

**WARHAMMER**

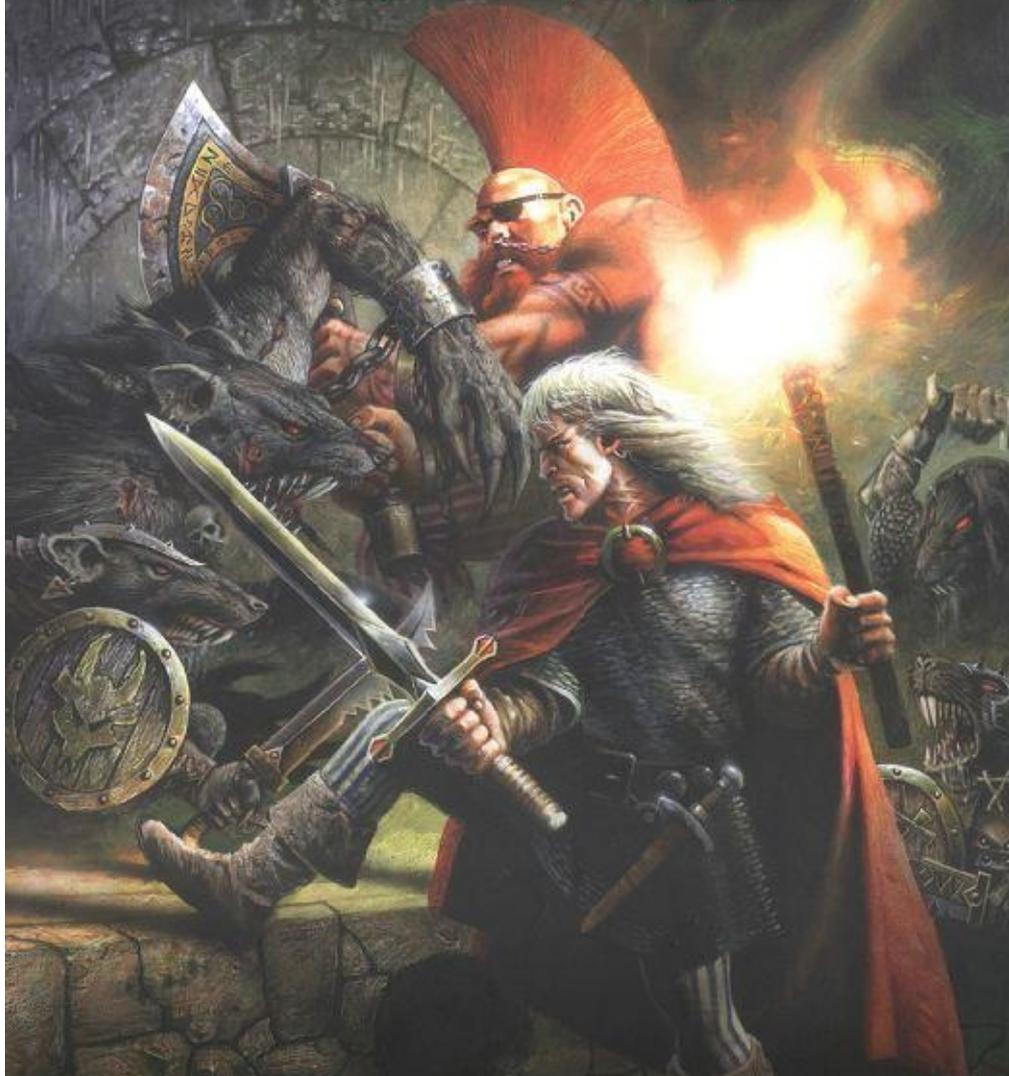


# SKAVENSLAYER

BY WILLIAM KING

A GOTREK & FELIX NOVEL

**WARHAMMER**



# SKAVENSLAYER

BY WILLIAM KING

A GOTREK & FELIX NOVEL

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

Gotrek and Felix

# SKAVENSLAYER

By William King



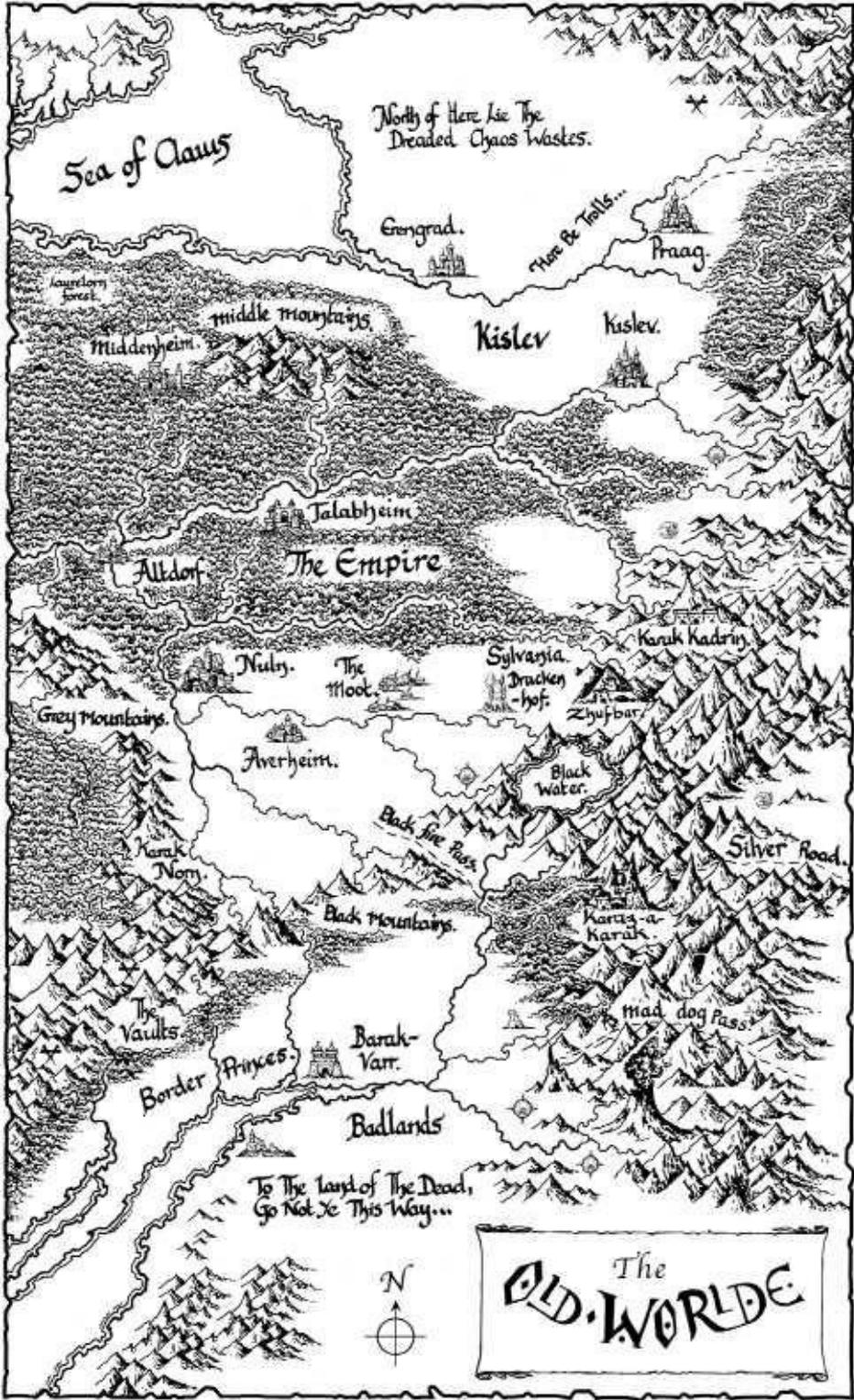
BLACK LIBRARY



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.



## Skaven's Claw

'I would like to forget the long, hard trudge through the winter woods which followed our encounter with the children of Ulric. And it pains me to this day to think of the punishment we meted out to the girl, Magdalena, but my companion was unrelenting, and no evil we encountered was ever spared if that could be avoided. In this case it could not be. With a heavy hearts, we entered the forest once more and set off northwards.

'At long last we found ourselves in the great Elector city of Nuln, a place of refinement, sophistication, wealth and great learning – and a city in which my family had long had business dealings. At that time, the Countess Emmanuelle was at the height of her fame, power and beauty and her city attracted the wealthy, the aristocratic and the famous like a candle flame attracts moths. Nuln was one of the most beautiful cities in all the Empire.

'Of course, our own entry into the life of the city was made at a level far lower on the social scale. Short of cash, hungry and weary from our long journey, we were forced to take employment in what was possibly the very worst occupation we were to pursue in our long wanderings. And during that period we encountered a fiend who was to bedevil our paths for long years to come.'

— From *My Travels With Gotrek, Vol. III*,  
by Herr Felix Jaeger (Altdorf Press, 2505)

'Stuck in a sewer, hunting goblins. What a life,' Felix Jaeger muttered with feeling. He cursed all the gods roundly. In his time he had come to consider himself something of an expert on unprepossessing surroundings but this must surely take the prize. Twenty feet overhead, the population of the city of Nuln went about its lawful daily business. And here he was, in the dark, creeping along narrow walkways where a single slip could put him over his head in reeking foulness. His back ached from stooping for hours on end. Truly, in all of his long association with the Trollslayer, Gotrek Gurnisson, he had never before plumbed such depths.

'Stop moaning, manling. It's a job, isn't it?' Gotrek said cheerfully, paying not the slightest heed to the smell or the narrowness of the ledge or the closeness of the bubbling broth of excrement the sewerjacks called 'the stew'.

The Slayer looked right at home in the endless maze of brickwork and channels. Gotrek's squat muscular form was far better adapted to the work than Felix's own. The dwarf picked his way along the ledges as sure-footed as a cat. In the two weeks they had been part of the sewer watch, Gotrek had become far more adroit at the job than ten-year veterans of the service. But then he was a dwarf; his people were reared in the lightless places far beneath the Old World.

It probably helped that he could see in the dark, Felix thought, and did not have to depend on the flickering light of the watchmen's lanterns. That still did not explain how he endured the stink, though. Felix doubted whether even the dwarfholds smelled quite so bad. The stench down here was exquisitely vile. His head swam from the fumes.

The Trollslayer looked peculiar without his usual weapon. Felix had come to think of the battle-axe as being grafted to his hand. Now the dwarf had his huge starmetal axe strapped across his back. There was not enough space to swing it in most areas of the sewer. Felix had tried to get Gotrek to leave the weapon in the watch armoury alongside his own magical sword but had failed. Not even the prospect of its weight dragging him below the sewage if he fell in could cause the Slayer to part with his beloved heirloom. So Gotrek carried a throwing hatchet in his right hand and a huge military pick in the other. Felix shuddered when he imagined the latter being used. It resembled a large hammer with a cruel hooked spike on one side. Driven by the dwarf's awesome strength he did not doubt that it could shatter bone and tear through muscle with ease.

Felix tightened his grip on his own short stabbing sword and wished that he still carried the Templar Aldred's dragon-hilted mageblade. The prospect of facing goblins in the dark made him long for the reassurance of using his familiar weapon. Perhaps Gotrek was right to keep his axe so close.

In the gloom of the lantern light, his fellow sewerjacks were ominous shadowy figures. They wore no uniform save the ubiquitous scarves wrapped round their heads like Araby turbans, with a long fold obscuring their mouths. Over the last two weeks, though, Felix had become familiar enough with them to recognise their silhouettes.

There was tall, spare Gant whose scarf concealed a face turned into a moonscape by pockmarks and whose neck was a volcanic archipelago of erupting boils. If ever there was a good advertisement for not staying a sewerjack for twenty years Gant was it. The thought of his toothless smile, bad breath and worse jokes made Felix want to cringe. Not that he had ever pointed this out to Gant's face. The sergeant had hinted that he had killed many a man for it.

There was the squat, ape-like giant Rudi, with his massive barrel chest and hands almost as big as Gotrek's. He and the Trollslayer often arm-wrestled in the tavern after work. Despite straining until the sweat ran down his bald pate, Rudi had never beaten the dwarf, although he had come closer than any man Felix had ever seen.

Then there were Hef and Spider, the new boys as Gant liked to call them, because they had only been with the sewer watch for seven years. They were identical twins who lived with the same woman on the surface and who had the habit of finishing each other's sentences. So strange were their long, lantern-jawed faces and their fish-like staring eyes, that Felix suspected that in-breeding or mutation was part of their heritage. He did not doubt their deadliness in hand-to-hand combat, though, or their

dedication to each other and their girl, Gilda. He had seen them do terrible things with their long hook-bladed knives to a pimp who had insulted her one night.

Along with the burly, one-eyed dwarf, these were the men he worked with, as desperate a crew as he had ever known. They were vicious men who couldn't find work that suited them anywhere else and who had finally found an employer who asked no questions.

There were times when Felix felt like going along to the office of his father's company and begging for money so he could leave this place. He knew they would give it to him. He was still the son of Gustav Jaeger, one of the Empire's wealthiest merchants. But he also knew that word of his capitulation would get back to his family. They would know that he had come crawling back to them, after all his fine boasts. They would know he had taken the money he had affected to so despise. Of course, it had been easy to despise money on the day he had stormed from their house, because he had never known the lack of it. His father's threat to disown him was meaningless because he simply had not understood it. He had grown up rich. The poor were a different species: sad, sickly things that begged on street corners and obstructed the path of one's coach. He had learned since that day. He had endured hardship and he thought he could take it.

But this was very nearly the last straw: being forced to become a sewerjack, the lowest of the low amongst the hired bravoos of Nuln. But there had simply been nothing else for it. Since their arrival no one else would hire two such down-at-heel rogues as himself and Gotrek. It pained Felix to think of how he must have looked, seeking work in his tattered britches and patched cloak. He had always been such a fine dresser.

Now they needed the money, any money. Their long trek through the land of the Border Princes had yielded no reward. They had found the lost treasure of Karak Eight Peaks but they had left it to the ghosts of its owners. It had been a case of find work, steal or starve – and both he and the Trollslayer were too proud to steal or beg. So here they were in the sewers below the Empire's second greatest city, crawling beneath a seat of learning that Felix had once dreamed of attending, haunting slimy tunnels below the home of the Elector Countess Emmanuelle, the most famous beauty of the nation.

It was not to be borne. Felix wondered constantly what ill-omened star had marked his birth. He consoled himself with the thought that at least things were quiet. It might be dirty work but so far it had not proved dangerous.

'Tracks!' he heard Gant shout. 'Ha! Ha! We've found some of the little buggers. Prepare for action, lads.'

'Good,' Gotrek rumbled.

'Damn!' Felix muttered. Even as inexperienced a sewerjack as Felix could spot these tracks.

'Skaven,' Gotrek hawked and spat a huge gob of phlegm out into the main channel of the sewer. It glistened atop a patch of phosphorescent algae. 'Rat-men, spawn of Chaos.'

Felix cursed. On the job only two weeks and already he was about to meet some of the creatures of the depths. He had almost been able to dismiss Gant's stories as simply the imaginings of a man who had nothing better with which to fill his long

tedious hours.

Felix had long wondered if there really could be a whole demented subworld beneath the city as Gant had hinted. Were there colonies of outcast mutants who sought refuge in the warm darkness and crept out at night to raid the market for scraps? Could there actually be cellars where forbidden cults held ghastly rituals and offered up human sacrifices to the Ruinous Powers? Was it possible that immense rats which mocked the form of man really scuttled through the depths? Looking at those tracks it suddenly seemed all too possible.

Felix stood frozen in thought, remembering Gotrek's tales of the skaven and their continent-spanning webwork of tunnels. Gant tugged his sleeve.

'Well, let's get on with it,' the sergeant said. 'We ain't got all day.'

'Never been here before,' Hef whispered, his voice echoing away down the long stretch of corridor.

'Never want to come here again,' Spider added, rubbing the blue arachnid tattoo on his cheek. For once Felix was forced to agree with them. Even by the standards of Nuln sewers, this was a dismal place. The walls had a crumbled, rotten look to them. The little gargoyles on the support arches had been blurred by age until their features were no longer visible. The stew bubbled and tiny wisps of vapour rose when the bubbles burst. The air was close, foetid and hot.

And there was something else – the place had an even more oppressive atmosphere than usual. The hair on the back of Felix's neck prickled, as it sometimes did when he sensed the undercurrents of sorcery nearby.

'Doesn't look safe,' Rudi said, looking at a support arch dubiously. Gotrek's face twisted as if this were a personal insult.

'Nonsense,' he said. 'These tunnels were dwarf-built a thousand years ago. This is Khazalid workmanship. It'll last an eternity.'

To prove his point he banged the arch with his fist. Perhaps it was just bad luck, but the gargoyle chose that moment to fall forward from its perch. The Slayer had to leap to one side to avoid being hit on the head and narrowly avoided skidding into the stew.

'Of course,' Gotrek added, 'Some of the labour was done by human artisans. That gargoyle, for instance – typical shoddy manling workmanship.'

No one laughed. Only Felix dared even smile. Gant stared up at the ceiling. The lamp set down at his feet underlit his face, making him look eerie and demonic.

'We must be below the Old Quarter,' he said wistfully. Felix could see he was contemplating the district of palaces. A strange melancholy expression transfigured his gaunt, bony features. Felix wondered whether he was pondering the difference between his life and the gilded existence of those above, contemplating the splendours he would never know and the opportunities he would never have. Momentarily he felt a certain sympathy for the man.

'There must be a fortune up there,' Gant said. 'Wish I could climb up and get it. Well, no sense in wasting time. Let's get on with it.'

'What was that?' Gotrek asked suddenly. The others looked around, startled.

'What was what?' Hef asked.

'And where was what?' added Spider.

‘I heard something. Down that way.’ All their gazes followed the direction indicated by the Trollslayer’s pointing finger.

‘You’re imagining things,’ Rudi said.

‘Dwarfs don’t imagine things.’

‘Aw sarge, do we have to look into this?’ Rudi whined. ‘I want to get home.’

Gant rubbed his left eye with the knuckles of his right fist. He seemed to be concentrating. Felix could see he was wavering. He wanted to leave and be off to the tavern just as quickly as the rest of them, but this was his responsibility. If something was wrong beneath the palaces and anyone found out they had been there and done nothing about it, then it was his neck for the block.

‘We’d better look into it.’ he said eventually, ignoring the groans of his fellow sewerjacks.

‘It shouldn’t take long. I’ll lay odds it’s nothing anyway.’

Knowing his luck, Felix decided, that was a bet he wouldn’t take.

Water dripped down from the arch of the tunnel. Gant had narrowed the aperture of his lantern so that only the faintest glimmering of light was visible. From ahead came the sound of voices. Even Felix could hear them now.

One of the voices was human, with an aristocratic accent. It was impossible to believe the other belonged to a man. It was high-pitched, eerie and chittering. If a rat had been given the voice of a human being it would have sounded like this.

Gant stopped and turned to look back at his men, his face pale and worried. He obviously didn’t want to go on. Glancing round the faces of his fellow sewerjacks, Felix knew they all felt the same. It was the end of the day. They were all tired and scared and up ahead was something they didn’t want to meet. But they were sewerjacks; men whose only virtue was courage and the willingness to face what others would not, in a place where others would not go. They had a certain pride.

Gotrek tossed the hatchet into the air. It spun upward, blade catching a little of the light. With no apparent effort the Trollslayer caught it by the haft as it fell. Spider pulled his long-bladed knife from its sheath and shrugged. Hef gave a feral smile. Rudi looked down at his shortsword and nodded. Gant grinned. The Trollslayer looked pleased. He was in the company of the sort of maniacs he could understand.

Gant gestured softly and they shuffled forward, picking their way carefully and quietly along the slimy ledge. As they turned the bend he opened up his lantern to illuminate their prey.

‘Your payment, a token of my esteem. Something for your own personal use,’ Felix heard the aristocratic voice say. Two figures stood frozen like trolls in a fairy tale, petrified by the sudden bright light. One was a tall man, garbed in a long black robe like a monk’s. His face was patrician: fine-boned, cold and aloof. His black hair was cut short, ending in a widow’s peak above his forehead. He was reaching forward to hand the other figure something that glowed eerily.

Felix recognised it. He had seen the substance before, in the abandoned dwarf fortress of Karak Eight Peaks. It was a ball of warpstone. The recipient was short and inhuman. Its fur was grey, its eyes pink; its long hairless tail reminded Felix of a great worm. As the thing turned to squint at the light, the tail lashed. It reached inside its long, patchwork robes and clutched something in its taloned paws. From its belt hung

an unscabbarded rusty, saw-toothed blade.

‘Skaven!’ Gotrek roared. ‘Prepare to die!’

‘Fool-fool, you said you were not followed,’ the thing chittered at its human companion. ‘You said no one knew.’

‘Stay where you are!’ Gant said. ‘Whoever you are, you’re under arrest on suspicion of witchcraft, treason and unnatural practices with animals.’

The sergeant’s confidence had been restored by the fact there were only two of them. Even the fact that one of the perpetrators was a monster seemed to leave him undaunted.

‘Hef, Spider, take them and bind them.’ The rat-thing suddenly threw the sphere it had withdrawn from its clothing.

‘Die-die, foolish manthings.’

‘Hold your breath!’ Gotrek shouted. His hatchet hurtled forward simultaneously.

The skaven’s sphere tinkled and shattered like glass and an unhealthy looking green cloud billowed outward. As he shoved Felix back down the corridor, Gotrek grabbed Rudi and pulled him with them. From inside the gas-cloud came the sound of gurgling and choking. Felix felt his eyes begin to water.

Everything went dark as the lantern went out. It was like being caught in a nightmare. He couldn’t see, he was afraid to take a breath, he was stuck in a narrow corridor underground and somewhere out there was a monster armed with deadly, incomprehensible weapons.

Felix felt the slick slime of the stone under his hands. As he fumbled he suddenly felt nothing. His hand was over the stew. He felt unbalanced and afraid to move, as if he could suddenly topple in any direction and plunge into the sewage. He closed his eyes to keep them from stinging and forced himself to move on. His heart pounded. His lungs felt as if they were about to burst. The flesh between his shoulder blades crawled.

He expected a saw-toothed blade to be plunged into his back at any moment. He could hear someone trying to scream behind him and failing. They gurgled and gasped and their breathing sounded terribly laboured as if their lungs had filled with fluid.

It was the gas, Felix realised. Gotrek had told him of the foul weapons which the skaven used, the products of a Chaos-inspired alchemy allied to a warped and inhuman imagination. He knew that to take one breath of that foul-smelling air was to die. He also knew that he could not keep from breathing indefinitely.

Think, he told himself. Find a place where the air is clear. Keep moving. Get away from the killing cloud. Don’t panic. Don’t think about the huge rat-like shape creeping ever closer in the dark with its blade bared. As long as you keep calm you’ll be safe. Slowly, inch by torturous inch, his lungs screaming for air, he forced himself to crawl towards safety.

Then the weight fell on him. Silver stars flickered before his eyes and all the air was driven from his lungs. Before he could stop himself he took in a mouthful of the foul air. He lay in the dark gasping and slowly it dawned on him that he wasn’t dead. He wasn’t choking. No knife had been driven into his back. He forced himself to try and move. He couldn’t. It was as if a great weight lay across him. Terror flashed through his mind. Maybe his back was broken. Maybe he was a cripple.

‘Is that you, Felix?’ he heard Rudi whisper. Felix almost laughed with relief. His

burden was his huge fellow sewerjack.

‘Yes... where are the others?’

‘I’m all right,’ he heard Hef say.

‘Me too, brother.’ That was Spider.

‘Gotrek, where are you?’ No answer. Had the gas got him? It seemed impossible. The Trollslayer couldn’t be dead. Nothing as insidious as gas could have killed him. It wouldn’t be fair.

‘Where’s the sarge?’

‘Anybody got some light?’

Flint sparked. A lantern flickered to life. Felix saw that something large was shuffling towards them along the shadows of the ledge. Instinctively his hand reached for his sword. It wasn’t there. He had dropped it when he fell. The others stood poised and waiting.

‘It’s me,’ said the Trollslayer. ‘Bloody human got away. His legs were longer.’

‘Where’s Gant?’ Felix asked.

‘Look for yourself, manling.’

Felix squeezed past and went to do so. The gas had vanished as quickly as it appeared. But it had done its work on Sergeant Gant. He lay in a pool of blood. His eyes were wide and staring. Trickle of red emerged from his nostrils and mouth.

Felix checked the body. It was already cooling and there was no pulse. There was no wound on the corpse.

‘How did he die, Gotrek?’ Felix knew about magic but the fact that a man could be killed and have no mark left on him made his mind reel.

‘He drowned, manling. He drowned in his own blood.’ The Slayer’s voice was cold and furious.

Was that how he dealt with fear, Felix wondered? By turning it into anger. Only after the dwarf went over and started kicking the corpse did he notice the dead skaven. Its skull had been split by the thrown hatchet.

Wearily Felix lay on his pallet of straw and stared at the cracked ceiling, too tired even to sleep. From below came the sound of shouting as Lisabette argued with one of her seemingly interminable stream of customers.

Felix felt like banging on the floor and telling them to either shut up or get out, but he knew that it would only cause more trouble than it would solve. As he did every night, he resolved that he would begin looking for another rooming house tomorrow. He knew that tomorrow night he would be too tired to start.

Ideas chased each other like frolicking rats inside the cavern of his brain. He was at that stage where weariness made his thoughts strange even to himself. Odd conjunctions of images and maze-like chains of reasoning came from nowhere and went nowhere in his mind. He was too tired even to be angry about the fate of Sergeant Gant, killed in the line of duty and destined for a pauper’s grave on the fringes of the Gardens of Morr. A watch captain too bored to pay much attention to reports of monsters in the sewers. No family to mourn him, no friends save his fellow sewerjacks, who were even now toasting his memory in the Drunken Guardsman.

Gant was a cold corpse now. And the same thing could so easily have happened to me, Felix thought. If he had been in the wrong place when the globe exploded. If

Gotrek had not told us to hold our breath. If the Slayer had not pushed him away from the gas. If. If. If. So many ifs.

What was he doing, anyway? Was this how he intended to spend the rest of his days; chasing monsters in the dark? His life seemed to have no reason to it any more. It merely moved from one violent episode to the next.

He thought of the alternatives. Where would he have been now if he had not killed Wolfgang Krassner in that duel, if he had not been expelled from university, if he had not been disinherited by his father? Would he be, like his brothers, working in the family business: married, secure, settled? Or would something else have gone wrong? Who could tell?

A small black rat scuttled across the rafters of the room. When he had first viewed this attic with its one small window, he had imagined that it would at least be free from the rats which infested all of the buildings in the New Quarter. He had deluded himself with the thought that the rodents would have heart attacks from the effort of climbing all those stairs. He had been wrong. The rats of the New Quarter were bold and adventurous and looked better fed than many of the humans. He had seen some of the larger ones chasing a cat.

Felix shuddered. Now he wished he had not started thinking about rats – it made him think of the mysterious aristocrat and the skaven in the sewers. What had been the purpose of that clandestine meeting? What profit could any man find in dealing with such alien monstrosities? And how could it be that folk could roister and whore through the teeming streets of Nuln and be unaware of the fact that evil things burrowed and crawled and nested not six yards beneath their feet? Perhaps they just didn't want to know. Perhaps it was true, as some philosophers claimed, that the end of the world was coming and it was best to simply lose oneself in whatever pleasures one could find.

Footsteps approached on the stairs. He could hear the old rickety boards creak under the weight. He had been going to complain that the whole place was a firetrap but Frau Zorin had always seemed too pitiful and poor to bother.

The footsteps did not stop on the landing below but continued to come closer. Felix reached beneath his pillow for his knife. He could think of no one who would be visiting him at this time of night and Frau Zorin's was right in the roughest part of the New Quarter.

Noiselessly he rose and padded on bare feet to the door. He stifled a curse as a splinter embedded itself in the sole of his foot. There was a knock on the door.

'Who is it?' Felix asked, although he already knew the answer. He recognised the old widow woman's wheezing breath even through the thin wood.

'It's me,' Frau Zorin shrieked. 'You have visitors, Herr Jaeger.'

Cautiously Felix opened the door. Outside stood two huge burly men. They carried clubs in their hands and looked as if they knew how to use them. It was the man they flanked that interested Felix. He was handing the landlady a gold coin, which she took with an ingratiating smile. As the man turned to look at the door Felix recognised him. It was his brother, Otto.

'Come in,' Felix said, holding the door open. Otto stood staring at him for a long time, as if he couldn't quite recognise his younger brother. Then he strode into the room.

‘Franz, Karl, remain outside,’ he said quietly. His voice carried an authority that Felix had not heard in it before, an echo of their father’s calm, curt manner.

Felix was suddenly acutely aware of the poverty of his surroundings: the uncarpeted floor, the straw pallet, the bare walls, the hole in the sloping roof. He saw the whole scene through his brother’s eyes and wasn’t at all impressed.

‘What do you want, Otto?’ he asked brusquely.

‘Your taste in accommodation hasn’t changed much, has it? Still slumming.’

‘You haven’t come all the way from Altdorf to discuss my domestic arrangements. What do you want?’

‘Do you have to hold that knife so ready? I’m not going to rob you. If I was, I would have brought Karl and Franz in.’

Felix slid the knife back into its scabbard. ‘Maybe I would surprise Karl and Franz.’

Otto tilted his head to one side and studied Felix’s face. ‘Maybe you would at that. You’ve changed, little brother.’

‘So have you.’ It was true. Otto was still the same height as Felix but he was far broader. He had put on weight. His chest had thickened and his hips broadened. His large soft belly strained against his broad leather belt. Felix guessed that his thick blond beard hid several chins. His cheeks were fatter and seemed padded. His hair was thinner and there were bags under his eyes. His head jutted forward aggressively. He had grown to resemble the old man. ‘You look more like father.’

Otto smiled wryly. ‘Sad but true. Too much good living, I’m afraid. You look like you could use some yourself. You’ve become very skinny.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘Come on, Felix. How do you think I found you? We have our agents and we wanted to find you. How many tall blond men travelling in the company of dwarf Slayers do you think there are in the Empire? When the report came into my office about two mercenaries answering the description I thought I’d better investigate.’

‘Your office?’

‘I run the business in Nuln now.’

‘What happened to Schaffer?’

‘Vanished.’

‘With money?’

‘Apparently not. We think he was deemed politically undesirable. The Countess has a very efficient secret police. Things happen in Nuln these days.’

‘Not Schaffer! There was never a more loyal citizen in the Empire. He thought the sun shone out of the Emperor’s fundament.’

‘Nuln is only just part of the Empire, brother. Countess Emmanuelle rules here.’

‘But she’s the most flighty woman in the Empire, or so they say.’

‘Von Halstadt, her Chief Magistrate, is very efficient. He’s the real ruler of Nuln. He hates mutants. And rumour has it that Schaffer had begun to show stigmata.’

‘Never.’

‘That’s what I said. But believe this, little brother: Nuln is no place to come under suspicion of being a mutant. Such people vanish.’

‘But it’s the most liberal city of the Empire.’

‘Not any more.’ Otto looked around fearfully as if realising that he had said too

much. Felix shook his head ruefully. 'Don't worry, brother. No spies here.'

'Don't be too sure about that, Felix,' he said quietly. 'In these days, in this city, walls have ears.' When he spoke again his voice was loud and held a note of false heartiness. 'Anyway I came around to ask if you'd like to dine with me tomorrow. We can eat out if you'd like.'

Felix half wanted to refuse and half wanted to talk to his brother some more. There was much family news to catch up on and perhaps the possibility of returning to the fold. That thought alone frightened him as well as intrigued him.

'Yes, I'd like that.'

'Good. I'll have my coach collect you from here.'

'After I've finished work.' Otto shook his head slowly. 'Of course, Felix. Of course.'

They said their goodbyes. It was only after his brother had left that Felix began to wonder what could so frighten a man of Otto's power and influence that he would worry about eavesdroppers in a place like Frau Zorin's.

Fritz von Halstadt, head of the secret police of Nuln, sat among his files and brooded. That damned dwarf had come within an inch of catching him. He had actually tried to lay his filthy hands on him. He had come so near to undoing all his good work. One blow would have been enough. It would have brought Chaos and darkness to the city von Halstadt was sworn to protect.

Von Halstadt reached out and raised his cut glass pitcher. The water was still warm. Good, the servant had boiled it for exactly eleven minutes as he commanded. He was to be commended. Von Halstadt poured some into a glass and inspected it. He raised the glass to the light and checked it for sediment, for stuff floating in it. There was none. No contamination. Good.

Chaos could come so easily. It was everywhere. The wise knew that and used it to their advantage. Chaos could take many forms; some were worse than others. There were relatively benign forms, like the skaven – and there was the festering evil of mutation.

Von Halstadt knew that the rat-men just wanted to be left alone, to rule their underground kingdom and pursue their own form of civilisation. They were intelligent and sophisticated and they could be dealt with. If you had what they wanted, they would make and keep bargains. Certainly they had their own plans, but that made them comprehensible, controllable. They were not like mutants: vile, insidious, evil things that lurked everywhere, that hid in secret and manipulated the world.

We could all so easily be puppets on the end of the mutant's foul strings, he thought. That is why we must be vigilant. The enemy are everywhere, and more and more are spawned all the time.

The commoners were the worst for it, spawning an endless string of slovenly, lazy, good-for-nothings. Most mutants were born among the herd. It made a sick kind of sense. There were more of them and they were notoriously immoral and lewd and licentious.

The thought made him rigid with horror. He knew that the mutants took advantage of the commoners' stupidity. They were so clever. They used the ill-educated, lazy oafs: filled their heads with seditious nonsense, fed their envious anger of their betters,

whipped them up to riot and loot and destroy. Look at how they had ruined his poor father, burned the estate to the ground in one of their brutish uprisings. And his father had been the kindest and gentlest man who had ever lived.

Well, Fritz von Halstadt would not make that mistake. He was too clever and too strong. He knew how to deal with revolutionaries and upstarts. He would stand guard and protect mankind from the menace of the mutant. He would fight them with their own weapons; terror, cunning and ruthless violence.

That was why he kept his files, even though his beloved ruler Emmanuelle laughed at them, calling them his secret pornography. Within these lovingly detailed and carefully cross-indexed records was a kind of power. Information was power. He knew who all the potential revolutionaries were. His web of spies and agents kept him informed. He knew which nobles secretly belonged to the Dark Cults and had them watched at all times. He had sources that could penetrate any meeting place, and who no one ever suspected.

That was part of his bargain with the skaven. They knew many things and could find out many more. Their little spies were everywhere, unsuspected. He used their dark wisdom and dealt with the lesser of two evils to keep the greater anarchy at bay.

He picked up the small framed portrait Emmanuelle had given him and licked his thin lips. He thought about her choice of words for his files: 'pornography'. He was shocked that she had used such a word, even knew what it meant. It must be that brother of hers! Leos was a bad influence. Emmanuelle was too good, too pure, too unsullied to have learned such a word herself. Perhaps he should put his spies on her, just to watch out for—

No, she was his ruler! He did this all for her. Though the countess could not see its worth now, one day she would. Spying on her would be crossing a line he had set for himself. Besides, sometimes he suspected that the lies which he heard about her might just conceivably contain a kernel of truth, and finding out that would be too painful.

He put the picture back down on his desk. He had been allowing himself to drift from the main problem. The dwarf and the sewerjacks. Could they have recognised him? And what would he do about it if they had? They were simple men doing their simple job. Like him, they were struggling to keep Chaos at bay. But would they understand the necessity of what he did? If they did not, perhaps they would understand that it was necessary to ensure their silence forever.

Slowly the hungover sewerjacks lowered themselves into the depths. One by one they clambered down the ladders lowered through the access ports. Rudi, now acting sergeant, lit the lantern and illuminated the tunnel.

The stink hit Felix like a hammer even as he carefully stepped from the ladder onto the ledge. This was the trickiest part of the operation. There was only about one foot clearance between the ladder and the edge of the walkway. A misstep had carried many a still-drunk sewerjack into the stew.

'You missed yourself last night, young Felix,' Hef said.

'We gave the sarge a fine send-off,' Spider added.

'Gotrek downed seven jacks of ale one after the other and wasn't even sick. We took a week's wages off the first watch.'

'I'm very pleased for you,' Felix said. Gotrek looked none the worse for his

exploits. Of all the sewerjacks he was the only one who didn't appear ill. The rest were ghastly, pale, and walked with the shuffling gait of old men.

'Ah, there's nothing like the smell of the stew to clear your head in the morning,' Hef said, proceeding to stick his head out over the edge of the walkway and be violently sick.

'Fair clears the head it does,' Rudi added, with no trace of irony.

'I can see that,' Felix said.

'We're going to sweep through the area where the sarge got taken,' Rudi said. 'We decided it last night. We want to see if we can find the scumbag who deals with the skaven. And maybe if we can't find him we'll find some of his pink-tailed little friends.'

'And what if they've got more of those gas bombs?' Felix asked.

'Not to worry. Gotrek's an old tunnel fighter. He explained how to deal with it.'

'Oh, did he?'

'Yes. We soak our scarves in piss and breathe through them. That cuts out the gas.'

'I knew it would be something like that,' Felix said, glaring at the Trollslayer, wondering if the others were really convinced by Gotrek's claims or whether they were simply humouring him. One look at their haggard, determined faces convinced him that it was the former.

'It's true, manling. My ancestors fought the skaven at Karak Eight Peaks and it worked for them.'

'If you say so,' Felix said. He could tell it was going to be a long day.

They followed the route of the previous day towards the area beneath the Old Quarter. As they went, Felix had time to reflect on how strange his life was. His brother's house was somewhere above his head and he had not known it. He had not even known Otto was in the city. The fact that his brother had found him was certainly a testimony to the efficiency of his spy network.

Felix suspected that such things were necessary to anyone who wanted to do business in Nuln nowadays. What Otto had said about Schaffer and the countess's secret police was worrying too. Felix was sorry for the old man but he was more worried about himself. Both he and the Trollslayer were wanted by the law for their part in the great Window Tax riots in Altdorf. If the secret police were so efficient here, and he and Gotrek were really so recognisable, then they too might vanish. He consoled himself with the thought that the capital was a long way away and that the local authorities would probably not be interested in what happened outside their jurisdiction.

In a way it was even more reassuring that they were part of the sewer watch. It was tacitly understood that the watch did not look too closely into the backgrounds of those who volunteered for it. Indeed it was said to be a sure way of having them ignore your previous crimes. All of the others had been involved in acts of criminal violence at some point in their lives, or so they claimed. No, there wasn't too much to worry about. He hoped.

More immediately worrying was the prospect that they might actually come across some skaven. He did not fancy facing such vicious foes in their own environment. Frantically he tried to recall what Gotrek had told him of the rat-men, hoping to

remember something that would give him an edge if it came to a fight. He knew that they were a race of vicious mutant rats, products of warpstone in ancient times. They were said to inhabit a great, polluted city called Skavenblight, the location of which nobody knew. Rumour had it that they were divided up into clans, each of which had their own function: the practice of sorcery, the making of war, the breeding of monsters and so forth. They were lighter than a man but faster and more vicious, and possessed of a feral intelligence which made them deadly enemies.

He could recall one book he had read about the battles of the ancients that described their few interventions on surface battlefields: their terrifying charges in great, chittering hordes, their twisted evil and their penchant for torturing their prisoners. It had been a skaven horde which had undermined the walls of Castle Siegfried and broke the siege after two years of trying. Legend said that Prince Karsten had paid a terrible price for the service of his allies. Sigmar himself destroyed an army of them before his ascension to the heavens. It had been one of his less well-known exploits.

Felix himself had seen some evidence of the skaven's handiwork in Karak Eight Peaks. The thought of the warpstone-polluted wells and the great mutated troll gave him the chills even after all this time. He hoped that he would not have to face any more of their monstrous creations in his lifetime. Looking at the others he could tell that they did not share his hope.

Until yesterday, Felix had never given a second thought to the number of rats in the sewers. Now he saw that they were everywhere. They scuttled away from the lights as the watchmen approached and he could hear the pitter-patter of their feet behind them after they had gone. Their eyes caught the reflection of the lantern and glittered like tiny stars far off in the darkness of the undercity.

He found himself wondering now if there was any connection between the rats and the skaven. He started to imagine the little ones as spies for their larger brethren. It was a madman's fantasy, he knew, one straight out of the tales of sorcery he had read as a boy, but the more he thought of it the more terrifying the prospect became. Rats were everywhere in the great cities of man, living amid the garbage and refuse of civilisation. They could see much and overhear much and go, if not unnoticed, at least unsuspected.

He began to feel their cold eyes staring malevolently at him even as he walked. The walls of the sewer seemed to close in about him threateningly and he imagined himself caught in a vast warren. Thinking of the skaven out there, it suddenly seemed possible to him that he was in a vast burrow, that he and the others had been shrunk to the size of mice and that the skaven were ordinary rats, walking upright and dressed in a fashion that aped man.

The fantasy became so vivid and compelling that he began to wonder whether the fumes of the stew were going to his head or whether the scent-deadening narcotics prescribed by the city alchemists had hallucinatory side-effects.

'Steady, manling,' he heard Gotrek say. 'You're looking very pale there.'

'I was just thinking about the rats.'

‘In the tunnels your mind creates its own foes. It’s the first thing a tunnel fighter learns to guard against.’

‘You’ve done this sort of thing before then,’ Felix said, half sarcastically.

‘Yes, manling. I was fighting in the depths before ever your father was born. The ways around the Everpeak are never free of foes and all the citizens of the King’s Council do their share of military service in the depths. More young dwarfs die that way than any other.’

Gotrek was being unusually forthright, as he sometimes was before moments of great peril. Danger made him garrulous, as if he wanted to communicate with others only when he realised he might never get another chance. Or perhaps he was simply still drunk from the night before. Felix realised he would never know. Fathoming the dwarf’s alien mind was nearly as far beyond him as was understanding a skaven.

‘I can remember my first time in the tunnels. Everything seemed cramped. Every sound was the tread of some secret enemy. If you listen with fearful ears you are soon surrounded by foes. When the true foe comes you have no idea from which quarter. Stay calm, manling. You’ll live longer.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Felix muttered as the hefty Slayer shoved past. All the same, he was reassured by Gotrek’s presence.

With some trepidation they approached the place where Gant had been killed. Mist rose from the surface of the stew and in places a slow current was evident in the sludge. The area of the fight looked very much the same as Felix remembered it, except that the body was gone. The area where the corpse had lain was disturbed.

There was a trail in the slime that suddenly ended at the ledge, as if the body had been dragged a short way, then dumped. He knew they should have shifted it yesterday, when they had the chance, but they had been too shaken, disturbed and excited by what had happened to do so. No one had wanted to carry the mangy, rat-man body. Now it wasn’t there.

‘Someone took it,’ Hef said.

‘Wonder who?’ Spider said.

Gotrek scanned the ledge where the body had been. He bent down and peered closely at the tracks, then rubbed his eye-patch with his right fist. The hatchet which had killed the skaven came dangerously close to his tattooed scalp.

‘Wasn’t a man, anyway. That’s for sure.’

‘All sorts of scavengers in the sewers,’ Rudi said. He voiced the common belief of all sewerjacks. ‘There are things you wouldn’t believe living in the stew.’

‘I don’t think it was any scavenging animal,’ Gotrek said.

‘Skaven,’ Felix said, voicing their unspoken thoughts.

‘Too big. One of them was anyway. The other tracks might be skaven.’ Felix peered out into the gloom; it suddenly appeared even more menacing.

‘How big?’ He cursed himself for taking on the same monosyllabic way of speaking as the others. ‘How large exactly was this creature you referred to, Gotrek?’

‘Perhaps taller than you, manling. Perhaps heavier than Rudi.’

‘Could it be one of the mutants you say the skaven breed? A hybrid of some sort?’

‘Yes.’

‘But how can all those prints simply vanish?’ Felix asked. ‘They can’t all have

thrown themselves in the stew, can they?’

‘Sorcery,’ Hef said.

‘Of the blackest sort,’ Spider added.

Gotrek looked down at the ledge and cursed in his native tongue. He was angry and his beard bristled. The light of mad violence shone in his one good eye. ‘They can’t just disappear,’ he said. ‘It’s not possible.’

‘Could they have used a boat?’ Felix asked. The idea had just struck him. The others looked at him incredulously.

‘Use a boat?’ Hef said.

‘In the stew?’ Spider said.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Rudi said. Felix flushed.

‘I’m not being stupid. Look, the tracks end here. It would be quite simple for someone to step down from the ledge into a small skiff.’

‘That’s the daftest thing I’ve ever heard,’ Rudi said. ‘You’ve got some imagination, young Felix. Who’d ever have thought of using a boat down here?’

‘There’s a lot of things you’d never think of,’ Felix snapped. ‘But then thinking’s not your strong suit, is it?’ He looked at the other sewerjacks and shook his head. ‘You’re right – a boat doesn’t make sense. Much better to believe they vanished by magic. Maybe a cloud of pixies wafted in and carried them away.’

‘That’s right, a cloud of pixies. That’s more like it,’ Rudi said.

‘He’s being sarcastic, Rudi,’ Spider said.

‘A very sarcastic fellow, young Felix,’ added Hef.

‘Probably right though,’ Gotrek said. ‘A boat wouldn’t be too hard to come by. The sewers flow into the Reik, don’t they? Easy to steal a small boat.’

‘But the outflows into the river all have bars,’ Rudi said. ‘To stop vagrants getting in.’

‘And what’s our job, if not hunting down those self-same vagrants when they file through the bars?’ Felix asked. He could see the idea was starting to filter into even Rudi’s thick skull.

‘But why, manling? Why use boats?’ Felix felt briefly elated. It wasn’t often that Gotrek admitted that Felix might know more than him. He considered the matter rapidly.

‘Well for a start, they don’t leave tracks. And they might be connected with a smuggling operation. Suppose someone was bringing warpstone in by river, for instance. Our noble skulker yesterday seemed to be paying the rat-man off with it.’

‘Boats make me sick. The only thing I hate more than boats is elves,’ Gotrek said as they set off again.

They searched for the rest of the day and found no trace of any skaven, although they did find that the bars had been sawn away on one of the outflows to the Reik.

Felix stepped out of the street and into the Golden Hammer. He stepped from reality into a dream. The doorman held the great oak door for him. Servile waiters ushered him away from the squalor of the streets into a vast dining hall.

Richly clad people sat at well-filled tables, and dined and talked by the light that sparkled from huge crystal chandeliers. Portraits of great Imperial heroes watched the diners sternly from the walls. Felix recognised Sigmar and Magnus and Frederick the