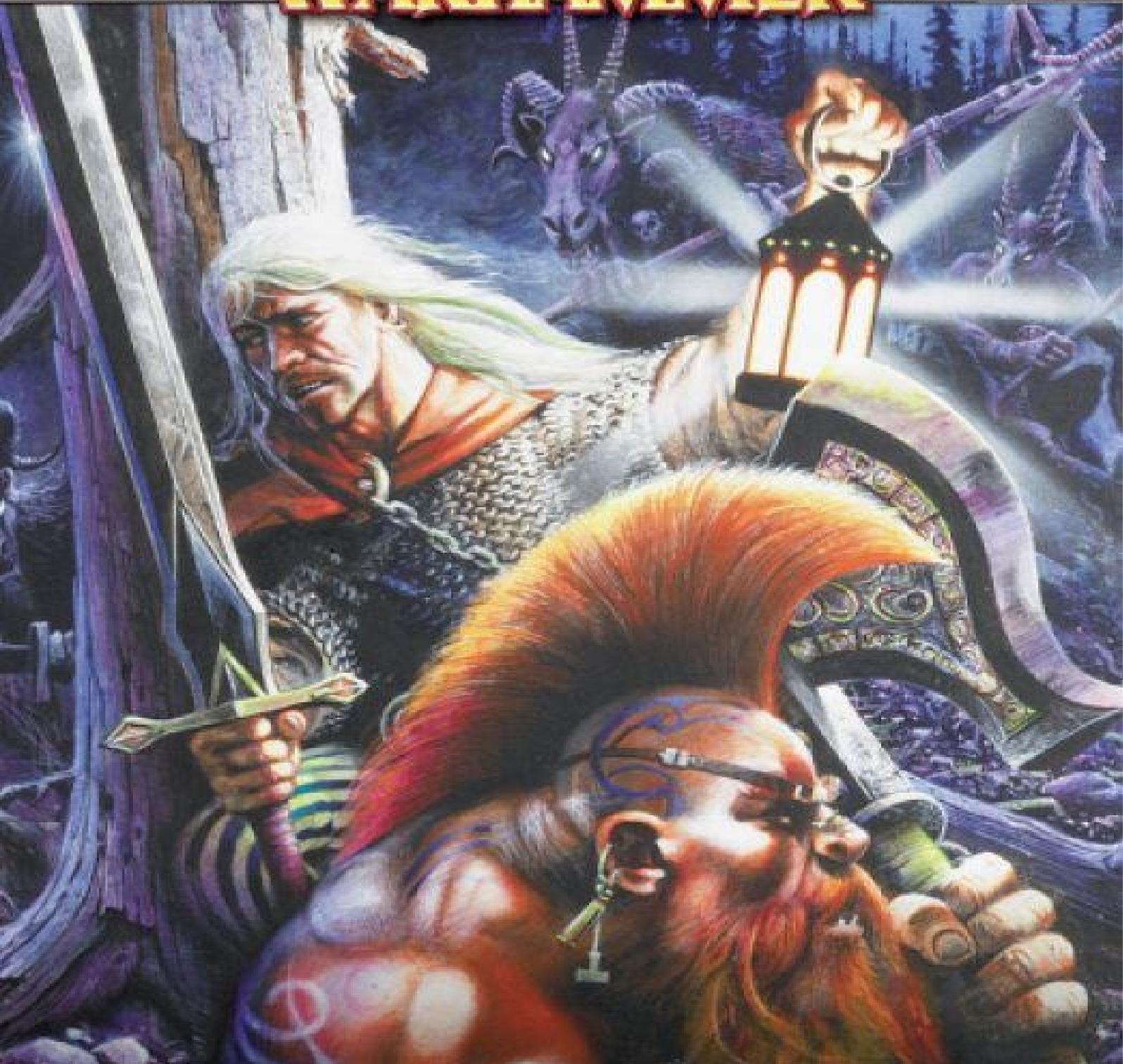


WARHAMMER



TROLLSLAYER

BY WILLIAM KING

A GOTREK & FELIX NOVEL

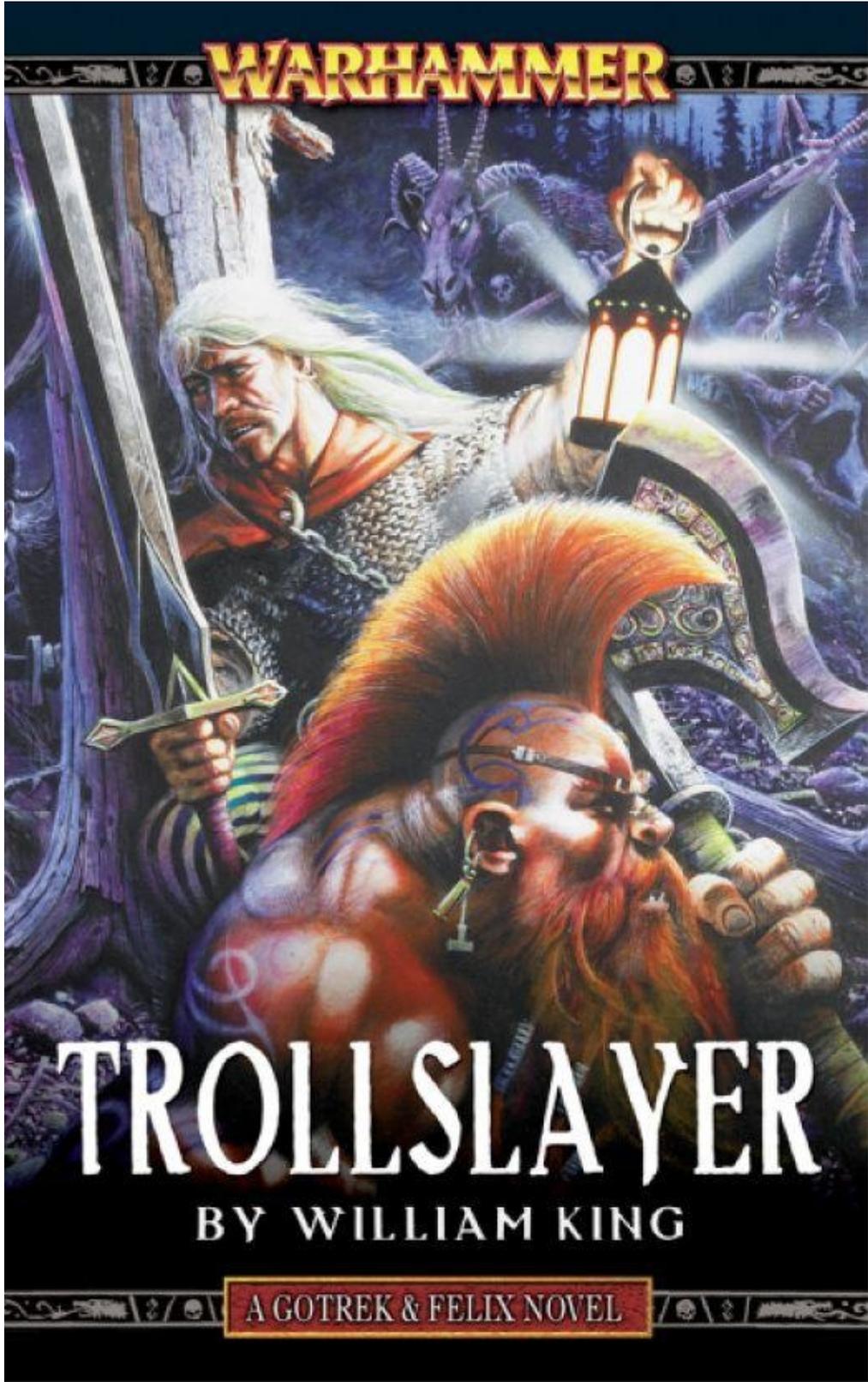


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A WARHAMMER NOVEL

Gotrek and Felix

TROLLSLAYER

By William King



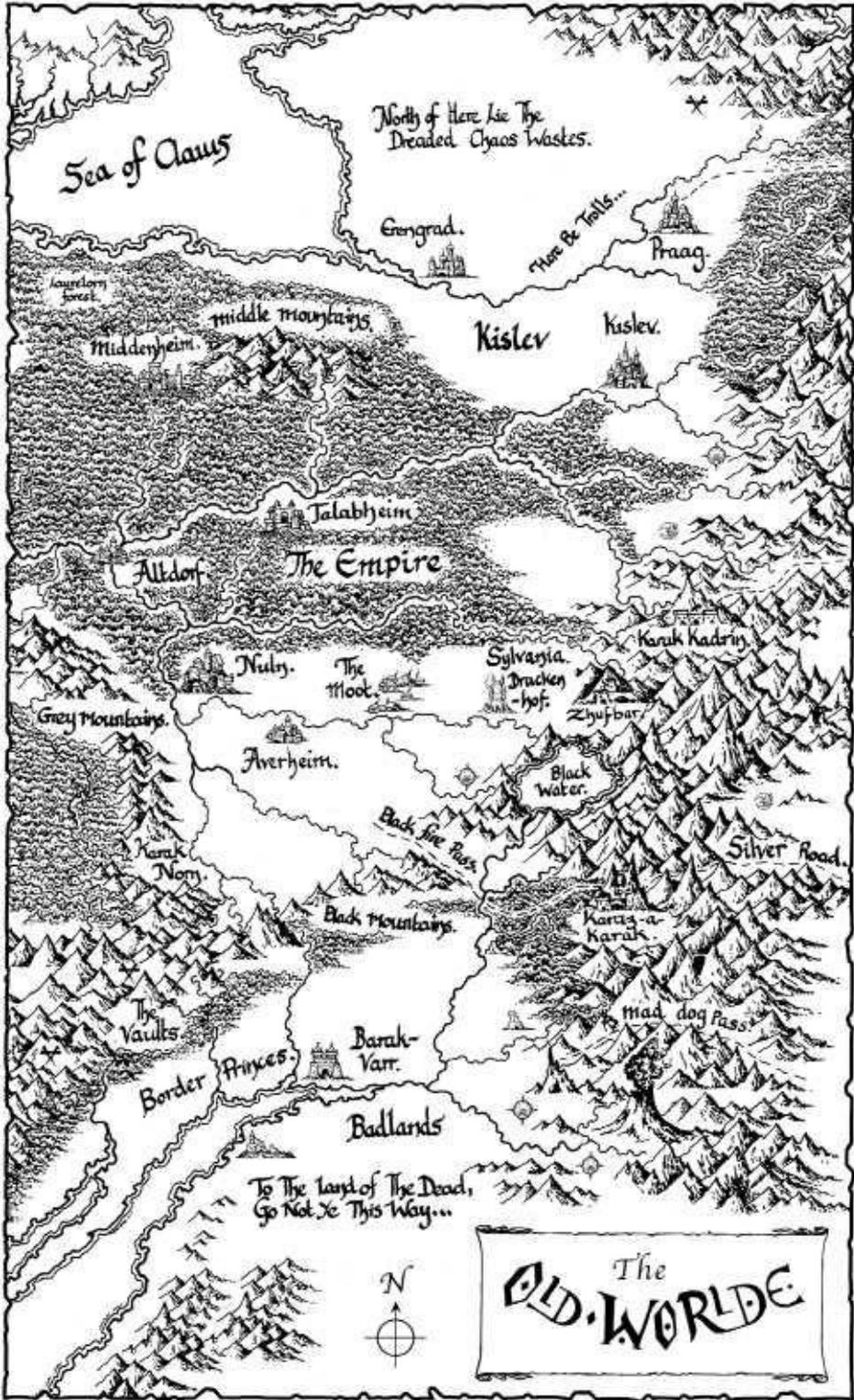
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This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

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, 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 nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.



Geheimnisnacht

‘After the terrible events and nightmare adventures we endured in Altdorf, my companion and I fled southwards, following no path more certain than that chosen for us by blind chance. We took whatever means of transport presented itself: stagecoach, peasant cart, drayage wagon, resorting to our own two feet when all else failed.

‘It was a difficult and fear-filled time for me. At every turning, it seemed, we stood in imminent danger of arrest and either imprisonment or execution. I saw sheriffs in every tavern and bounty killers behind every bush. If the Trollslayer suspected that things might have been otherwise, he never bothered to communicate this information to me.

‘To one as ignorant of the true state of our legal system as I then was, it seemed all too possible that the entire apparatus of our mighty and extensive state might be bent to the apprehension of two fugitives such as ourselves. I did not then have any idea of quite how feebly and randomly the rule of law was applied. It was indeed a pity that all those sheriffs and all those bounty killers who peopled my imagination did not, in fact, exist – for perhaps then evil would not have flourished quite so strongly within the boundaries of my homeland.

‘The extent and nature of the evil was to become very clear to me one dark evening after boarding a southbound stagecoach, on what is perhaps the most ill-omened night in our entire calendar...’

– From *My Travels with Gotrek, Vol. II*,
by Herr Felix Jaeger (Altdorf Press, 2505)

‘Damn all manling coach drivers and all manling women,’ Gotrek Gurnisson muttered, adding a curse in dwarfish.

‘You did have to insult the lady Isolde, didn’t you?’ Felix Jaeger said peevishly. ‘As things are, we’re lucky they didn’t just shoot us. If you can call it “lucky” to be dumped in the Reikwald on Geheimnisnacht Eve.’

‘We paid for our passage. We were just as entitled to sit inside as her. The drivers were unmanly cowards,’ Gotrek grumbled. ‘They refused to meet me hand to hand. I would not have minded being spitted on steel, but being blasted with buckshot is no death for a Trollslayer.’

Felix shook his head. He could see that one of his companion's black moods was coming on. There would be no arguing with him and Felix had plenty of other things to worry about. The sun was setting, giving the mist-covered forest a ruddy hue.

Long shadows danced eerily and brought to mind too many frightening tales of the horrors to be found under the canopy of trees.

He wiped his nose with the edge of his cloak, then pulled the Sudenland wool tight about him. He sniffed and looked at the sky where Morrslieb and Mannslieb, the lesser and greater moons, were already visible. Morrslieb seemed to be giving off a faint greenish glow. It wasn't a good sign.

'I think I have a fever coming on,' Felix said. The Trollslayer looked up at him and chuckled contemptuously. In the last rays of the dying sun, his nose-chain was a bloody arc running from nostril to earlobe.

'Yours is a weak race,' Gotrek said. 'The only fever I feel this eve is the battle-fever. It sings in my head.'

He turned and glared out into the darkness of the woods. 'Come out, little beastmen!' he bellowed. 'I have a gift for you.'

He laughed loudly and ran his thumb along the edge of the blade of his great two-handed axe. Felix saw that it drew blood. Gotrek began to suck his thumb.

'Sigmar preserve us, be quiet!' Felix hissed. 'Who knows what lurks out there on a night like this?'

Gotrek glared at him. Felix could see the glint of insane violence appear in his eyes. Instinctively Felix's hand strayed nearer to the pommel of his sword.

'Give me no orders, manling! I am of the Elder Race and am beholden only to the Kings Under the Mountain, exile though I be.'

Felix bowed formally. He was well schooled in the use of the sword. The scars on his face showed that he had fought several duels in his student days. He had once killed a man and so ended a promising academic career. But still he did not relish the thought of fighting the Trollslayer. The tip of Gotrek's crested hair came only to the level of Felix's chest, but the dwarf outweighed him and his bulk was all muscle. And Felix had seen Gotrek use that axe.

The dwarf took the bow as an apology and turned once more to the darkness. 'Come out!' he shouted. 'I care not if all the powers of evil walk the woods this night. I will face any challenger.'

The dwarf was working himself up to a pitch of fury. During the time of their acquaintance Felix had noticed that the Trollslayer's long periods of brooding were often followed by brief explosions of rage. It was one of the things about his companion that fascinated Felix. He knew that Gotrek had become a Trollslayer to atone for some crime. He was sworn to seek death in unequal combat with fearsome monsters. He seemed bitter to the point of madness – yet he kept to his oath.

Perhaps, thought Felix, I too would go mad if I had been driven into exile among strangers not even of my own race. He felt some sympathy for the crazed dwarf. Felix knew what it was like to be driven from home under a cloud. The duel with Wolfgang Krassner had caused quite a scandal.

At that moment, however, the dwarf seemed bent on getting them both killed, and he wanted no part of it. Felix continued to plod along the road, casting an occasional worried glance at the bright full moons. Behind him the ranting continued.

‘Are there no warriors among you? Come feel my axe. She thirsts!’

Only a madman would so tempt fate and the dark powers on Geheimnisnacht, Night of Mystery, in the darkest reaches of the forest, Felix decided.

He could make out chanting in the flinty, guttural tongue of the Mountain Dwarfs, then once more in Reikspiel, he heard: ‘Send me a champion!’

For a second there was silence. Condensation from the clammy mist ran down his brow. Then – from far, far off – the sound of galloping horses rang out in the quiet night.

What has that maniac done, Felix thought, has he offended one of the Old Powers? Have they sent their daemon riders to carry us off?

Felix stepped off the road. He shuddered as wet leaves fondled his face. They felt like dead men’s fingers. The thunder of hooves came closer, moving with hellish speed along the forest road. Surely only a supernatural being could keep such breakneck pace on the winding forest road? He felt his hand shake as he unsheathed his sword.

I was foolish to follow Gotrek, he thought. Now I’ll never get the poem finished. He could hear the loud neighing of horses, the cracking of a whip and mighty wheels turning.

‘Good!’ Gotrek roared. His voice drifted from the trail behind. ‘Good!’

There was a loud bellowing and four immense jet horses drawing an equally black coach hurtled past. Felix saw the wheels bounce as they hit a rut in the road. He could just make out a black-cloaked driver. He shrank back into the bushes.

He heard the sound of feet coming closer. The bushes were pulled aside. Before him stood Gotrek, looking madder and wilder than ever. His crest was matted, brown mud was smeared over his tattooed body and his studded leather jerkin was ripped and torn.

‘The snotling-fondlers tried to run me over!’ he yelled. ‘Let’s get after them!’

He turned and headed up the muddy road at a fast trot. Felix noted that Gotrek was singing happily in Khazalid.

Further down the Bogenhafen road the pair found the Standing Stones Inn. The windows were shuttered and no lights showed. They could hear a neighing from the stables but when they checked there was no coach, black or otherwise, only some skittish ponies and a peddler’s cart.

‘We’ve lost the coach. Might as well get a bed for the night,’ Felix suggested. He looked warily at the smaller moon, Morrslieb. The sickly green glow was stronger. ‘I do not like being abroad under this evil light.’

‘You are feeble, manling. Cowardly too.’

‘They’ll have ale.’

‘On the other hand, some of your suggestions are not without merit. Watery though human beer is, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Felix said. Gotrek failed to spot the note of irony in his voice.

The inn was not fortified but the walls were thick, and when they tried the door they found it was barred. Gotrek began to bang it with the butt of his axe-shaft. There was no response.

‘I can smell humans within,’ Gotrek said. Felix wondered how he could smell anything over his own stench. Gotrek never washed and his hair was matted with

animal fat to keep his red-dyed crest in place.

‘They’ll have locked themselves in. Nobody goes abroad on Geheimnisnacht. Unless they’re witches or daemon-lovers.’

‘The black coach was abroad,’ Gotrek said.

‘Its occupants were up to no good. The windows were curtained and the coach bore no crest of arms.’

‘My throat is too dry to discuss such details. Come on, open up in there or I’ll take my axe to the door!’

Felix thought he heard movement within. He pressed an ear to the door. He could make out the mutter of voices and what sounded like weeping.

‘Unless you want me to chop through your head, manling, I suggest you stand aside,’ Gotrek said to Felix.

‘Just a moment. I say: you inside! Open up! My friend has a very large axe and a very short temper. I suggest you do as he says or lose your door.’

‘What was that about “short”?’ Gotrek said touchily.

From behind the door came a thin, quavering cry. ‘In the name of Sigmar, begone, you daemons of the pit!’

‘Right, that’s it,’ Gotrek snapped. ‘I’ve had enough.’

He drew his axe back in a huge arc. Felix saw the runes of its blade gleam in the Morrslieb light. He leapt aside.

‘In the name of Sigmar!’ Felix shouted. ‘You cannot exorcise us. We are simple, weary travellers.’

The axe bit into the door with a chunking sound. Splinters of wood flew from it. Gotrek turned to Felix and grinned evilly up at him. Felix noted the missing teeth.

‘Shoddily made, these manling doors,’ Gotrek said.

‘I suggest you open up while you still have a door,’ Felix called.

‘Wait,’ the quavering voice said. ‘That door cost me five crowns from Jurgen the carpenter.’

The door was unlatched. It opened. A tall, thin man with a sad face framed by lank, white hair stood there. He had a stout club in one hand. Behind him stood an old woman who held a saucer that contained a guttering candle.

‘You will not need your weapon, sir. We require only a bed for the night,’ Felix said.

‘And ale,’ the dwarf grunted.

‘And ale,’ Felix agreed.

‘Lots of ale,’ Gotrek said. Felix looked at the old man and shrugged helplessly.

Inside, the inn had a low common room. The bar was made of planks stretched across two barrels. From the corner, three armed men who looked like travelling peddlers watched them warily. They each had daggers drawn. The shadows hid their faces but they seemed worried.

The innkeeper hustled the pair inside and slid the bars back into place. ‘Can you pay, Herr Doktor?’ he asked nervously. Felix could see the man’s Adam’s apple moving.

‘I am not a professor, I am a poet,’ he said, producing his thin pouch and counting out his few remaining gold coins. ‘But I can pay.’

‘Food,’ Gotrek said. ‘And ale.’

At this the old woman burst into tears. Felix stared at her.

‘The hag is discomfited,’ Gotrek said.

The old man nodded. ‘Our Gunter is missing, on this of all nights.’

‘Get me some ale,’ Gotrek said. The innkeeper backed off. Gotrek got up and stumped over to where the peddlers were sitting. They regarded him warily.

‘Do any of you know about a black coach drawn by four black horses?’ Gotrek asked.

‘You have seen the black coach?’ one of the peddlers asked. The fear was evident in his voice.

‘Seen it? The bloody thing nearly ran me over.’ A man gasped. Felix heard the sound of a ladle being dropped. He saw the innkeeper stoop to pick it up and begin refilling the tankard.

‘You are lucky then,’ the fattest and most prosperous-looking peddler said. ‘Some say the coach is driven by daemons. I have heard it passes here on Geheimnisnacht every year. Some say it carries wee children from Altdorf who are sacrificed at the Darkstone Ring.’

Gotrek looked at him with interested. Felix did not like the way this was developing.

‘Surely that is only a legend,’ he said.

‘No, sir,’ the innkeeper shouted. ‘Every year we hear the thunder of its passing. Two years ago Gunter looked out and saw it, a black coach just as you describe.’

At the mention of Gunter’s name the old woman began to cry again. The innkeeper brought stew and two great steins of ale.

‘Bring beer for my companion too,’ Gotrek said. The landlord went off for another stein.

‘Who is Gunter?’ Felix asked when he returned. There was another wail from the old woman.

‘More ale,’ Gotrek said. The landlord looked in astonishment at the empty flagons.

‘Take mine,’ Felix said. ‘Now, mein host, who is Gunter?’

‘And why does the old hag howl at the very mention of his name?’ Gotrek asked, wiping his mouth on his mud-encrusted arm.

‘Gunter is our son. He went out to chop wood this afternoon. He has not returned.’

‘Gunter is a good boy,’ the old woman sniffled. ‘How will we survive without him?’

‘Perhaps he is simply lost in the woods?’

‘Impossible,’ the innkeeper said. ‘Gunter knows the woods round here like I know the hairs on my hand. He should have been home hours ago. I fear the coven has taken him, as a sacrifice.’

‘It’s just like Lotte Hauptmann’s daughter, Ingrid,’ the fat peddler said. The innkeeper shot him a dirty look.

‘I want no tales told of our son’s betrothed,’ he said.

‘Let the man speak,’ Gotrek said. The peddler looked at him gratefully.

‘The same thing happened last year, in Hartzroch, just down the road. Goodwife Hauptmann looked in on her teenage daughter Ingrid just after sunset. She thought she heard banging coming from her daughter’s room. The girl was gone, snatched by who-knows-what sorcerous power from her bed in a locked house. The next day the hue

and cry went up. We found Ingrid. She was covered in bruises and in a terrible state.’

He looked at them to make sure he had their attention. ‘You asked her what happened?’ Felix said.

‘Aye, sir. It seems she had been carried off by daemons, wild things of the wood, to Darkstone Ring. There the coven waited with evil creatures from the forests. They made to sacrifice her at the altar but she broke free from her captors and invoked the good name of blessed Sigmar. While they reeled she fled. They pursued her but could not overtake her.’

‘That was lucky,’ Felix said dryly.

‘There is no need to mock, Herr Doktor. We made our way to the stones and we did find all sorts of tracks in the disturbed earth. Including those of humans and beasts and cloven-hoofed daemons. And a yearling infant gutted like a pig upon the altar.’

‘Cloven-hoofed daemons?’ Gotrek asked. Felix didn’t like the look of interest in his eye. The peddler nodded.

‘I would not venture up to Darkstone Ring tonight,’ the peddler said. ‘Not for all the gold in Altdorf.’

‘It would be a task fit for a hero,’ Gotrek said, looking meaningfully at Felix. Felix was shocked.

‘Surely you cannot mean—’

‘What better task for a Trollslayer than to face these daemons on their sacred night? It would be a mighty death.’

‘It would be a stupid death,’ Felix muttered.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You are coming, aren’t you?’ Gotrek said menacingly. He was rubbing his thumb along the blade of his axe. Felix noticed that it was bleeding again.

He nodded slowly. ‘An oath is an oath.’

The dwarf slapped him upon the back with such force that he thought his ribs would break. ‘Sometimes, manling, I think you must have dwarf blood in you. Not that any of the Elder race would stoop to such a mixed marriage, of course.’ He stomped back to his ale.

‘Of course,’ his companion said, glaring at his back.

Felix fumbled in his pack for his mail shirt. He noticed that the innkeeper and his wife and the peddlers were looking at him. Their eyes held something that looked close to awe. Gotrek sat near the fire drinking ale and grumbling in dwarfish.

‘You’re not really going with him?’ the fat peddler whispered. Felix nodded.

‘Why?’

‘He saved my life. I owe him a debt.’ Felix thought it best not to mention the circumstances under which Gotrek had saved him.

‘I pulled the manling out from under the hooves of the Emperor’s cavalry,’ Gotrek shouted.

Felix cursed bitterly. The Trollslayer has the hearing of a wild beast as well as the brains of one, he thought to himself, continuing to pull on the mail shirt.

‘Aye. The manling thought it clever to put his case to the Emperor with petitions and protest marches. Old Karl Franz chose to respond, quite sensibly, with cavalry

charges.'

The peddlers were starting to back away.

'An insurrectionist,' Felix heard one mutter.

Felix felt his face flush. 'It was yet another cruel and unjust tax. A silver piece for every window, indeed. To make it worse, all the fat merchants bricked up their windows and the Altdorf militia went around knocking holes in the side of poor folks' hovels. We were right to speak out.'

'There's a reward for the capture of insurrectionists,' the peddler said. 'A big reward.'

Felix stared at him. 'Of course, the Imperial cavalry were no match for my companion's axe,' he said. 'Such carnage! Heads, legs, arms everywhere. He stood on a pile of bodies.'

'They called for archers,' Gotrek said. 'We departed down a back alley. Being spitted from afar would have been an unseemly death.'

The fat peddler looked at his companions then at Gotrek, then at Felix, then back at his companions. 'A sensible man keeps out of politics,' he said to the man who had talked of rewards. He looked at Felix. 'No offence, sir.'

'None taken,' Felix said. 'You are absolutely correct.'

'Insurrectionist or no,' the old woman said, 'may Sigmar bless you if you bring my little Gunter back.'

'He is not little, Lise,' the innkeeper said. 'He is a strapping young man. Still, I hope you bring my son back. I am old and I need him to chop the wood and shoe the horses and lift the kegs and—'

'I am touched by your paternal concern, sir,' Felix interrupted. He pulled his leather cap down on his head.

Gotrek got up and looked at him. He beat his chest with one meaty hand. 'Armour is for women and girly elves,' he said.

'Perhaps I had best wear it, Gotrek. If I am to return alive with the tale of your deeds – as I did, after all, swear to do.'

'You have a point, manling. And remember that is not all you swore to do.' He turned to the innkeeper. 'How will we find the Darkstone Ring?'

Felix felt his mouth go dry. He fought to keep his hands from shaking.

'There is a trail. It runs from the road. I will take you to its start.'

'Good,' Gotrek said. 'This is too good an opportunity to miss. Tonight I will atone my sins and stand among the Iron Halls of my fathers. Great Grungni willing.'

He made a peculiar sign over his chest with his clenched right hand. 'Come, manling, let us go.' He strode out the door.

Felix picked up his pack. At the doorway the old woman stopped him and pressed something into his hand. 'Please, sir,' she said. 'Take this. It is a charm to Sigmar. It will protect you. My little Gunter wears its twin.'

And much good it's done him, Felix was about to say, but the expression on her face stopped him. It held fear, concern and perhaps hope. He was touched.

'I'll do my best, frau.'

Outside, the sky was bright with the green witchlight of the moons. Felix opened his hand. In it was a small iron hammer on a fine-linked chain. He shrugged and hung it round his neck. Gotrek and the old man were already moving down the road. He had

to run to catch up.

‘What do you think these are, manling?’ Gotrek said, bending close to the ground. Ahead of them, the road continued on towards Hartzroch and Bogenhafen. Felix leaned on the league marker. This was the edge of the trail. Felix hoped the innkeeper had returned home safely.

‘Tracks,’ he said. ‘Going north.’

‘Very good, manling. They are coach tracks and they take the trail north to the Darkstone Ring.’

‘The black coach?’ Felix said.

‘I hope so. What a glorious night! All my prayers are answered. A chance to atone and to get revenge on the swine who nearly ran me over.’ Gotrek cackled gleefully but Felix could sense a change in him. He seemed tense, as if suspecting that his hour of destiny were arriving and he would meet it badly. He seemed unusually talkative.

‘A coach? Does this coven consist of noblemen, manling? Is your Empire so very corrupt?’

Felix shook his head. ‘I don’t know. It may have a noble leader. The members are most likely local folk. They say the taint of Chaos runs deep in these out of the way places.’

Gotrek shook his head and for the first time ever he looked dismayed. ‘I could weep for the folly of your people, manling. To be so corrupted that your rulers could sell themselves over to the powers of darkness, that is a terrible thing.’

‘Not all men are so,’ Felix said angrily. ‘True, some seek easy power or the pleasures of the flesh, but they are few. Most people keep the faith. Anyway, the Elder Race are not so pure. I have heard tales of whole armies of dwarfs dedicated to the Ruinous Powers.’

Gotrek gave a low angry growl and spat on the ground. Felix gripped the hilt of his sword tighter. He wondered whether he had pushed the Trollslayer too far.

‘You are correct,’ Gotrek said, his voice soft and cold. ‘We do not lightly talk about such things. We have vowed eternal war against the abominations you mention and their dark masters.’

‘As have my own people. We have our witch hunts and our laws.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Your people do not understand. They are soft and decadent and live far from the war. They do not understand the terrible things which gnaw at the roots of the world and seek to undermine us all. Witch hunts? Hah!’ He spat on the ground. ‘Laws! There is only one way to meet the threat of Chaos.’

He brandished his axe meaningfully.

They trudged wearily through the forest. Overhead, the moons gleamed feverishly. Morrslieb had become ever brighter, and now its green glow stained the sky. A light mist had gathered and the terrain they moved through was bleak and wild. Rocks broke through the turf like plague spots breaking through the skin of the world.

Sometimes Felix thought he could hear great wings passing overhead, but when he looked up he could see only the glow in the sky. The mist distorted and spread so that it looked as though they walked along the bed of some infernal sea.

There was a sense of wrongness about this place, Felix decided. The air tasted foul and the hairs on the nape of his neck constantly prickled. Back when he had been a boy in Altdorf he had sat in his father's house and watched the sky grow black with menacing clouds. Then had come the most monstrous storm in living memory. Now he felt the same sense of anticipation. Mighty forces were gathering close to here, he was certain. He felt like an insect crawling over the body of a giant that could at any moment awake and crush him.

Even Gotrek seemed oppressed. He had fallen silent and did not even mumble to himself as he usually did. Now and again he would stop and motion for Felix to stand quiet, then he would stand and sniff the air. Felix could see that his whole body tensed as if he strained with every nerve to catch the slightest trace of something. Then they would move on.

Felix's muscles all felt tight with tension. He wished he had not come. Surely, he told himself, my obligation to the dwarf does not mean I must face certain death. Perhaps I can slip away in the mist.

He gritted his teeth. He prided himself on being an honourable man, and the debt he owed the dwarf was real. The dwarf had risked his life to save him. Granted, at the time he had not known Gotrek was seeking death, courting it as a man courts a desirable lady. It still left him under an obligation.

He remembered the riotous drunken evening in the taverns of the Maze when they had sworn blood-brotherhood in that curious dwarfish rite and he had agreed to help Gotrek in his quest.

Gotrek wished his name remembered and his deeds recalled. When he had found out that Felix was a poet, the dwarf had asked Felix to accompany him. At the time, in the warm glow of beery camaraderie, it had seemed a splendid idea. The Trollslayer's doomed quest had struck Felix as excellent material for an epic poem, one that would make him famous.

Little did I know, Felix thought, that it would lead to this. Hunting for monsters on Geheimnisnacht. He smiled ironically. It was easy to sing of brave deeds in the taverns and playhalls where horror was a thing conjured by the words of skilled craftsmen. Out here, though, it was different. His bowels felt loose with fear and the oppressive atmosphere made him want to run screaming.

Still, he tried to console himself, this is fit subject matter for a poem. If only I live to write it.

The woods became deeper and more tangled. The trees took on the aspect of twisted, uncanny beings. Felix felt as if they were watching him. He tried to dismiss the thought as fantasy but the mist and the ghastly moonlight only stimulated his imagination. He felt as if every pool of shadow contained a monster.

Felix looked down at the dwarf. Gotrek's face held a mixture of anticipation and fear. Felix had thought him immune to terror but now he realised it was not so. A ferocious will drove him to seek his doom. Feeling that his own death might be near at hand, Felix asked a question that he had long been afraid to utter.

'Herr Trollslayer, what was it you did that you must atone for? What crime drives you to punish yourself so?'

Gotrek looked up to him, then turned his head to gaze off into the night. Felix

watched the cable-like muscles of his neck ripple like serpents as he did so.

‘If another man asked me that question I would slaughter him. I make allowances for your youth and ignorance and the friendship rite we have undergone. Such a death would make me a kin-slayer. That is a terrible crime. Such crimes we do not talk about.’

Felix had not realised the dwarf was so attached to him. Gotrek looked up at him as if expecting a response.

‘I understand,’ Felix said.

‘Do you, manling? Do you really?’ The Trollslayer’s voice was as harsh as stones breaking.

Felix smiled ruefully. In that moment he saw the gap that separated man from dwarf. He would never understand their strange taboos, their obsession with oaths and order and pride. He could not see what would drive the Trollslayer to carry out his self-imposed death sentence.

‘Your people are too harsh with themselves,’ he said.

‘Yours are too soft,’ the Trollslayer replied. They fell into silence. Both were startled by a quiet, mad laugh. Felix turned, whipping up his blade into the guard position. Gotrek raised his axe.

Out of the mists something shambled. Once it had been a man, Felix decided. The outline was still there. It was as if some mad god held the creature close to a daemonic fire until flesh dripped and ran, then had left it to set in a new and abhorrent form.

‘This night we will dance,’ it said, in a high-pitched voice that held no hint of sanity. ‘Dance and touch.’

It reached out gently to Felix and stroked his arm. Felix recoiled in horror as fingers like clumps of maggots rose towards his face.

‘This night at the stone we will dance and touch and rub.’ It made as if to embrace him. It smiled, showing short, pointed teeth. Felix stood quietly. He felt like a spectator, distanced from the event that was happening. He pulled back and put the point of his sword against the thing’s chest.

‘Come no closer,’ Felix warned. The thing smiled. Its mouth seemed to grow wider, it showed more small sharp teeth. Its lips rolled back till the bottom half of the face seemed all wet glistening gum and the jaw sank lower like that of a snake. It pushed forward against the sword till beads of blood glistened on its chest. It gave a gurgling, idiotic laugh.

‘Dance and touch and rub and eat,’ it said, and with inhuman swiftness it writhed around the sword and leapt for Felix.

Swift as it was, the Trollslayer was swifter. In mid-leap his axe caught its neck. The head rolled into the night; a red fountain gushed.

This is not happening, thought Felix.

‘What was that? A daemon?’ Gotrek asked. Felix could hear the excitement in his voice.

‘I think it was once a man,’ Felix said. ‘One of the tainted ones marked by Chaos. They are abandoned at birth.’

‘That one spoke your tongue.’

‘Sometimes the taint does not show till they are older. Relatives think they are sick and protect them till they make their way to the woods and vanish.’

‘Their kin protect such abominations?’

‘It happens. We don’t talk about it. It is hard to turn your back on people you love even if they change.’

The dwarf stared at him in disbelief, then shook his head.

‘Too soft,’ he said. ‘Too soft.’

The air was still. Sometimes Felix thought he sensed presences moving in the trees about him and froze nervously, peering into the mist, searching for moving shadows. The encounter with the tainted one had brought home to him the danger of the situation. He felt within him a great fear and a great anger.

Part of the anger was directed at himself for feeling the fear. He was sick and ashamed. He decided that whatever happened he would not repeat his error, standing like a sheep to be slaughtered.

‘What was that?’ Gotrek asked. Felix looked at him.

‘Can’t you hear it, manling? Listen! It sounds like chanting.’ Felix strained to catch the sound but heard nothing. ‘We are close, now. Very close.’

They pushed on in silence. As they trudged through the mist Gotrek became ever more cautious and left the trail, using the long grass for cover. Felix joined him.

Now he could hear the chanting. It sounded as though it was coming from scores of throats. Some of the voices were human, others were deep and bestial. There were male voices and female voices mingled with the slow beat of a drum, the clash of cymbals and discordant piping.

Felix could make out one word only, repeated over and over till it was driven into his consciousness. The word was ‘Slaanesh’.

Felix shuddered. Slaanesh, dark lord of unspeakable pleasures. It was a name that conjured up the worst depths of depravity. It was whispered in the drug dens and vice houses of Altdorf by those so jaded that they sought pleasures beyond human understanding. It was a name associated with corruption and excess and the dark underbelly of Imperial society. For those who followed Slaanesh no stimulation was too bizarre, no pleasure forbidden.

‘The mist covers us,’ Felix whispered to the Trollslayer.

‘Hist! Be quiet. We must get closer.’

They crept forward slowly. The long wet grass dragged at Felix’s body, and soon he was damp. Ahead he could see beacons burning in the dark. The scent of blazing wood and cloying sickly-sweet incense filled the air. He looked around, hoping that no latecomer would blunder into them. He felt absurdly exposed.

Inch by inch they advanced. Gotrek dragged his battleaxe along behind him and once Felix touched its sharp blade with his fingers. He cut himself and fought back a desire to scream out.

They reached the edge of the long grass and found themselves staring at a crude ring of six obscenely-shaped stones amid which stood a monolithic slab. The stones glowed greenly with the light of some luminous fungus. On top of each was a brazier which gave off clouds of smoke. Beams of pallid, green moonlight illuminated a hellish scene.

Within the ring danced six humans, masked and garbed in long cloaks. The cloaks were thrown back over one shoulder revealing naked bodies, both male and female.

On one hand the revellers each wore finger cymbals which they clashed, in the other they carried switches of birch with which they each lashed the dancer in front.

‘Ygrak tu amat Slaanesh!’ they cried

Felix could see that some of the bodies were marked by bruises. The dancers seemed to feel no pain. Perhaps it was the narcotic effect of the incense.

Around the stone ring lolled figures of horror. The drummer was a huge man with the head of a stag and cloven hooves. Near him sat a piper with the head of a dog and hands with suckered fingers. A large crowd of tainted women and men writhed on the ground nearby.

Some of their bodies were subtly distorted: men who were tall with thin, pin heads; short, fat women with three eyes and three breasts. Others were barely recognisable as once having been human. There were scale-covered man-serpents and wolf-headed furred beasts mingling with things that were all teeth and mouth and other orifices. Felix could barely breathe. He watched the entire proceeding with mounting fear.

The drums beat faster, the rhythmic chanting increased in pace, the piping became ever louder and more discordant as the dancers became more frenzied, lashing themselves and their companions until bloody weals became visible. Then there was a clash of cymbals and all fell silent.

Felix thought they had been spotted, and he froze. The smoke of the incense filled his nostrils and seemed to amplify all his senses. He felt even more remote and disconnected from reality. There was a sharp, stabbing pain in his side. He was startled to realise that Gotrek had elbowed him in the ribs. He was pointing to something beyond the stone ring.

Felix struggled to see what loomed in the mist. Then he realised that it was the black coach. In the sudden, shocking silence he heard its door swing open. He held his breath and waited to see what would emerge.

A figure seemed to take shape out of the mist. It was tall and masked, and garbed in layered cloaks of many pastel colours. It moved with calm authority and in its arms it carried something swaddled in brocade cloth. Felix looked at Gotrek but he was watching the unfolding scene with fanatical intensity. Felix wondered if the dwarf had lost his nerve at this late hour.

The newcomer stepped forward into the stone circle.

‘Amak tu amat Slaanesh!’ it cried, raising its bundle on high. Felix could see that it was a child, though whether living or dead he could not tell.

‘Ygrak tu amat Slaanesh! Tzarkol taen amat Slaanesh!’ The crowd responded ecstatically.

The cloaked man stared out at the surrounding faces, and it seemed to Felix that the stranger gazed straight at him with calm, brown eyes. He wondered if the coven-master knew they were there and was playing with them.

‘Amak tu Slaanesh!’ the man cried in a clear voice.

‘Amak klessa! Amat Slaanesh!’ responded the crowd. It was clear to Felix that some evil ritual had begun. As the rite progressed, the coven-master moved closer to the altar with slow ceremonial steps. Felix felt his mouth go dry. He licked his lips. Gotrek watched the events as if hypnotised.

The child was placed on the altar with a thunderous rumble of drum beats. Now the six dancers each stood beside a pillar, legs astride it, clutching at the stone

suggestively. As the ritual progressed they ground themselves against the pillars with slow sinuous movements.

From within his robes the master produced a long wavy-bladed knife. Felix wondered whether the dwarf was going to do something. He could hardly bear to watch.

Slowly the knife was raised, high over the cultist's head. Felix forced himself to look. An ominous presence hovered over the scene. Mist and incense seemed to be clotting together and congealing, and within the cloud Felix thought he could make out a grotesque form writhe and begin to materialise. Felix could bear the tension no longer.

'No!' he shouted.

He and the Trollslayer emerged from the long grass and marched shoulder-to-shoulder towards the stone ring. At first the cultists didn't seem to notice them, but finally the demented drumming stopped and the chanting faded and the cult-master turned to glare at them, astonished.

For a moment everyone stared. No one seemed to understand what was happening. Then the cult-master pointed the knife at them and screamed; 'Kill the interlopers!'

The revellers moved forward in a wave. Felix felt something tug at his leg and then a sharp pain. When he looked down he saw a creature, half woman, half serpent, gnawing at his ankle. He kicked out, pulling his leg free and stabbed down with his sword.

A shock passed up his arm as the blade hit bone. He began to run, following in the wake of Gotrek who was hacking his way towards the altar. The mighty double-bladed axe rose and fell rhythmically and left a trail of red ruin in its path. The cultists seemed drugged and slow to respond but, horrifyingly, they showed no fear. Men and women, tainted and untainted, threw themselves towards the intruders with no thought for their own lives.

Felix hacked and stabbed at anyone who came close. He put his blade under the ribs and into the heart of a dog-faced man who leapt at him. As he tried to tug his blade free a woman with claws and a man with mucous-covered skin leapt on him. Their weight bore him over, knocking the wind from him.

He felt the woman's talons scratch at his face as he put his foot under her stomach and kicked her off. Blood rolled down into his eyes from the cuts. The man had fallen badly, but leapt to grab his throat. Felix fumbled for his dagger with his left hand while he caught the man's throat with his right. The man writhed. He was difficult to grip because of his coating of slime. His own hands tightened inexorably on Felix's throat in return and he rubbed himself against Felix, panting with pleasure.

Blackness threatened to overcome the poet. Little silver points flared before his eyes. He felt an overwhelming urge to relax and fall forward into the darkness. Somewhere far away he heard Gotrek's bellowed war-cry. With an effort of will Felix jerked his dagger clear of its scabbard and plunged it into his assailant's ribs. The creature stiffened and grinned, revealing rows of eel-like teeth. He gave an ecstatic moan even as he died.

'Slaanesh, take me,' the man shrieked. 'Ah, the pain, the lovely pain!'

Felix pulled himself to his feet just as the clawed woman rose to hers. He lashed out with his boot, connected with her jaw. There was a crunch, and she fell backwards.

Felix shook his head to clear the blood from his eyes.

The majority of the cultists had concentrated on Gotrek. This had kept Felix alive. The dwarf was trying to hack his way towards the heart of the stone circle. Even as he moved, the press of bodies against him slowed him down. Felix could see that he bled from dozens of small cuts.

The ferocious energy of the dwarf was terrible to see. He frothed at the mouth and ranted as he chopped, sending limbs and heads everywhere. He was covered in a filthy matting of gore, but in spite of his sheer ferocity Felix could tell the fight was going against Gotrek. Even as he watched, a cloaked reveller hit the dwarf with a club and Gotrek went down under a wave of bodies. So he has met his doom, thought Felix, just as he desired.

Beyond the ruck of the melee, the cult-master had regained his composure. Once more he began to chant, and raised the dagger on high. The terrible shape that had been forming from the mist seemed once again to coalesce.

Felix had a premonition that if it took on full substance they were doomed. He could not fight his way through the bodies that surrounded the Trollslayer. For a long moment he watched the curve-bladed knife reflecting the Morrslieb light.

Then he drew back his own dagger. 'Sigmar guide my hand,' he prayed and threw. The blade flew straight and true to the throat of the High Priest, hitting beneath the mask where flesh was exposed. With a gurgle, the cult-master toppled backwards.

A long whine of frustration filled the air and the mist seemed to evaporate. The shape within the mist vanished. As one, the cultists looked up in shock. The tainted ones turned to stare at him. Felix found himself confronted by the mad glare of dozens of unfriendly eyes. He stood immobile and very, very afraid. The silence was deathly.

Then there was an almighty roar and Gotrek emerged from amidst the pile of bodies, pummeling about him with ham-sized fists. He reached down and from somewhere retrieved his axe. He shortened his grip on the haft and laid about him with its shaft. Felix scooped up his own sword and ran to join him. They fought through the crush until they were back to back.

The cultists, filled with fear at the loss of their leader, began to flee into the night and mist. Soon Felix and Gotrek stood alone under the shadows of the Darkstone Ring.

Gotrek looked at Felix balefully, blood clotted in his crested hair. In the witch-light he looked demonic. 'I am robbed of a mighty death, manling.'

He raised his axe menacingly. Felix wondered if he were still berserk and about to chop him down in spite of their binding oath. Gotrek began to advance slowly towards him. Then the dwarf grinned. 'It would seem the gods preserve me for a greater doom yet.'

He planted his axe hilt first into the ground and began to laugh till the tears ran down his face. Having exhausted his laughter, he turned to the altar and picked up the infant. 'It lives,' he said.

Felix began to inspect the corpses of the cloaked cultists. He unmasked them. The first one was a blonde-haired girl covered in weals and bruises. The second was a young man. He had an amulet in the shape of a hammer hanging almost mockingly round his neck.

'I don't think we'll be going back to the inn,' Felix said sadly.