

I really don't like the look of this place," whined Felix Jaeger, surveying his surroundings warily. He cast a glance towards the distant gateway just to make sure that the portcullis had not come crashing down. The whole place reminded him of a set from one of Detlef Sierck's horror plays. No, the young scholar corrected himself, this castle was probably the *prototype* for all of those settings.

Evil gargoyles leered from every corner of the ancient building. Tall chill towers loomed overhead. As the blood-red Sylvanian sun sank behind the massive walls an aura of fear settled over the place. The smell of mould and rot filled the air. Blood and evil seemed to have seeped into every crumbling stone of the lichen-crusted walls. Felix started as a huge rat scuttled across the courtyard and disappeared into the ruins of the ancient stables.

"Small ponies they have here," muttered his companion, running a massive fist through his enormous crest of dyed red hair. Felix turned and looked down at the Dwarf. He was glad Gotrek was there. Although a full head shorter than Felix, he was nearly twice as heavy and all that weight was muscle. The sight of the monstrous axe the Dwarf held so casually in one hand was even more reassuring.

"It was a rat, Gotrek. A rat. I hate rats," said Felix, throwing his tattered red cloak back over his shoulder to leave his sword arm free. It was true. He did hate rats. He had hated the pestilential things ever since his encounter with the Skaven in the sewers below Nuln.

"It was a joke, manling," muttered the Trollslayer, surveying the grim remains of the keep with his one good eye. Felix looked around nervously. Perhaps the Dwarf could make jokes here but he could not. He was scared. All his life he had heard tales of the von Carsteins, the infamous Vampire Counts of Sylvania, and now he was standing amid the ruins of their ancestral home.

How did I ever get here, he asked himself? Why did that damned innkeeper have to mention the rumours that a necromancer was laired up here to Gotrek. Why did the Trollslayer feel it was incumbent on the two of them to investigate? He felt like telling the Dwarf that he could take a death wish too far. He knew the Slayer had sworn a mighty oath to seek death in battle but it was all too possible that against a necromancer he would not find mere death but an eternity of ghastly servitude as an animated corpse. Just the thought of it made Felix want to flee screaming from the keep.

"What was that noise, manling?"

"Probably my teeth chattering."

"I'm serious!" Felix looked warily at the Dwarf. He knew the Dwarf's ears were keener than his. If Gotrek said he'd heard something then something was there.

"Probably the rats," suggested Felix without much hope.

"Bloody big rats," muttered the Dwarf. Felix wished he had not mentioned the word bloody so loudly. It brought to mind the infamous thirst for human blood

that the Vampire Counts were said to have suffered from.

"Look," said Gotrek, "a trail!"

Felix followed the Dwarf's stubby pointing finger. He could see that there were indeed tracks in the mud of the courtyard. It looked as if something heavy had been dragged across the ground here. They backtracked to the point of origin and found a huge black coach like those used by undertakers back in Felix's home city of Altdorf. Nowhere was there a sign of any horses.

"Must be the coach the villagers were talking about," grunted Gotrek.

"Surely not," said Felix with nervous irony.

"I think we'd better look inside the keep."

"Oh good," said Felix, with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the keep all was quiet. They stood in the great hall and surveyed their surroundings. Mouldering hangings covered the chill walls. From over a huge empty fireplace an enormous portrait of a tall and elegantly clad man, garbed in finery centuries out of fashion, glared down at them. Felix walked over to the fireplace and rubbed the dust from the brass plate at the bottom of the picture. It read: Mannfred von Carstein, Count of all Sylvania.

Felix looked up at the picture. The count was a handsome man but there was something feral and predatory about his features. His skin was pale and the painter had tinted his eyes with just the hint of red. On his fingers was a great ring with a ruby set among black bat wings.

"Mannfred von Carstein," said Felix.

"My father fought against him at Hel Fenn," said Gotrek.

"Your father?" spluttered Felix. "But Hel Fenn was nearly three hundred years ago..."

"So?"

Felix shrugged. Dwarfs were long-lived and their concept of time was not the same as men's.

"Aye," said Gotrek. "Often he would tell us of that dreadful day when the sun hid its face from the slaughter and the armies of Dwarf and man pitted themselves against the Lords of Undeath."

The Dwarf looked lost in thought. His coarse and brutal features relaxed into an expression that was almost gentle. His enormous axe was held negligently in one hand. When he spoke he seemed to be remembering another's words and recounting them word for word from memory.

"It was an overcast day. The sky was black with storm clouds. The sun's light was dim and watery. In the gathering gloom a great host of yellow-boned skeletons grinned and champed their teeth, and brandished their notched and rusty weapons. Zombies marched forward in rotting ranks – balefires glowing in their putrefying eyeballs. Their flesh was blotched with rot. Great

patches of skin had peeled away and flapped in the breeze revealing hearts that did not beat, and veins through which no blood flowed. Overhead, ghostly birds flapped like daemon ravens descending on the battlefields of hell. In the centre of the host were the last of the Vampire aristocrats, their skin white and smooth as porcelain. Their eyes were red with unnatural thirst."

"It was a long fight and a hard one that day. For the men were filled with fear at the sight of the walking dead, and the horses of their cavalry panicked at the ghastly smell of the advancing enemies. As the two forces clashed only the Dwarfs held their ground and it seemed that they might be overwhelmed by the sea of undead foes. Then the Elector Count of Stirland rallied his force and returned to face the Vampire Count. In the centre of the field they clashed and for a while it seemed that Mannfred might prevail but the Elector's Runefang bit deep and the Vampire turned and fled, to be lost on the edge of Hel Fenn. The body was never found."

Gotrek shook himself from his reverie. "Often I have wished for a chance to measure myself against the Princes of the Undead, as my father did," said Gotrek.

Personally Felix hoped that he would never get the chance.

\*\*\*\*\*

They pushed on down the stairwell towards the dungeons. From up ahead they heard the sound of chanting in some foreign tongue. After a moment Felix recognised the harsh and guttural cadences of Arabic, although the intonation was much different from that used by the merchants who had once visited his father's warehouses. Only one word was familiar from the whole long litany. It was a name his parents had used to frighten him into silence when he was a child. It was the name of the infamous Liche Lord Nagash.

Gotrek too must have understood the significance, for he flinched then smiled broadly, revealing his missing teeth. He ran his thumb along the edge of his axe blade until a bead of bright red blood appeared. Under the circumstances the sight of it made Felix shudder. He hoped there was nothing nearby that might be drawn to the sight of it.

The voice chanting the incantation was high-pitched and cracked and made Felix think of the mad beggars he had often seen ranting on the cobbled streets of Altdorf. The ones who always claimed that the end of the world was coming and that it was time to repent.

They pushed on into the crypts and the chanting slowly stopped, dying away into an ominous eerie silence. Felix could almost feel the currents of Dark Magic in the air. It was like having icy fingers scrape his skin.

Now the voice had started to speak again. "Soon, master, soon," it shrieked. "Soon you will return to spread fear and reverence among the citizens of the Empire. Soon the cattle who call themselves men will grovel in the dust before thee. Soon all will know that you walk the woods of Sylvania once more."

The tone of the voice changed once more. "They said I was mad, you know. They said it could never be done. For years I trawled my nets through the murk of Hel Fenn. Everyone said it couldn't be done, that it shouldn't be done, but I succeeded. I found HIS body. I will prove them wrong girl. With your virgin blood I will bring Mannfred von Carstein back to unlife and all will tremble at my genius. I, Hermann Schtillman, will have performed the mightiest act of necromancy of the age."

"Please, let me go," a girl's voice said. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

"True. You most certainly won't. You will, unfortunately, be dead."

Gotrek growled with barely suppressed fury. Felix's hand found his sword hilt. The sound of the girl's tears drove back his forebodings. He looked at the Dwarf. Gotrek nodded. Weapons ready they charged into the room. When Felix saw what was waiting he wished they hadn't.

\*\*\*\*\*

The crypt was huge. A shivering girl was chained against one clammy wall. Her lithe form was a stark contrast to that of the skeletons who dangled from the chains about her. Before her stood a tall, thin man with a shaven head and vulpine features. In one hand he clutched a black-bladed knife with a small brass skull at its pommel. This he wiped against the breast of his none-too-clean black robe. On the floor in front of him was a pile of mouldering bones to which clung the hardened remains of mud and traces of swamp reed. All this was ominous enough but it was what stood around the edges of the chamber the grabbed Felix's attention and made him freeze with fear.

Ten huge grey corpses stood there, each clutching an enormous rusting weapon. As Felix and Gotrek entered their eyes opened and luminous witchfires gazed out. Teeth were visible through their ragged cheeks and bones protruded from their flaking skin. The stench of corruption and decay was near overwhelming.

"Stop!" shrieked the necromancer. Gotrek paid him no heed. With surprising speed for one so short and muscular, he bounded across the room, axe held high. The zombies shuffled forward to intercept him like obscene puppets in a hellish play. Gotrek's axe flickered and one giant fell, decapitated. Then the axe struck again and sheared away the right arm of another. A third stroke crunched through rotten ribs as if they were matchwood. A fourth blow narrowly missed and smashed into the stone floor of the crypt sending blue sparks flying into the air. Red runes blazed along the blade of Gotrek's axe, as if in response to the presence of evil magic.

Felix forced himself forward into the fray and found himself face to face with a mighty shuffling zombie. The sight of worms burrowing through its rotting eyes and the sound of the air wheezing through the thing's decomposing chest combined with its charnel reek to make him feel physically sick. He barely managed to raise his blade in time to parry its sweeping blow. He could hardly bring himself to strike out. His blade

burrowed deep into the clammy flesh and his second stroke chopped off a slimy hand. Droplets of pus that once might have been blood splashed his face. It took all his willpower to keep his mind concentrated on his foes and not to stop and wipe his face.

The necromancer recovered from his surprise and began to chant aloud. Cold fear played up and down Felix's spine as a nimbus of dark power crackled round Schtillman's head and hands and then lashed out to touch the skeletons on the wall. The girl screamed as lights flickered on in the gaping skulls' sockets. The chains fell away from the skeletons' limbs as they pulled themselves upright and leapt into battle.

If Gotrek was disturbed by this he gave no sign. He kept chopping away at everything within reach. The axe flashed out, describing a great figure of eight and four zombies fell, cut to pieces by the thunderous power of his blows. Foam dripped from the Slayer's lips, his beard bristled and he howled with the insane lust for battle. Recovering slightly from his fear Felix lashed out with his own blade, taking out another zombie.

His stomach lurched as he slipped on a puddle of pus on the slimy floor. He fell on his back, barely managing to keep his head from striking the stone floor. His heart raced as he saw two more animated corpses lumber towards him, weapons held high. Sticky filth covered his hand as he rolled to one side, barely dodging in time, as blows that would have reduced him to bloody pulp almost connected. The necromancer continued to chant and more and more skeletons threw off their chains and staggered forward, pausing only to pick up their fallen comrades' weapons.

Gotrek's roars mingled with the girl's screams and the magician's chanting. The noise echoed round the crypt threatening to deafen Felix. He forced himself to concentrate and continue to fight.

Gotrek laughed and gibbered and threw himself forward towards the horrified magician. Two skeletons tried to grab him as if at some unspoken command. The Trollslayer's cable-like sinews swelled as he threw them off and brought his axe down in an irresistible arc, nearly cleaving the evil sorcerer in two with the force of his blow.

Instantly the zombies dropped to the floor like men pole-axed. The skeletons disintegrated in a clattering shower of bones. Gratefully Felix pulled himself to his feet. Gotrek stomped over to the girl. His axe flashed twice and her chains fell to the floor, severed cleanly by two blows. Felix moved forward and barely managed to catch the girl as she toppled floorward. The way he felt he wished there was someone to catch him. Then he felt the girl stiffen against him and let out a little gasp.

"Look," she whispered. "Sigmar save us."

Felix turned to see what she was looking at. At first he saw nothing but then the awful details of what was happening became clear.

A trickle of bright red blood flowed from the necromancer's mangled body. It touched the pile of bones in the centre of the floor. As it did so the blood bubbled and evaporated into a fine red steam. A cloud of the stuff swiftly spread to cover the bones. Through a

red haze Felix watched what happened next.

First all the dirt and mud and reeds evaporated from the bones leaving the skeleton gleaming white. Felix noticed that its skull had two very long and pronounced canine teeth. Next, layers of muscle and sinew congealed out of the mist and wrapped themselves round the bones. Veins burrowed their way through the clay-like flesh. Red eyeballs sprouted in the sockets of the skull. Great cables of sinew writhed like snakes as they formed.

The three stood transfixed as they watched this bizarre resurrection. Not even Gotrek seemed capable of movement. He watched in fascination as white flesh enveloped the man-like form and glossy black hair erupted from its scalp. It dawned on Felix's shocked brain that what he had just witnessed was like watching the decomposition of a corpse only at great speed and in reverse. Slowly the pale creature rose to its feet and smiled at them revealing long white teeth.

Felix recognised the thing at once although his stunned mind refused to accept what he was seeing. "Mannfred von Carstein," he breathed.

"True," said the Vampire Count in a low well-modulated voice. "And I thank you for your part in my resurrection. It was not quite what Herr Schtillman intended I think, but nonetheless the results are satisfactory."

"Undead scum, prepare to die," said Gotrek.

The Vampire gestured with one long claw-like hand and Gotrek froze on the spot. Veins bulged in his forehead. Great muscles swelled on his chest and arms. He looked as if he were struggling in the grip of an invisible giant. The only sign of this contest was a look of strain on the Vampire Count's face.

"No, Slayer," he said. "I would be foolish indeed to face such an axe as yours in my newly reborn state. I think I shall forgo the pleasure of humbling you till another evening. For the moment farewell."

With a mighty roar Gotrek threw himself forward, overcoming his invisible bonds. Even as the Slayer sprang the Vampire shimmered and his form came apart in a cloud of black mist. Gotrek's axe cleaved through the fog and Felix thought he heard a slight cry of pain. Droplets of blood congealed on the edge of the axe. Then with faintest trace of mocking laughter the cloud slithered up the stairs and was gone.

Gotrek bounded after it, howling oaths and curses. Felix turned to look at the girl. He took off his cloak and draped it round her shivering form. She looked stunned.

"Are you all right?" he asked. The girl nodded. After a moment she said. "He was rather handsome. The Count, I mean."

Felix groaned and headed for the stairs. The sooner they got out of this accursed place, the happier he would be.