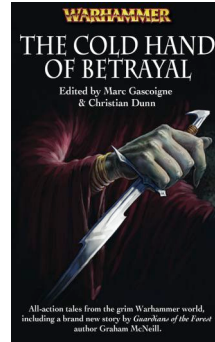


THE COLD HAND OF BETRAYAL

A Warhammer anthology

In the dark and gothic Warhammer world, the foul magic of Chaos is everywhere, its corrupting and mutating powers twisting man and beast alike. From the south, the dark armies of the undead attack the realms of man, thirsting to drain all life from the civilised lands. From the north, the endless tide of Chaos sweeps down to kill and capture in the name of the Dark Gods. This collection of fantasy stories follows man's fight for survival in these desperate times.



Featuring stories by Robert Allan, Robert Baumgartner, Richard Ford, Nick Kyme, Graham McNeill, Matt Ralphs, Steven Savile, Adam Troke and C L Werner.

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From Kinstrife, by Graham McNeill

Eldain reined in his steed as he saw the shadow warrior emerge from behind the thick bole of a black barked tree, and raised his hand in a fist to halt his troop of Ellyrion reavers.

The hooded scout bowed before Eldain and said, ‘Clar Karond is beyond the rise, my lord. Where the trees thin out, the land drops away and the towers of the druchii can be clearly seen.’

Eldain sensed the scout’s loathing for the druchii in every word and felt a similar stirring in his breast at the thought of taking the fight to those who had slain his father. He stared over the scout’s shoulder, seeing the light from beyond the trees.

‘Well done,’ he told the scout. ‘Where are the rest of your warriors?’

The scout waved his hand and the other two warriors emerged from the shadows. Eldain had not noticed either of the scouts, and though it was their forte to avoid being seen, it still irked him that he had not sensed so much as a hint of them.

‘Why do we stop?’ asked Caelir, riding alongside.

‘The trees thin out ahead,’ explained Eldain. ‘We are close to Clar Karond.’

‘At last,’ said Caelir. ‘I grow weary of this forest. It weighs heavily on the soul.’

‘Indeed,’ said Eldain, turning away. ‘Stay here, I will scout ahead with the shadow warriors.’

Without waiting for Caelir to complain about being left behind, Eldain dismounted and lifted his bow from the oiled, leather case slung from Lotharin's saddle. He nodded to the scout and followed him as he slipped into the forest ahead.

The scout moved effortlessly ahead of him, and Eldain felt as clumsy as a human as he attempted to match his stealth. But it seemed that every brittle branch and leaf deliberately wormed its way beneath the soles of his boots.

Slowly, they crept forwards, and though the light of the afternoon was a welcome sight after five days of travelling through the dense, dark forests of Naggarth, it was scant comfort to an elf raised on Ulthuan.

Each day had been more grim than the previous, though the warriors made no complaint – as was only proper. Each of them was well used to spending many weeks, or longer, in the wilds as part of their training, but the bleak forests of the Land of Chill were something else altogether.

Though days and nights came and went, the sun neither warmed the skin nor refreshed the soul, instead leeching the life from the world and casting a pall of fear and doubt over their band. As dreary as the days were, the nights were a thousand times worse, with the darkness of Naggarth unbroken by torch or moonlight. The blackness shrouded them in silence such that each warrior feared to break it with so much as a single word.

Night was a time to fear, doubly so in Naggarth, as strange sounds echoed in the depths of the forest around them and in the sky above them. Rustling branches, crackling leaves and the drifting echoes of what sounded like the screaming laughter of lunatic children.

Each night as they made cold camp, Eldain would picture Rhianna and his fears would ease a little, though each time a shard of ice would enter his heart when his treacherous memories would unfold to include Caelir.

Eldain shook off such thoughts as the ground began to rise and he felt a pressure on his shoulder. He looked up into the hooded face

of the shadow warrior. The scout nodded slowly and gestured to a thorny patch of briars that clung to the edge of the rise like barbed tangleweed.

The scout dropped to his belly and began crawling towards the briars, and Eldain followed him, conscious that he would need to dispose of this tunic after the mission. A saying of the reavers was that survival never took second place to dignity in the field, but that was all very well when you hadn't had the finest tailors and seamstresses in Lothorn fashion your garments.

At last he reached the briar patch and parted the thorny brush to see the vast city of Clar Karond in all its hateful glory.

Three black towers the colour of bloody iron rose from the centre of the city, with tall jagged-roofed temples jockeying for position around them. A high wall, topped with blades and spikes, surrounded the centre of the city, and even from here, Eldain could see the sunlight glinting from the speartips of the city's guards. Beyond this high wall sprawled the peripherals of a city such as could be seen around many other cities: markets, temples, dwellings of the common folk and barracks of the city's soldiery.

But for all the trappings of civilisation, a vile darkness hung over its cobbled streets and black roofs – a sense of violence about to be unleashed, of blood about to be spilled. It chilled Eldain's soul to see such a place, a place of evil that festered beneath a brooding sun, and a place whose inhabitants plotted the destruction of his homeland.

Scattered around the city were tracts of elaborate vineyards, choked with grapes of deepest crimson, and Eldain's lip curled as he realised that these were harvested for the druchii's blood wine. Wretched human slaves tended to the vines, guarded by cruel warriors on horseback who emphasised their commands with blade and whip.

Between the vineyards, and stretching all the way up to their vantage point, the land was scarred by devastation. Shorn tree stumps bore grim testimony to the massive logging operations of the druchii that provided timber for the new war vessels of their raiding

fleets. Thousands of trees must have been felled here, and the day echoed still with the distant sound of chopping axe blades and the rasp of saws. More slaves toiled in huge work gangs to the east, felling trees by the dozen and dragging them back towards the desolate city.

‘Look to the north-east, my lord,’ whispered the scout.

Eldain’s eyes travelled to where the scout had indicated and saw their prize, the docks and shipyards for which Clar Karond was justly infamous. Ships filled the dark waters of the rocky bay that slowly widened until it emptied into the Sea of Malice. A warren of interlinked jetties and quays spread out into the water from the shoreline, each with great reaper bolt throwers on the seaward side, mighty war-machines capable of launching huge iron bolts that could pierce the hull of even the mightiest ship.

‘What do you see?’ asked the scout.

‘Reavers mostly,’ said Eldain, ‘some sloops of war, a few reaper-ships and... and there’s something beyond that mountain spur, but I can’t quite see it.’

‘Look again, my lord,’ said the scout. ‘That’s no mountain.’

Eldain looked closer and the breath caught in his throat as he saw that what he had at first mistaken for a mountain spur of the bay was something else entirely.

‘Asuryan’s mercy!’ he hissed as he saw that the scout spoke true.

This was no mountain... this colossus was one of the dreaded black arks.

A mountainous castle set adrift on the sea and held together by the most powerful enchantments, the black ark was a sinister floating fortress, tower upon tower, spire upon spire of living rock sundered from the isle of Ulthuan over five thousand years ago.

Crewed by an entire army, and dismal home to thousands of slaves, the black arks were the most feared and mightiest sea-going vessels in the world. Some said that the bulk they displayed above the surface of the water was but a fraction of their true size, with great vaulted caverns below the waterline that were home to terrible monsters, slaves and all manner of foul witchcraft. The truth of such

things was beyond Eldain; all he knew was that the arks brought with them terror and death on a scale undreamt of.

Great chains, each link thicker than the trunk of a tree, looped from a cluster of towers at the prow of the black ark, curving down towards the impossibly huge draconic head of some monstrous and terrible sea beast that lay, half-submerged in the dark waters of the harbour. Even from here, Eldain could sense the powerful magic keeping the colossal beast docile while the black ark was berthed at Clar Karond.

Eldain heard someone behind him and turned to see Caelir low-crawling towards the lip of the ridge. His brother had almost reached Eldain before he had become aware of his presence, and he masked his jealousy of Caelir's talents with anger at his disobeying orders.

'Blood of Khaine!' swore Caelir. 'Is that a black ark?'

'What are you doing here, Caelir?' asked Eldain, ignoring his brother's question. 'I told you to wait with the rest of the warriors.'

Caelir waved his scarred hand dismissively. 'Our warriors do not need me to tell them how to prepare for battle. I wish to see the enemy for myself.'

'You will see them soon enough,' replied Eldain. 'And be careful what you wish for.'

'It will be good to avenge father,' said Caelir, staring fixedly at the spires of Clar Karond and the black ark. 'I have great vengeance to wreak upon them.'

'We both do,' said Eldain.

'Nothing is forgotten. Nothing is forgiven,' whispered Caelir, and Eldain recognised the words as those of Alith Anar, the Shadow King of the shattered kingdom of Nagarythe, a brutal ruler who had led the shadow warriors in the years following the Sundering.

'How will we come at them?' asked Caelir.

'From the north-east,' replied Eldain, pointing to the logging works. 'The shadow warriors will lead us around to the forested hills above where those slaves are working, and under cover of darkness we shall ride into the harbour, fire as many ships as we can and cause bloody mayhem before pulling back.'

‘The druchii will pay in blood for what they have taken from me,’ said Caelir, and Eldain saw that his brother unconsciously rubbed his scarred hand as he spoke.

Looking at the burned flesh of his brother’s hand, Eldain remembered the day Caelir and Rhianna had ridden breathlessly through the portal of the family villa on the eastern slopes of the Annullii. Both had been badly hurt, but Caelir had seen them to safety, and delivered his warning of the druchii raiders, before collapsing.

The tale of how he had heroically defended Rhianna from the dark kin had spread quickly through the courts of Tor Elyr, and Caelir’s reputation as a dashing hero was established.

No one thought to mention that it had been foolish of him to take Rhianna so high into the mountains and so close to the Eagle Gate. No, thought Eldain bitterly, to do so would have been to tarnish the heroic tale of Caelir the Protector. In the weeks that followed, he had watched as Caelir and Rhianna grew closer, powerless to prevent his brother from bewitching the woman he loved with his wayward charms.

‘Come, brother,’ snapped Eldain, turning and preparing to rejoin the rest of the warriors. ‘We should get back. If we are to reach the northeastern slopes before nightfall, we must be away soon.’

Caelir simply nodded and crawled back with him, vaulting to his feet when they were safely out of sight below the ridge. Back with the rest of the high elven warriors, Eldain felt his spirits lift once more as he saw, by their proud and elegant features, that they were ready for battle. To have penetrated so far into the realm of the druchii was accomplishment enough, but they would achieve something that would show the dark kin what it was to live in fear of raiders from across the sea.

He issued his orders quickly and efficiently, and within minutes the band of warriors was on the move once more, stealthily riding around the eastern fringes of Clar Karond.

As the day wore on and the sun sank lower in the sky, Eldain thought of the coming raid and his brother’s caution that it had been

too long since he had fought in battle. True, it had been many years since he had wielded a blade, but the finest tutors had taught him, and he knew that when the blood was flowing and the thrill of battle was upon him, he would be as deadly as he had ever been.

A bruised dusk was drawing in as the scouts once again halted their progress and informed him that they were in position. He dismounted and drew his sword, dropping to his knees and reciting the vow of the sword masters.

*'From the darkness I cry for you.
The tears you shed for us
are the blood of the elven kind.
O Isha,
here I stand
on the last shore,
a sword in my hand.
Ulthuan shall never fall.'*

Though he was not one of the legendary warriors of the White Tower of Hoeth, mystic guardians of knowledge and wisdom who were masters of the martial arts, the words gave him comfort and focused his concentration on the death yet to be dealt.

The sun continued to fall until the fearful darkness of Naggaroth began to encroach upon the world, and Eldain knew that it was time. The warriors around him began their preparations for battle, weaving iron cords into their long hair – symbolic of strength, power and nobility, the mark of a true warrior – to ensure that an enemy's blade would not cut it in the heat of battle.

Eldain prayed to the Emperor of the Heavens to guide his blade and watch over him this night, and though he knew there was soon to be blood on his hands, he asked forgiveness from the elven gods. His prayers went unanswered in the darkness, but he felt at peace and knew that his soul was ready for battle. His senses spread out and he could feel the breathing of his men, the harsh whinnies of their steeds and the tense anticipation that gripped them all.

No... not all. Around Caelir was nothing but a thirst for vengeance that burned brightly in the night. Eldain was not gifted with wizard sight, but even he could feel Caelir's aggressive soul. The spirit of Kurnous burned in his brother's breast, the elven god of the wild hunt, of untamed forests, wild animals and the trackless wilderness. Many in Ellyrion venerated Kurnous, as did their rustic kin across the ocean who dwelt beneath the boughs of Athel Loren, but the fire of the hunt was stronger in his brother than he could ever remember sensing in anyone before.

But beyond even his brother's desire for vengeance, he sensed something else. Something crude to be sure, but something with a spirit burning brightly with fear and desperation.

And it was coming straight towards them.

From the primal vulgarity of the spirit, Eldain knew it must be of the race of man. He leapt to his feet, his spirit sight fading as the shadow warriors slid from their vantage points to intercept the threat.

Eldain sprinted towards his men and ordered them, with a gesture, to silently scatter. The Ellyrion reavers vanished into the forest, as Eldain crouched beside a tall, claw-branched tree and risked a glance through the dark forest. His elf-sight easily pierced the gloom and he saw a group of six naked and skeletally thin men running towards the forest, their flesh bruised and scarred from months in captivity.

Behind them, Eldain saw a host of armoured druchii riders on dark steeds, in pursuit of the escaped slaves. One loosed a flurry of bolts from a repeater crossbow and slew one of the escapees. The slaves were almost at the trees, but Eldain knew they would never reach them before the dark riders overtook them.

He saw the leader of the shadow warriors raise his bow and aim at the druchii who had fired his crossbow.

'No,' he whispered. 'Stay your hand. If we are discovered now, then all we have achieved so far is for nothing.'

The shadow warrior nodded and relaxed his bowstring, commanding his scouts to do the same with some unseen and unheard signal.

Eldain watched dispassionately as the druchii quickly surrounded the escaped slaves and, rather than herd them back to their work gangs, slaughtered them where they stood. Cruel laughter drifted from the scene of butchery as the druchii killed their prey and took their heads to mount upon their saddle horns.

Within moments it was over, and the druchii warriors were riding back towards their dark city with their bloody trophies. Eldain let out his breath, relieved the druchii had been too intent on bloodshed to notice the raiders not a hundred yards from them.

As the druchii departed, Caelir approached him and said, 'that was too close.'

'Indeed,' replied Eldain.

'We should have helped them.'

'Helped them?' asked Eldain. 'To what end? Would you take them back to Tor Elyr and have them for your servants? No, to die like that was probably easier for them than to go on living.'

'Perhaps,' said Caelir, 'but it sits ill with me that we just let them die.'

'They were only humans, Caelir,' said Eldain. 'Do not trouble yourself with them. Now get some rest, we move out within the hour.'

Caelir nodded and returned to his steed, and Eldain lay back against the tree, watching him go. Emotions warred within him and to calm himself before going into battle, he closed his eyes and thought of the last time he had spoken with Rhianna.