

Bloodstorm

The 2nd Darkblade novel by Dan Abnett & Mike Lee

Tricked, possessed and manipulated by the foul daemon Tz'arkan, can things get any worse for the dark elf Malus Darkblade? However, when he returns to Hag Graef he discovers to his horror that he is homeless, penniless – and his father has become his most deadly enemy.

Malus must now seek the next artefact Tz'arkan requires – the Idol of Kolkuth. The sea voyage is perilous enough, but some of the most dangerous enemies.



Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone in England. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips *Lone Wolves*, *Titan* and *Darkblade*, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

Mike Lee was the principal creator and developer for White Wolf Game Studio's *Demon: The Fallen*. An avid wargamer, history buff and devoted fan of two-fisted pulp adventure, Mike lives with his family in the United States.

Bloodstorm can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US)

Bookshops: Distributed in the UK by Hodder. Distributed in the US by Simon & Schuster Books.

Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.

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Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com/store or www.games-workshop.com

PUBLISHED BY THE BLACK LIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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ISBN: 1 84416 192 7



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from BLOODSTORM

THE NAUGLIR LET out a hiss like hot steel quenched in blood, its muscular legs pumping furiously as the huge reptile scrambled around the narrow turn. Clots of snow and black cinders sprayed from beneath the cold one's claws and Malus Darkblade twisted in the saddle as he fought to keep his seat. Sibilant shouts echoed in the cold air behind Malus, rising over the thunder of hooves. A crossbow bolt buzzed past his ear like an angry hornet. The highborn bared his teeth in a feral grin as he regained his balance and put the spurs to Spite's flanks once more. Just ahead the Spear Road fell away into the dreadful Valley of Shadow and in the distance he could spy the knifelike towers of Hag Graef rising from the clinging tendrils of last night's fog.

Another bolt whipped a hand span from the highborn's face – then a third slammed like a hammer blow between Malus's shoulders. The broad, steel head of the crossbow bolt punched through the thick cloak of crudely stitched beastman hide Malus wore and slapped into the backplate of his armour with a flat *crack*. The silver steel plate and the thick leather kheitan beneath robbed the shot of much of its lethal force, but the bolt's tip tore into his back like a talon of ice. The highborn let out a wordless snarl of pain and bent as low as he could against Spite's heaving back. The gang of brigands galloping in Malus's wake let out a chorus of savage cries as they sensed the chase was nearly at an end.

It had been nearly three months since Malus and his retainers had slipped from Hag Graef and headed north, hunting a source of ancient power hidden in the Chaos Wastes. This was not the triumphant return he'd dreamt of all those months ago.

Countless leagues of snow and blood and starvation had left their mark on rider and mount. The cold one's scaly, armoured hide bore dozens of scars from sword, axe and claw, and Malus's saddle was cinched tightly over sharply etched ribs. The highborn's cloak of coarse, greasy black fur was tattered and rent and the silver steel armour beneath was tarnished and scarred from constant wear. His robes and kheitan were stiff with old sweat, blood and grime and his boots were patched with rags and scraps of deer hide. Malus's dark eyes were sunken and fever-bright, his cruel features paler and even more sharply defined. With hollow cheeks and thin, cracked lips, he seemed more wight than man.

Death had dogged his path from the moment his journey began. Every retainer who'd ridden from the Hag into the tainted north had died there, some by Malus's own hand. Yet he hadn't returned from the Wastes empty-handed: four large saddlebags bounced heavily on Spite's gaunt flanks, bulging with a Drachau's ransom in gold and gems.

Nor had he returned entirely alone.

Spite plunged down the long, steep slope toward the valley floor and for a moment the sounds of pursuit fell away on the far side of the ridge. Malus reached back and drew his crossbow from its saddle hook. His path back to Hag Graef had been fraught with peril: packs of fierce beastmen, twisted, Chaos-tainted monsters and gangs of druchii thieves had all sought to spill his blood, hungry for his flesh or the bags of treasure at his side. The highborn's sword was notched and pitted and his bolts were nearly

spent. 'I didn't come all this way to die within sight of home,' Malus swore, calling on every blasphemous god he could name.

'Then kill them,' a cold voice replied, welling up in Malus's chest like blood from an old wound. 'There are but eight of them, little druchii. Let your cold one feast on their sallow flesh.'

Malus snarled, resisting an urge to pound at his breast with a gauntleted hand. 'Bold words from a daemon, who knows nothing of hunger or fatigue.'

'You have your hate, Malus,' the daemon Tz'arkan whispered, the words buzzing in his skull like flies. 'With hate, all things are possible.'

'If that were true I would have been rid of you long ago,' the highborn seethed, working the arming lever on the crossbow and readying it to fire. 'Now shut up and let me concentrate.'

He could feel the daemon's consciousness recede, his bones vibrating with Tz'arkan's mocking laughter. There were times, late in the night, when Malus would awaken and feel the daemon writhing within his chest like a clutch of vipers, slithering and tangling around his beating heart.

Desperation had driven him north, seeking power to use against his enemies. He sought the power to thwart the schemes of his father and his siblings, to bathe in their blood and drink deeply of their pain. And he'd found what he sought in a temple far to the north, standing before a great crystal surrounded by circle after circle of magical wards and the piled riches of a dozen kingdoms. Giddy with power-lust and ravenous greed, Malus had been oblivious to the cunning trap surrounding him. The highborn had plucked a single ring from the treasure heaped in the room – a perfect ruby cabochon, like a shimmering drop of blood – and had slipped it on his finger. And the terrible

daemon bound within the crystal had claimed Darkblade's soul in return.

The steel bowstring locked into place and one of Malus's last bolts was levered into the firing channel. Spite had nearly reached the base of the slope as the first of the druchii brigands crested the ridgeline with a lupine howl. Malus twisted in the saddle and fired with an ease born from months of experience. The black-fletched bolt struck the brigand below the ribcage, piercing the rusted mail the druchii wore and tearing upwards through his vitals before lodging in the man's spine. The brigand's howl cut off with a choked cry and he toppled backwards out of the saddle.

Tall stands of darkpine and witchwood rose from the dark soil of the valley floor, their branches heavy with snow. Perpetual twilight reigned beneath the trees; in the narrow confines of the valley the sun's light reached the city and its surroundings for a few short hours each day. The Spear Road wound a sinuous course among the copses of trees, but Malus spurred his mount directly ahead, off the road and into the shadowy wood.

Malus bent low against Spite's neck as the nauglir crashed through low-hanging branches and leapt the rotting boles of fallen trees. Speed was of the essence. The thieves had been as patient as wolves, tracking him for days and gauging his strength. Now they knew he and his mount were almost spent and they knew that the safety of the city walls was less than a mile away. If they didn't pull him down in the next few minutes they would be cheated of their prize.

Sure enough, shouts and muffled hoof beats echoed across the snowy ground behind Malus. The highborn readied his crossbow and twisted at the waist, aiming backwards one-handed at the black shapes darting between the trees. He fired out of instinct and caught one of the brigands' horses in mid-turn – the animal lost its footing with

a terrible shriek and crashed to the ground in a spray of dirt and snow, throwing its rider into a stand of fallen timber. Two of the bandits fired their weapons in response and a bolt struck a fan of bright sparks as it glanced from Malus's left pauldron. The blow knocked the highborn forwards – and his crossbow was smashed from his hands by a pine bough.

Pine needles lashed at the side of Malus's face and then suddenly the trees fell away on either side and Spite was lunging through drifts of piled snow. The cold one was losing speed rapidly. Ahead the black ribbon of the Spear Road crossed a narrow, snowy field and less than a quarter of a mile away loomed his home, the great City of Shadow. 'The race is nearly won, beast of the deep earth,' Malus rasped to his mount. 'A few more furlongs and then we will see how brave these dogs are.' As if understanding the highborn's words, Spite put on a final burst of speed, charging across the open ground for the basalt walls of the city ahead.

Malus drew his sword, holding it high in hopes of catching the attention of the men on the ramparts. The thunder of hoof beats brought his head around – the five remaining bandits had emerged from the woods and were lashing at their horses' flanks with whip and spur. Their pale faces stood out sharply against the dark background of the hooded cloaks they wore. Their eyes were intent, teeth bared against the icy wind.

The bandits were gaining ground, but slowly, too slowly. Malus was halfway to the city walls within moments and could spy the tall helmets of the city guard rising above the spiked battlements of the gatehouse. 'Open the gate!' he cried, with all the strength he could muster. If the guardsmen heard, they gave no sign.

Spite leapt onto the roadway, flat feet crunching across the pressed layer of cinders. Malus caught sight of several

stubby poles with black fletching jutting at an angle from the frozen ground – the heavy bolts the city guard had fired at him months ago still lay where they had fallen, perhaps left as a warning to future travellers. He was less than a hundred paces from the tall city gates, yet the portal remained shut.

Malus hurled a torrent of curses at the guards on the battlements, hauling back on Spite's reins to stop the beast's headlong rush. The gate wasn't going to open in time – if at all.

The wounded nauglir stumbled to a halt right in front of the tall doors. Malus hauled on the reins and brought the beast sharply around, then lashed out at the dark iron with an armoured boot. 'Open the gates you lowborn worms!' Malus roared.

Then the air around the highborn was filled with the angry buzz of man-made hornets. Three crossbow bolts shattered against the city's iron gates and two more struck Malus in the back. One bolt tore through his heavy cloak and skimmed the druchii's backplate with a harsh, clattering sound, while the second punched through his cloak, his left pauldron and part of the backplate it overlapped. Malus felt a stabbing pain in his shoulder and threw himself instinctively to the ground, taking shelter between Spite's bulk and the gate.

The sound of hooves had stopped. Spite turned his head to face his attackers, managing a weak hiss. Malus chanced a quick look over the nauglir's hindquarters. The bandits had reined in, right in the middle of the road, eyeing the city's gatehouse and debating their chances. The highborn could feel blood staining his robes and seeping down his back. 'Why aren't they opening the damned gate,' he muttered fiercely. 'Why aren't they shooting at these curs?'

‘Biding their time, perhaps,’ Tz’arkan said, faintly amused. ‘The bandits kill you, they kill the bandits and then they have six bodies to loot.’

‘I wouldn’t sound so smug, daemon,’ Darkblade said through gritted teeth. He planted the point of his sword in the ground and groped over his shoulder, trying to pull the crossbow bolts free from his back. ‘There are five of them and I’m down to sword and knife. If they put a bolt through my eye, how will you ever escape that cursed temple?’

‘Do not fear for me, Darkblade,’ the daemon said. ‘I have waited thousands of years in my prison and I can wait thousands more if I must. You should worry about the consequences if you fail me and I claim your soul for eternity. But that need not happen. These fools are fodder for your blade, if you allow me to lend you a little strength.’

Malus clenched his fists. The daemon had claimed him in the temple for one reason only – to be free from the prison he’d been bound into millennia ago. Darkblade was his agent in the world of mortals, seeking the keys that would unlock the magical wards trapping Tz’arkan in his crystal cell. And for all that the daemon threatened him with eternal torment, Tz’arkan was quick to lend the highborn a measure of his power when things took a turn for the worse. And yet, Malus thought, did he dare refuse?

Suddenly the sound of hoof beats thundered through the air and Malus heard Spite utter a warning hiss. ‘All right,’ the highborn seethed. ‘Lend me your strength one last time, daemon.’

‘One last time,’ the daemon answered mockingly. ‘Of course.’

The power hit like a rush of black, icy water, racing through his body in a torrent that made every muscle strain at its fleshy bonds. Malus’s head snapped back, his mouth dropping open in a wordless snarl. He could feel the veins on his face and neck writhe like serpents, pulsing with corruption.

When his vision cleared, his senses were sharp and the world had slowed to a turgid crawl. The sound of the oncoming horses was like the slow, purposeful beat of a temple drum.

The bandits came forward in a rush, hoping to kill their prey swiftly and escape before the guards on the walls changed their mind. Malus heard two riders split off to the right, towards Spite's head, while the other three circled wide around the cold one's tail. Grinning like a wolf, Malus raced at the trio to his left.

Once again, the highborn was amazed at the way he raced across the ground, his steps so swift and light they didn't seem to actually touch the earth at all. He was on the brigands before they knew it, their attention focused on Spite and his deadly tail. The first horse caught wind of Malus and let out a terrified shriek, its eyes rolling back in its head with fear as it sensed the daemon inside him. It tossed its head and tried to back away, and Malus leapt in and sliced through its reins with a flick of his wrist. The animal reared and the rider lost his seat, tumbling backwards onto the road. Before he could recover, Malus buried his blade in the bandit's neck, spraying a jet of bright crimson across the churned snow.

A crossbow bolt droned lazily past his head. Malus turned in time to see the second bandit hurl the empty crossbow at his face. He batted the weapon aside with his sword and rushed forward, savouring the dawning horror in the bandit's eyes as the brigand tried to draw his sword in time. Malus's sword flashed, severing the bandit's right leg at the knee. Druchii and horse screamed alike and the bandit fell beneath the horse's hooves as the animal bolted, fleeing Malus's daemonic visage.

Malus heard another horse scream then saw the third bandit yank savagely on his reins and kick his lathered mount into a gallop, racing back down the road. The

remaining two brigands joined him, frantically lashing at their horses' flanks.

They were about ten yards from the gate when the bolt throwers on top of the walls went into action. The metal strings snapped and sang and bolts three feet long streaked through the clear air piercing man and horse. As the bodies tumbled across the snowy ground Malus fell to his knees, guts heaving as the daemon's power leached from his body. He retched black bile onto the cinder-covered road and heard the sound of chains as the city guard began to winch open the great gates.

A small spark of something akin to panic welled up in Malus's brain. Control, he thought fiercely, trying to overcome his helpless nausea. Push back the daemon. Hide his traces...

There was no sin in Naggaroth save weakness: the Witch King commanded the fealty of conquerors and slave masters – anything less was prey. Malus well knew that if his people discovered Tz'arkan's hold over him they would slaughter him out of hand. It did not matter that the daemon's gifts made him the equal of any ten druchii – the fact that he'd allowed himself to fall into Tz'arkan's trap and become the daemon's slave made him unfit to live.

Over the long months in the wilderness Malus had struggled to master the telltale signs of demonic influence that warped his thin frame. With an effort of extreme will, he slowed his racing heart, causing the black veins to recede from his neck and face. His skin, a chalky bluish-white, smoothed into a uniform alabaster tone. As the first of the guards charged out onto the road Malus wiped bile from his lips and forced himself to rise without the slightest sign of his exertions.

The armoured guardsmen of the city raced from the gateway, long knives gleaming in their hands. Spite raised his

head from the carcass of one of the brigand's horses and roared a warning at the interlopers, his blocky snout smeared with blood and scraps of flesh. The warriors ignored both Malus and his mount, inspecting each of the brigands in turn and slitting their throats with quick, expert knife strokes, then searching the bodies for valuables. The highborn headed back towards Spite, keeping a wary distance until the nauglir had eaten his fill of horseflesh.

'Two dead and the rest put to flight in as much time as it takes to tell of it,' said a voice from the shadows of the city gate. 'A most impressive display, dread lord. Your time in the wilderness has suited you well, if I may be so bold.'

Malus turned at the sound of the voice, his fist clenching around the hilt of his sword. A guard captain stepped into the light, clad in fine armour and wearing a silver-chased sword at his hip. There was a wry look in the captain's dark eyes that Malus didn't care for one bit. There was something familiar about the man.

'Bold words from a craven captain,' Malus hissed, 'who hid behind stone walls while I fought alone. When the Vaulkhar hears of it you and your children's lives will be forfeit.'

Malus expected the man to quail at the words, but instead the captain smiled faintly and his dark eyes shone with cruel mirth. The highborn fought the urge to bury his knife in the man's mocking eyes – remembering who he was talking to. It was the same captain he'd bribed to escape the city months ago. His face had picked up a few new scars in the meantime, but judging by his new armour he'd clearly put Malus's gift to good use.

The captain stepped from beneath the gate arch and approached the highborn. 'You are of course free to make your complaint to your father the Vaulkhar,' he said calmly, 'but I don't think it would be a pleasant reunion, dread lord. In fact, it could be a fatal one.'

Malus studied the captain with narrowed eyes. 'And how would you know such a thing?'

'Because there is a standing order for the city guard – issued by both your father and the Drachau himself – that Malus, son of Lurhan, is to be arrested on sight and delivered to the Vaultkhar's tower.' The captain smiled. 'Does your father always treat his children like criminals, dread lord?'

The captain's audacity was breathtaking – but it was a carefully calculated ploy, Malus saw. The man was nothing if not ambitious.

Malus stepped closer to the captain. 'So you kept the gates closed as a favour to me, then?'

'Of course, dread lord. If I'd sounded the alarm and opened the gates, the commander of the watch would have to be informed and that would have necessitated your arrest.' The captain glanced around at his men. 'At the moment I'm just giving my men a break while I discuss business with a noble acquaintance.'

Malus grinned mirthlessly. 'Indeed?'

The captain nodded. 'Certainly. I know very well what your father and the Drachau are offering for your arrest. I'm curious to know what you'd offer to avoid that unfortunate fate.'

The highborn stared at the captain and began to laugh. It was a harsh, bloodless sound that drained the amusement from the captain's face. 'As I seem to recall I promised you a reward when I returned to Hag Graef,' Malus said. 'Allow me into the city, captain and I shall double it.'

'Is that so?' The captain considered Malus carefully, weighing the risks. Malus could see the avarice in the man's expression. 'I'll take the payment now if it please you, dread lord.'

'Are you certain that's wise, with all these men around? They'll want a cut, too and then where will you be?' The

highborn took a step closer and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. 'Do you know of a flesh house in the Corsairs' Quarter called the House of Brass?'

'I know of it,' the captain said warily.

'Then I have a favour to ask of you. Carry a message to Silar Thornblood – he is one of my sworn men – and tell him to meet me there this evening. You will find him at my tower in the Hag. Accompany him tonight and I will see you amply rewarded for your efforts.'

The captain cocked his head suspiciously. 'My dread lord is a cruel and canny man,' he said. 'So you understand if I have reason to believe this is some sort of deception.'

Malus grinned. It was hard not to admire such brazenness. 'Do I dare deceive you captain? If I do, you report me to my father and I can't have that.'

The captain thought it over for a moment, gauging the odds. 'Very well,' he said evenly. 'I will look forward to our rendezvous, then. What message shall I deliver?'

'Say that his lord is returned from the Wastes,' Malus said. 'That will tell him all he needs to know.'

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