The cover art depicts a chaotic battle scene. In the foreground, a Grey Seer, a dark-skinned figure with a large, horned head and a long, pointed beard, is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. He wears a dark, tattered robe and has a large, curved blade or staff in his right hand. His face is contorted in a scream or shout. Behind him, a massive, multi-headed Chaos Beast, resembling a dragon or a multi-headed dog, is roaring with its mouths wide open, showing sharp teeth and a red interior. The creature's body is covered in intricate, mechanical-looking details and glowing green energy. The background is a dark, stormy sky with bright green lightning bolts striking down. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and greens, with highlights of red and yellow from the lightning and the creature's mouth.

WARHAMMER

GREY SEER

BY C • L • WERNER

A THANQUOL & BONERIPPER NOVEL

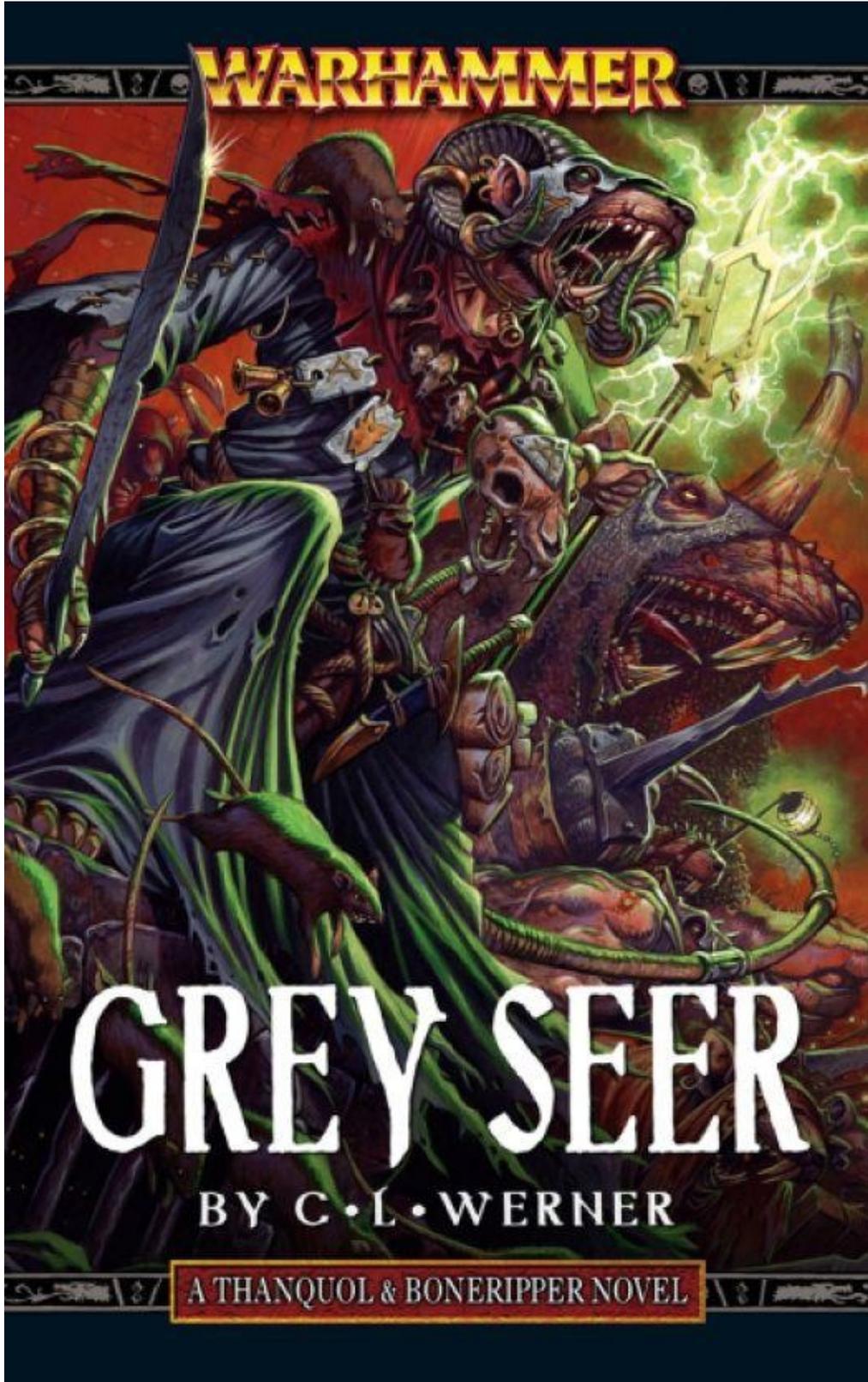


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A WARHAMMER NOVEL

Thanquol & Boneripper

GREY SEER

C. L. Werner



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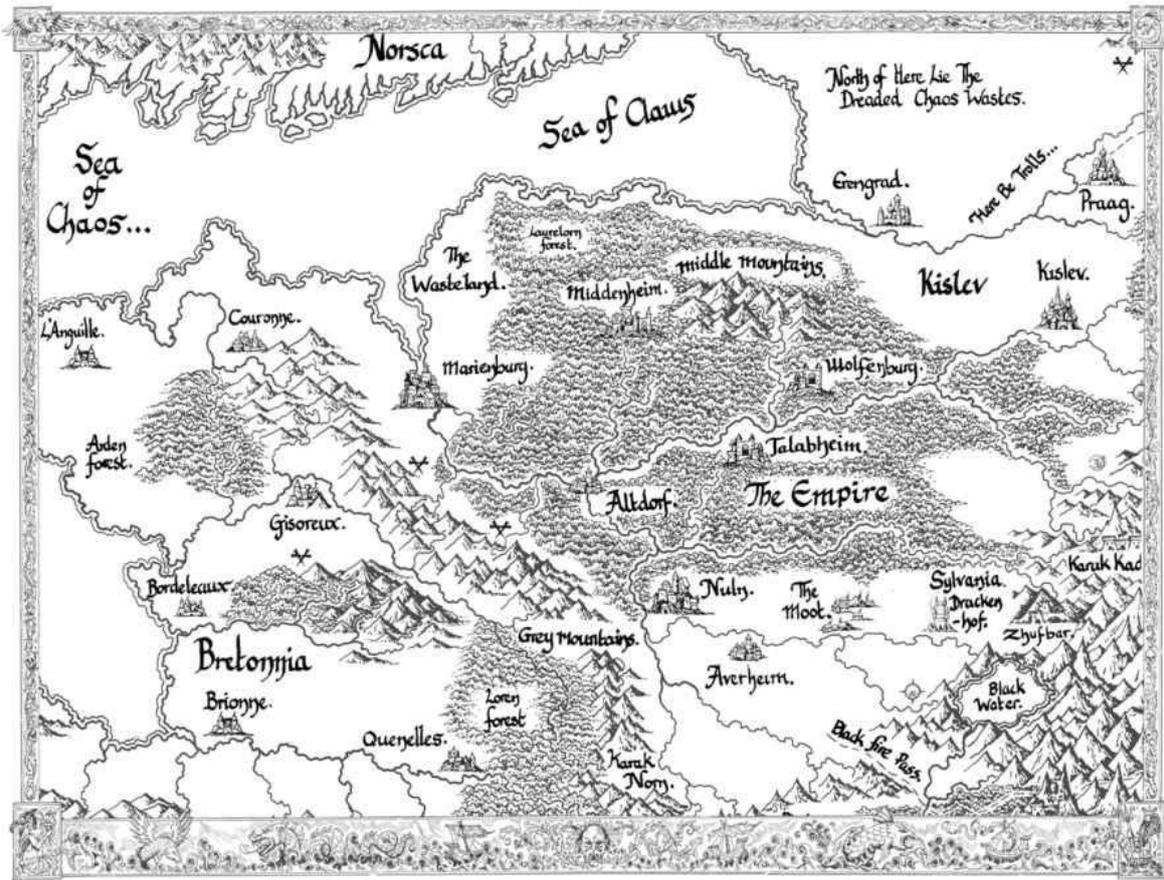


This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

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

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws

ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.



Chapter one

Something in the Sewers

‘Fast-quick, flea-maggots!’

The scratchy voice was thin as a whisper, like the rasp of snakeskin against cobblestone, but it carried through the dank, crumbling tunnels like a thunderclap. Scrawny rats with jaundiced eyes and matted fur skittered away, hugging the earthen walls as the fury of the voice moved them to flight.

For others, retreat was an option long ago taken from them. Emaciated creatures nearly as thin as the starveling cave rats, their scarred bodies covered in stringy brown fur, cowered and grovelled but heavy chains of corroded iron forced them to stand their ground. Each of the creatures was a horror of blisters and scabs, their bodies gouged by the violence of whip and fang. Only the most sardonic of observers would liken them to men, though there was a loathsome mockery of man in the shapes they wore. The things that dangled limply from their wasted arms were as much paws as they were hands. Naked tails, scaly and pallid, lashed the floor between their clawed feet. Above the iron collars that circled their necks was a narrow head, pinched and pulled into the rodent-like visage of an enormous rat. Yet even here could be found a gruesome echo of humanity, for it was more than the blind fear of vermin that shone in their beady red eyes, more than the unthinking pain of a simple beast that gave their gaze its stamp of dejected misery.

‘Fast-quick!’ the voice snarled again. This time the words were punctuated by a loud crack as a scaly whip, like the severed tail of one of the creatures, flashed through the green-shadowed gloom of the tunnel. Something cried out in a wordless shriek that spoke equally of pain and terror. The echoes of the cry had not even started to shudder through the tunnels when the slaves were moving once more, attacking the walls with their clawed hands, slashing and scratching at the earth and rock with frantic desperation.

Kratch coiled the macabre whip around his arm, exulting in the panic of the slaves. Not the slightest twinge of sympathy for the miserable throng moved him; pity was a concept utterly alien to the skaven mind. The slaves existed only to further Kratch’s own position and power; beyond that simple fact, Kratch had no concern for them or

their suffering. It was the most basic foundation of skaven society: the weak existed to exalt the strong.

Kratch rubbed his white-furred hands together, a pleased gleam in his eyes, as he considered the wisdom of such an arrangement. Perhaps he would have been less pleased had the Horned Rat not smiled so kindly upon Kratch and made him one of the strong. But the skaven god had favoured him, shaping him in the belly of his brood-mother and placing his mark upon Kratch. The ratman lifted a paw to his forehead, stroking the bony nubs protruding through his fur. Horned skaven were the chosen of their god, the voices and instruments of his will. More than the frayed grey robes and warpstone charms he wore, it was his horns that marked Kratch as one of the exalted, one of the grim brotherhood of sorcerer-priests known as the grey seers.

As he stroked his tiny horns, some of the pleasure ceased to sparkle in Kratch's eyes. He had been marked, but he was still far from the magnificence he wanted. Kratch was young, barely eight winters from the whelp-nests, his horns still developing and his magical knowledge small. He was only an adept, an initiate into the secrets of the grey seers, not a grey seer himself. One day he would wield such power, but until then he would be an apprentice, serving those who Kratch knew were his inferiors for all their horns and magic.

Kratch looked away from the frantic slaves, casting an appraising glance over his shoulder at his current 'master'. Grey Seer Skabritt was several times again as old as Kratch, his horns grown into a double-curved knot of bone that encased the sides of the priest's head like a helmet. Skabritt fancied himself a cunning strategist and plotter, weaving a nest of intrigue and deception to cloak his activities from his many rivals and enemies, but Kratch knew he could do so much more with Skabritt's resources and power.

The adept lashed his tail in annoyance. Looking at Skabritt caused Kratch's blood to boil with resentment. The grey seer stood well away from where the slaves were working, surrounded on all sides by his armoured stormvermin. The big black-furred skaven kept an easy grip on their halberds when they weren't scratching fleas from their fur. So very like Skabritt to spare himself any chance of danger. Distance would protect him from any cave-in that might result from the attentions of the work gang on the crumbling walls. The stormvermin would guard him against the unlikely, but possible event of a slave revolt. The armoured ratmen would cut down any berserk slaves long before they could lay a paw on Skabritt.

However, such hazards were perfectly acceptable for Kratch to be exposed to. The skaven gnashed his fangs as he reflected on that fact. Skabritt had insisted it would be a good learning experience for his apprentice, something to bolster his abilities to command and lead the unwashed masses of the Under-Empire. More pragmatically, Skabritt could always get another apprentice if something went wrong.

'Fast-quick!' Kratch growled, spinning back around and striking out with his whip. He wasn't sure if the brown-furred wretch he struck had really been slacking off and didn't really care. Lurking about in this forsaken network of burrows – burrows that had been sealed off since the skaven civil war – was far from Kratch's idea of safety and comfort. The number of stormvermin Grey Seer Skabritt brought along, and the amount of warpstone tokens he had spent in the markets of Under-Altdorf arming them, told Kratch that his mentor expected trouble. That Skabritt had not shared from

what quarter he expected that trouble didn't do much to reassure Kratch.

Still, the adept reflected, Skabritt would hardly put himself at risk for some miniscule gain. Whatever he hoped to find in the abandoned burrows the slaves were excavating, it would be something of importance. Perhaps some lost cache of warpstone or a lost trove of Clan Skryre technology. Kratch began to salivate as he considered the magnitude of such a find. Skabritt would earn the favour of the seerlords and the Council of Thirteen itself presenting them with such a treasure. Or perhaps he would instead choose to deal with a single clan, tempting them with the power his discovery would offer them. Under-Altdorf was a nest of intrigue already, each of its dominant clans striving against the others for control of the city, the largest in the entire Under-Empire with the exception of Skavenblight itself. Clan Skryre would pay well for anything that would tip the balance in their favour, just as the other clans would pay to keep such power from slipping into their paws.

Whatever Skabritt chose to do, Kratch would be there, clinging to his tail every step of the way. Even if only the smallest portion of the wealth and glory Skabritt was after trickled down to his apprentice, Kratch would take it. Unless of course he saw some way to cut his mentor out of the equation. Accidents did sometimes happen, like the time a swamp troll had broken free in the mines beneath Rat Rock and nearly devoured the grey seer. In the right paws, a sharp file and a rusty chain were as deadly as any assassin's poisoned dagger.

A sharp squeal of alarm stirred Kratch from his murderous visions. The adept cracked his whip against one of the slaves, slashing through its mangy hide, then wrinkled his snout in disgust. The workers were venting the musk of fear from their glands. Kratch fought back the instinctive response to do the same, his contempt for the wretches overcoming the tyranny of biology.

The slaves were skulking away from the wall of the tunnel. Kratch could see a dark opening where the bloodied paws of the skaven had broken through into a sealed chamber. A murky, stagnant odour wafted from the opening, overcoming even the pungent musk of the frightened slaves. Kratch felt a tremor of anxiety as his senses drank in the cold, evil smell. He quickly calmed himself. Anything with such an intimidating stench would also be obscenely powerful. His thoughts turned to visions of some lost trove of warpstone quietly festering away in the dark for six centuries and again his jaws became moist with anticipation. There was certainly a suggestion of warpstone about the clammy stench issuing from the darkness.

Kratch started to scramble down from his perch atop a pile of loose earth. Sounds behind him had the adept spinning about in alarm, one paw slipping to the dagger concealed in the sleeve of his robe. A gruff snarl froze Kratch's hand. The adept winced, screwing his eyes shut and lifting his head, exposing his throat in deference and humility to the creature he called master.

Grey Seer Skabritt had been drawn from his cautious observation point well away from the excavation by the clammy smell issuing from the opening. There was a feverish light shining in the priest's eyes as he shuffled forward, his stormvermin flanking him.

'Yes-yes,' Skabritt chortled, clapping his paws together. 'Mine it is! Power-strength! The Wormstone belongs to Skabritt!' The grey seer's eyes narrowed with suspicion, casting a hostile glance at slaves, stormvermin and apprentice alike. In his

injudicious enthusiasm he had let too much slip off his tongue. The priest seemed to almost swell with malignity as he drew energy into himself, his eyes glassing over with a greenish film of light. After a moment, he allowed the energy to dissipate, satisfied that none of those around him knew of what he spoke. The ignorance of his minions filled Skabritt with contempt. There was no danger such wretches could pose to him.

Kratch was careful to maintain his subservient poise, to keep any suggestion of his thoughts away from Skabritt's keen nose and penetrating gaze. The grey seer's scrutiny of his apprentice lasted only a moment, then he was turning his attention back on the tunnel. Skabritt was growing forgetful with his years. He had forgotten the apprentice who had scoured the records of Under-Altendorf for him, sniffing out any mention of the war with the plague priests of Clan Pestilens and the doom of Clan Mawrl. He had forgotten the many weeks Kratch had spent poring over the rat-hide scrolls and their cramped lines of hieroglyphs. Skabritt had forgotten that everything he knew about the Wormstone, his apprentice had learned first.

Stormvermin kicked and bullied their way through the huddled throng of cowering slaves as Skabritt ordered them forward. Warpstone lanterns were pulled down from the crumbling walls, casting the tunnel into blackness. Kratch scurried after the light, not trusting the darkness to guard him against the attentions of a vengeful slave. He crept after the rearmost of the stormvermin as Skabritt entered the exposed chamber.

The light from the lanterns warred against the centuries of darkness that filled the burrow, casting green shadows against the dripping walls. The burrow was not large, its other entrances as choked with rubble as the one Skabritt's slaves had broken through. The other clans of Under-Altendorf had been most thorough in their plot to bury Clan Mawrl alive. Evidence of how successful they had been was littered all across the floor. The bones of hundreds, perhaps even thousands of skaven were scattered everywhere. Even a cursory glance told Kratch that something had fed off the dead, the marks of fangs clearly visible on the bones, though whether the damage had been done by common vermin or fellow skaven was impossible to determine.

Kratch quickly dismissed the question, his focus shifting to the object standing almost in the exact centre of the burrow. Here the skeletons were at their thickest, piled about the object as though seeking succour from it in the long hours of their slow deaths. Kratch's fur crawled as he looked at it, as its evil smell hammered at his senses. Yet even in the midst of his fear, he could not deny the fierce desire and awful hunger the thing provoked in him.

A sickly yellow haze surrounded the Wormstone. The artefact was the size of a skaven, the colour of swamp slime laced with veins of pitch-black. Two hundred pounds if it was an ounce, the smell that came off it told Kratch what formed the bulk of its composition. Warpstone, the sorcerous rock that was the very foundation of skaven civilisation. It was food, power, wealth and more to the ratkin, used to power their technology, feed their brood-mothers and fuel their industry. A piece of warpstone the size of the find he now gazed upon was more wealth than any but the strongest clan-leaders and sorcerers could ever expect to possess.

There was something more in the scent of the Wormstone, something that reminded Kratch of what he had read. The warning checked the adept's greed, and he backed away from the glowing rock.

The stormvermin, however, were ignorant of the Wormstone's history. Two of them rushed forwards, snapping and spitting at each other as they rushed for the massive shard of glowing rock. One of the ratmen slashed his paw across the other's face, staggering his rival as black blood spurted down his forehead. For an instant, it seemed that Grey Seer Skabritt might intervene, but then the priest's face pulled back in a gruesome sneer. Skabritt was a big believer in object lessons: the more ghastly the better.

The foremost stormvermin covered the last few yards between him and the Wormstone with a fierce pounce, his teeth bared in challenge to any who would contest his new possession. Skabritt's tail twitched with amusement as the defiant warrior stretched his arm around the massive rock. Instantly he cried out with a pained squeak, leaping away in terror. Kratch could see the same ghoulish light that surrounded the Wormstone now glowing around the stormvermin's arm. Was it a trick of shadow, or were there really gigantic maggots burrowing into the warrior's fur?

The stormvermin was scratching and tearing at himself now, his body twitching in a fit of agony. The ratman whose eyes he had nearly scratched out snickered and drew his sword. No thought of seizing the tainted Wormstone now, but the stormvermin could still glut his need for revenge against his treacherous rival.

As the avenger approached the twitching wretch, the stricken stormvermin reared up, lunging at his rival with paws spread wide. Kratch realised with revulsion that the sick skaven wasn't attacking, he was appealing for succour. The swordsrat backed away in revulsion, horrified by the squirming ripples beneath the sick skaven's fur. He wasn't fast enough; the paw of the maddened wretch struck his foot, leaving a touch of the glowing taint on his clawed toes.

The swordsrat shrieked and brought his blade smashing down. The sick skaven's head burst open like an overripe melon, exploding into greasy quarters. From the grisly mush, fat green worms plopped and slithered.

The watching skaven vented their glands at the sickening sight. Several stormvermin braced their halberds, pointing the blades at the now infected swordsrat, trying to keep both him and the glowing worms in view. Kratch began trolling through his mind for a spell that would guard him against the ghastly magic he had witnessed, prayers to the Horned Rat rasping through his fangs.

Skabritt was unmoved, however. A fiendish, exultant light was in his eyes now. 'This,' the sorcerer hissed, 'this is the weapon that makes Skabritt seerlord!'

His master's words had barely registered with Kratch before the adept's attention was riveted once more upon the Wormstone. The bones piled behind the relic were moving, heaving and undulating like a boiling pool of pitch. A new scent imposed itself upon his snout, a thick beastly reek like an orc abattoir after a hot summer day mixed with the stink of wet rat ogre.

The stormvermin were too preoccupied with fending off their infected comrade, jabbing at him with the points of their halberds, trying to keep him back without puncturing his hide and spilling more glowing worms onto the floor of the burrow. They did not see the pile of bones rise up, did not see the old gnawed skeletons crash back to the floor as something immense and monstrous shook them from its peeling hide.

What it was, Kratch did not know. He suspected such a thing had no name. It was

immense, bigger even than the blind burrowers that Clan Moulder used to expand the caverns of the Under-Empire. There was certainly the suggestion of rat in its overall shape, a loathsome bulk that conspired at once to appear both bloated and emaciated. Patches of piebald fur clung to random bits of its anatomy; the rest was leprous and dripping. Its paws were oversized, like those of a snow bear, and tipped with more talons than it had toes. The head was withered to the point of being almost skeletal and the eyes that stared from either side of its peeling snout were swollen and pale. It lashed its tail against the floor and scabbled forwards, darting to the carcass of the slain ratman.

Now the stormvermin could not fail to notice the monster. They froze, eyes wide with fright as they stared at the imposing beast. The rat-thing ignored the warriors, instead snuffling at the floor, licking green maggots into its maw with its thin slimy tongue. The stormvermin backed away from the feeding monster, nearly trampling Kratch in their slow retreat.

Along with the healthy warriors, the infected swordsrat also withdrew from the monster, visibly shivering as he watched it feed. The sick skaven blundered into one of his former comrades. Instantly the stormvermin cried out, slashing the swordsrat from throat to belly with his halberd. Glowing worms oozed from the wound, slapping against the floor like greasy raindrops.

The sound caused the enormous rat-beast to lift its skeletal head. The monster sniffed at the air, then its jaws opened in a sharp hiss. Before any of the skaven could turn to run, the beast leapt across the burrow and was in their midst. Giant claws ripped and tore the tight knot of warriors, shredding armour like paper. Squeals of terror and agony became deafening as the smell of blood enraged the beast still further, provoking it into a frenzied state.

Kratch didn't wait to see anything else. The adept dived from the burrow, scurrying on all fours in his haste to flee. In the tunnel, the panicked slaves were struggling to rip the iron spikes that anchored their chains to the crumbling walls from their earthen fastenings. When they saw Kratch, some of them abandoned their efforts, turning instead toward the savage taskmaster. Several leapt at him, tearing the empty air with their bloodied paws as they reached the limit of their chains.

Kratch backed away from the maddened slaves, but found his retreat blocked by something warm and furry. Grey Seer Skabritt's scent held an unfamiliar taint of fear, but Kratch still recognised the smell. He lifted his gaze to the sorcerer-priest. Like the stormvermin, Skabritt's eyes were wide with fear. Unlike the warriors, however, fear was not the only thing Kratch saw in his mentor's stare. He saw anger, the smouldering fury of a mad genius who at the moment of triumph sees his prize stolen from him.

Then Skabritt's eyes were changing, glossing over with a greenish luminance as he drew upon the arcane power of the Horned Rat and the warpstone talisman he clutched in his fist. Kratch could feel tendrils of energy oozing into his brain, trying to smother his thoughts. It took all of his own willpower and sorcerous knowledge to drive them back, to free his mind of their numbing touch. The adept slumped to the floor, physically drained by the effort of resisting Skabritt's spell.

The slaves were not so fortunate. From the ground, Kratch could see them grow still. Fear withered from their eyes, dispelled by a green glow that was an eerie echo of

Skabritt's own charged gaze. When the grey seer gestured, the mob stirred, pulling once again at their chains and the iron staples anchoring them to the walls. This time, however, they did not attack the task as a disordered rabble but rather as a unified body guided by a single will: that of Skabritt. One after another, the combined strength of the slaves tore the staples from the walls.

The last staple came free just in time for Skabritt. The sounds of carnage and slaughter had faded from the burrow. In the exposed mouth of the chamber, its mangy pelt smeared in the black blood and yellow fat of the stormvermin, the rat-beast snarled and spat. Skabritt spun about, glaring at the loathsome creature and pointed a clawed finger at the monster.

At his command, the ensorcelled slaves surged forward, a chittering mass of claws and fangs. Like a furry tide, they crashed upon the rat-beast, crushing it beneath their sheer weight of numbers, bowling it over and slamming it into the crumbling wall of the tunnel. Earth and rock showered down from the ceiling, throwing dust into the musty air.

The rat-beast fought back, disembowelling slaves with every turn of its massive paws, snapping spines with its iron jaws. For all their numbers, for all the grey seer's magic, the stink of fear began to rise from the tangled knot of skaven sweeping over the monster. Skabritt gave voice to an inarticulate howl in which was both terror and outraged fury. The sorcerer-priest scurried forwards, desperate to reinforce his hypnotic control of the craven slaves.

Kratch watched the grey seer rush closer to the battle and his mouth pulled back in a predatory smile. He pulled a small piece of blackish-green rock from beneath his robes, a tiny sliver of refined warpstone. The adept's teeth gnawed at the rock, letting little bits of stony grit burn their way down his throat and through his body. Now it was Kratch's eyes that began to glow with an unholy light, the apprentice's brain that roared with the mighty power of the Horned Rat. Kratch could feel his body pulse with strength, swell with godlike vitality. He felt the essence of the warpstone flow through his entire being, hearing its seductive whisper crawl through his flesh.

It was almost worse than Skabritt's spell, fighting down the euphoric mania of the warpstone, but Kratch knew if he lost control now, his opportunity would be lost. That cold, ugly fact helped him maintain a grip on his reason. He forced his eyes to focus on the rat-beast and the slaves, on Skabritt now standing so very close to the fray.

On the crumbling walls and weak ceiling of the tunnel.

It seemed so easy. A few words, a few gestures, and the primordial power that raced through his body was reaching out. Like a great hammer, it smashed against the walls, it battered against the ceiling. A deafening roar thundered through the tunnel. In that last instant, Skabritt turned, locking eyes with his apprentice.

Kratch grinned back, baring his fangs in challenge to his hated mentor. Then thousands of tons of earth and rock came crashing down, obliterating Skabritt's expression of disbelief. Grey Seer, slaves and rat-beast, all were buried in the collapse.

Kratch coughed, spitting dirt from his mouth, choking on the dust that filled the tunnel and stifled the warpstone lanterns. He wiped at his almost blind eyes, even as he was pressing a rag to his snout to act as a filter for his nose. Briefly, Kratch considered waiting to see if the entrance to the burrow had remained intact. Skabritt was not the only skaven who could put the Wormstone to good purpose.

It was the memory of the stormvermin who had been infected by the Wormstone's power rather than the dust and dirt that made Kratch decide to flee. He would not brave such a fate as he had seen. He would let others take those risks.

Yes, Kratch decided as he scurried through the raw, desolate tunnels, he would need helpers if he wanted to recover the Wormstone and reap the rewards of such a find. Kratch's muzzle dripped as he salivated in anticipation of those rewards. He knew where to find his allies. He knew where his report about Skabritt's discovery would benefit him the most.

'Stop your whining or get an honest job!' growled Hans Dietrich for what felt like the hundredth time since they had set out from the docks. It was a serious threat to make against men like those who lumbered after him through the stinking, dripping corridors. Most of them had been born one kind of thief or another. Compared to their past activities, smuggling was an almost legitimate enterprise, if no less dangerous. There were stiff penalties for bringing contraband into Altdorf. Everyone from the Emperor downwards took a dim view of cheating the excisemen, though nobody really seemed to mind that it was the excisemen who were the biggest thieves. Popular theory on the wharves was that if even half the money the excisemen collected on goods coming into the capital actually were to go where it was supposed to, Karl Franz would be able to buy back Marienburg.

Reviled villains, the excisemen were everywhere on the waterfront, and if they weren't around, then there was always the chance that some wrinkle-faced old charwoman or bleary-eyed stevedore was employed by one, acting as their eyes and ears. The Fish, probably the most notorious of the waterfront gangs, took especial pleasure in floating such toadies in the river. Still, there was always someone desperate enough to take a few coppers from an exciseman, whatever the risks.

Which was why men in Hans's profession avoided the wharfs and the streets. There was another, surer way to navigate the swarming, crowded warren that was Altdorf, and do so completely unseen. The sewers of Altdorf were the biggest in the Empire, if not the entire Old World. Built by the dwarfs so long ago that some said Sigmar's water was the first to christen them, the sewers existed as an unseen underworld, ignored and forgotten by nearly all who prowled the streets above. Sewerjacks and ratcatchers, maybe the odd mutant hiding from the witch hunters, but largely no one bothered the sewers or even thought about doing so. Far from prying eyes and wagging tongues, the sewers were more than a filthy nest of scummy brickwork and walls dripping with slime to Hans: they were his secret road to anywhere in the city.

There were dangers, to be sure. Sewer rats grew to the size of small dogs and were infamous for their ferocity and the filthy diseases they carried. There were the grisly water lizards brought back from the Southlands for Emperor Boris Goldgather, which had escaped the Imperial Menagerie to slink and stalk through the humid damp of the tunnels. Hans himself had seen one of the things once, pale as the belly of a fish and with a tail thick enough to choke an ox.

Then there were the floods, when the reservoir beneath Altdorf would overflow and dump its spillage for the sewers to cast the excess into the Reik. There was little warning when these floods would rush through the tunnels; only by watching the rats

could a man find any hint of alarm. If the rats started scrambling for the surface, the smart man was right behind them. Hans cursed the fiendish cunning of the dwarfs; no human would have thought of using the reservoir as a means to clean the tunnels. He cast a nervous look at one of the grimy chutes that yawned in the wall, somewhat reassured to find a big black rat staring back at him from the muck, its whiskers twitching as it gnawed on some nameless filth clutched in its hand-like paws.

‘Are we there yet?’ the thin, reedy voice of Kempf called out from the rear of the little procession. There were ten men in Hans’s little gang, just big enough to keep their cut of the merchandise lucrative, but too small to bounce anyone from the mob. Even an annoying weasel like Kempf.

‘You seen the mark?’ Hans snarled back, turning around to glare at Kempf. Like the rest of the smugglers, Kempf was dressed in a grimy set of homespun and wool that was only slightly too good to be called rags. Kempf affected a goatskin coat two sizes too big for him, the garment hanging well below his knees while a gaudy scarf circled his throat, hiding an Adam’s apple so big the man looked like he’d swallowed a goblin.

Kempf lifted his hands in a placating gesture, causing Hans to roll his eyes. Kempf had an ugly habit of excusing himself from all the heavy work. While the rest of the men laboured under the weight of a half-dozen casks of bootleg Reikland hock from Carroburg, Kempf had conned his comrades into posting him as rearguard to keep a wary eye out for sewerjacks... or worse.

‘Maybe we passed it,’ Kempf suggested, visibly cringing when he saw the reaction on Hans’s face. The reedy smuggler bobbed his head like a punch-drunk stork and started a bout of his braying, nasal laughter. ‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘You keep a good eye out for the marks. Nobody says you don’t. I mean, that’s why you’re the leader.’ Kempf’s thin face spread in a toothy smile that was both ingratiating and smarmy. ‘But, I mean, everyone makes mistakes.’

Hans scowled at the rearguard, sucking at his teeth as he imagined burying his fist in that smug smile. He counted to ten, then reversed the numbers. His brother was always on him about his temper. They’d lost a few clients and quite a few men because Hans didn’t keep a tight leash on his tongue. More than a few of their enemies had started that way by being on the receiving end of Hans’s ire. Someday, Johann was always warning him, his temper was going to get all of them into more trouble than they could handle.

Hans looked away from Kempf and gave Johann an exasperated look. His brother was younger but taller and more muscular, his features handsome in a rugged sort of way that had all the girls at Argula Cranach’s making cow-eyes at him and offering discounts. His leather tunic, despite years of abuse and crude mending, still managed to constrain his brawny build. Hair the colour of old corn was cropped close to the skull, starkly contrasting eyes as cold and blue as the waters of the Upper Reik.

Johann had inherited all the better qualities. Hans was short, his unimposing build fading to fat, his left ear swollen out of proportion thanks to the impact of a Reiksguard’s bludgeon during the Window Tax riots many years ago. His nose was crooked, bent into its current asymmetrical fashion by the fist of a dock-ganger from the Hooks. His hair was a scraggly brown mop, like some disordered bird’s nest threatening to burst from beneath his battered felt hat. It wasn’t just looks that Johann

had won out on. The younger brother was smarter, stronger, more cautious, less emotional and decidedly braver. What Johann lacked, what his older brother provided, was ambition.

Starve or steal was a simple choice to make for the people who inhabited the waterfront. The Dietrich brothers had chosen to steal, at first petty acts of thuggery that yielded petty results. There wasn't much coin to be had rolling drunks as they stumbled out of the Orc and Axe. The real money was to be had by smuggling, sneaking goods from river trader to city merchant without the excisemen interfering.

They'd been profiting well from the venture, too. Even with his hot temper, Hans had a steady cadre of clients quite willing to put up with him for the sake of avoiding usurious duties and customs. Johann had scouted out a large section of the sewer over the course of several months, making marks in chalk and soot where the walls of the stinking tunnels corresponded with some important landmark above. By watching for the marks, the smugglers always knew where they were and where they needed to go.

Only Hans hadn't seen any marks for quite some time now. Far too long, now that he thought about it. He didn't like to give any credence to one of Kempf's slippery suggestions, but the sneak might be right this time. Maybe he had missed something.

Before he could speak, Hans saw Johann's eyes narrow into a suspicious squint. Slowly, the younger Dietrich began to lower his cask of cheap Carroburg booze.

'Something's wrong,' Johann said, his voice low. His hand dropped to a weapon belt that was in far better shape than his tunic, fingers tightening about the grip of his dagger.

'Who...' but Hans had no need to finish his question. Torches blazed into life from the sewer tunnel up ahead. More lights burst into flame from the cross-tunnels to either side. Dark silhouettes moved through the blackness, naked steel reflecting the flickering flames. Hans felt his stomach turn as he decided that the sewerjacks had finally caught them. In the next moment, he found himself wishing they were sewerjacks.

'The Dietrich boys,' a deep voice growled, a voice Hans and any other scoundrel on the waterfront knew only too well. Gustav Volk. In a district infamous for casual violence and brutality, Gustav Volk was a name held in fear. As the speaker stepped out of the shadows, Hans reflected that it wasn't size or strength that made Volk so feared, the man possessed neither in such abundance as to overwhelm the feral courage of rakes and thieves. It was the face – that grizzled scowl with its stubbly hair and heavy brow. Volk carried an expression that could make a wolf pass water. It burned in his eyes, the pitiless rage looking for any excuse to allow the man to do his absolute worst to his victim and enjoy every screaming, bloody minute of it.

Volk oozed out from the darkness, accompanied by a bull-necked bruiser carrying a torch. Other thugs followed close behind. Volk looked the smugglers up and down, his lip curled in scorn. 'Quite an accomplishment,' he snarled. 'Your operation has become big enough to become annoying to Herr Klasst. Bad news for you.' To add emphasis to his statement, Volk slapped the hilt of his sword. For the moment, it was sheathed. Nobody was fool enough to think the moment would last.

Klasst. Vesper Klasst. He was even more of a bogeyman to the inhabitants of the waterfront than Volk. A big-scale racketeer and gang-leader, it was said Klasst controlled criminal bands all across Altdorf, from Little Tilea to the Morrwives. After

the Fish and the Hooks had been at least partially broken up by the Altdorf Dock Watch in the weeks after the murderous Beast had finally been brought to ground, it was Vesper Klasst who had become the undisputed power on the waterfront. And Gustav Volk was his enforcer, extorting a percentage from every transaction, criminal or legal, that happened in his territory, brutally coercing many of the district's thieves to join Klasst's 'family'.

Hans had resisted Volk's suggestion that his band of smugglers accept the protection of his gang. That meeting had ended with one of Hans's fingers bent so far backward it wasn't so much broken as snapped. It had also ended with Johann's dagger tickling a piece of anatomy Volk wasn't too keen on losing. The last view the brothers had had of Volk was him screaming for a surgeon and clutching his blood-soaked breeches. That had been three months ago. They'd been lucky to avoid him so long. Now Randal had decided their luck was at an end.

'I want the wine,' Volk stated, his tone broaching no argument. 'Then you're going to show me where you were taking it. I'll make a good example of somebody who thinks they can still use independents without Herr Klasst finding out.'

'How do we know you won't just kill us anyway?' Hans challenged.

Volk's smile was as ugly as an orc in a nursery. 'You can die here, slow, or you can die there. I'll have other things to do there, so I'll make it quick.'

Johann pulled his dagger from its sheath. 'How about I just gut you like the pig you are and leave you floating here with the rest of the...'

Hans stared in horror as his brother lunged at Volk. The entire sewer exploded into madness, armed men charging from the darkness to confront the smugglers. Hans dodged the murderous sweep of a boat-hook, driving his elbow into the thug's belly and knocking the wind out of him.

So much for Johann being the level-headed one, Hans thought as he drew his own dagger and joined the fray in earnest.

Six casks of Reikland hock, three dead and two men missing. Johann knew he should be thankful that any of them were still alive, but he still couldn't help but grumble over their losses. They'd accounted for at least two of Volk's gang, but unfortunately he wasn't one of the casualties. Not bad considering they'd been outnumbered three to one. Still, if Volk's men had known the sewers half as well as the smugglers, there was no chance they'd have given the thugs the slip.

Then again, giving them the slip had also put Johann in a situation he hadn't encountered in quite some time: he had no idea where they were. It was more than Volk's men removing marks from the walls – Johann would swear on the Hammer of Sigmar he'd never seen this stretch of tunnel before. He tried to keep his confusion to himself, not wanting to panic the men. He felt that his brother had some inkling as to what was wrong but trusted him to keep quiet.

When they came upon the breach in the sewer wall, however, even the dullest of the surviving smugglers knew something was wrong. The jagged tear in the brickwork, like the yawning mouth of some immense snake, was certainly something they would remember. Johann edged forwards, peering through the opening. He risked lighting a candle. Beyond the breach was a tunnel, raw earthen walls that looked to have been carved out with bare hands rather than tools. There was a foul smell as well,

a thick animal stench that even the reek of the sewers couldn't overwhelm.

Hans appeared at his side, staring into the earthen tunnel. He glanced back, watching the fear grow in his small band of thieves.

'We can hide from Volk's gang in here,' Hans proclaimed boldly, gambling that their fear of the unknown wasn't quite so robust as their fear of Gustav Volk.

The gamble played out and soon the entire band of smugglers was creeping through the narrow, winding tunnel. The unsettling sound of earth shifting overhead and the occasional stream of dust falling from the ceiling did nothing to improve their spirits. But it was when the huge Emil Kleiner, a former stevedore before he decided that even so marginally legitimate a profession wasn't to his taste, found the body that things really took a turn for the worse. His ear-battering shriek was such that if any of Volk's gang were still following the smugglers, they could not fail to find their quarry now.

A snarled reprimand died on Johann's lips as he stared down at the ugly, mangled thing that had so terrified Kleiner. The noxious carcass was almost man-sized, dressed in a crude grey robe even the most pathetic of Altdorf's beggars would have refused to be seen in. It was covered in bloodied fur and its appearance, for all its mutilation, was that of a giant rat: a rat that seemed to have thought it was a man!

Frightened whispers came from the circle of smugglers gazing down on the thing. Half-remembered childhood tales of the verminous underfolk and their kidnapping ways rose to the forefront of each man's mind. Several made the signs of Ranald and Sigmar, praying to their gods for deliverance from such mythic nightmares. Even Johann felt the nervous urge to glance down the tunnel, to discover if the dead thing had any of its living fellows about.

Hans bullied his way through the frightened men, sneering with contempt at both their fear and the unnatural corpse that sprawled at their feet. 'Gunnred's noose!' he swore. 'What is wrong with you slack-jawed curs? Never seen a dead mutant before?' Hans punctuated his outburst with a strong kick to the dead thing's horned skull. The corpse rolled obscenely from the impact.

Their leader's outburst rallied the men and nervous laughter echoed in the crumbling tunnel. Hans was right of course, the smugglers decided. The thing was no more than a mutant wretch. Looking like it did, there was small wonder the scum had chosen to hide itself down in the sewers. The only thing remarkable about it was that it had avoided the witch hunters long enough to even reach the sewers.

Underfolk? Bah! Everyone with half a brain knew there was no such thing as the skaven!

The smugglers began following the tunnel once more. The air was dank and foul, leading Johann to believe it didn't lead anywhere, but Hans was more obstinate. They passed carefully around several places that showed signs of recent collapse. Once, a great pool of black blood rewarded their investigation, seeming to seep from beneath a recent cave-in. The men carefully avoided the ominous sign and pressed on.

Not far from the cave-in, the smugglers found a large chamber. If anything, the air was even fouler here. The floor of the cavern was littered with bones and fresh offal, putrid blood splashed everywhere and gobbets of gnawed meat splattered against the walls. A quick inspection told Johann that whatever the place had been, the other tunnels that opened into it had collapsed a long time ago. He tried not to look too

closely at the strange bones and furry meat littering the floor.

‘Look at that.’ The words left Hans’s mouth in an awed whisper. The smuggler was staring in open wonder at a huge chunk of greenish stone resting at the centre of the room, glowing faintly with its own inner light. Johann felt his skin crawl just looking at it. He could tell most of the other men felt the same way.

‘Black magic,’ hissed old Mueller, the eye that hadn’t been pulled from its socket by an over-eager river pirate squinting with a mixture of suspicion and loathing. At his words, other smugglers began making the signs of their gods for protection.

‘Maybe,’ agreed Kempf, ‘but have you ever heard of any kind of magic that wasn’t worth a fair number of crowns?’ The little thief scrambled forwards and joined Hans beside the weird rock. He grinned as he studied the thing, reaching out a hand and scratching at the rock. Kempf sniffed at his finger and his smile broadened.

‘Wyrdstone,’ Kempf declared. The eyes of every man present grew wide not from fear, but from greed. Wyrdstone was a valuable commodity, so valuable that even the lowest cutpurse knew its worth. A type of rock soaked in magic that, it was said, could do everything from curing shingles to turning lead into gold. It was said to be able to remove wrinkles from the old and build strength in the young. Pigments mixed with wyrdstone dust could allow even the most talentless artist to create a priceless masterpiece, and a single whiff of a wyrdstone poultice was certain protection from the evils of mutation and madness. Those who lusted after wyrdstone insisted it was a different substance from the abhorred warpstone, the raw stuff of Chaos that brought madness and mutation with its touch. Such connections were the delusions of ignorant, superstitious fools in their minds. There was almost nothing alchemists and wizards wouldn’t do to possess even a small measure of wyrdstone. What they were looking at was anything but a small measure.

Still, the avarice of the men was tempered by the grim knowledge that few substances in the Empire were as forbidden as wyrdstone. If there was nothing wizards wouldn’t do to get some, there was nothing the witch hunters wouldn’t do to anyone caught with any. Even for men who daily risked hanging or an indeterminable stay in Mundsden Keep, the thought of what the witch hunters did to heretics was sobering.

Hans stared at the glowing rock for several minutes, then nodded his head slowly. ‘Kempf, do you think you could find us a buyer for that thing?’

‘One? Why not a dozen?’ Kempf replied enthusiastically.

The answer decided Hans. ‘Kleiner, Mueller, fetch that thing down. We’ll take it back to the hideout.’

The men hesitated, but a sharp look from their leader had the pair lumbering up to the pile of bones and pulling down the heavy rock. They drew frayed rags from their pockets, wrapping them tightly about their faces to fend off any sorcerous fume, wound ribbons of torn cloth about their hands to defend their skin from the touch of magic. Johann felt a shiver pass through him as he saw the green light stretch and grip the arms of the men, casting a diseased pallor across their skin. The men carrying the rock didn’t seem to notice and Hans was already conferring with Kempf in a soft whisper, trying to figure out how they would best bring their strange discovery to market.

As they worked their way back down the crumbling tunnel, Johann could not share the optimism of his brother. He could not shake the impression that far from making