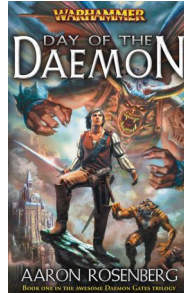


# ***DAY OF THE DAEMON***

*The first novel in the Daemon Gates trilogy*

*By Aaron Rosenberg*

*The first exciting installment in this brand new trilogy, set in the dark and gothic Warhammer world, is packed with action and adventure. Day of the Daemon follows the journey of archaeologist Alaric and his assistant Dietz as they return to the war-blighted city of Middenheim. The recent war against the dark forces of Chaos has corrupted the souls of many mortal men and there is now no shortage willing to do the bidding of the Dark Gods. As the clock ticks down, the day of the daemon approaches and it falls to those few men who have remained true to the Empire to stop it!*



## **About the Author**

Aaron Rosenberg has written role-playing games, educational books, magazine articles, short stories and novels for White Wolf and the Star Trek: Starfleet Corps of Engineers series. He also runs his own role-playing game publishing company. Aaron lives and works in New York City.

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‘I’LL BE SPEAKING with your superiors about this!’ Alaric shouted over his shoulder as he kicked his horse forward. ‘The nerve,’ he muttered to Dietz as they cleared the gate and entered Middenheim proper. ‘Searching my bags! As if I was a common merchant, or a pedlar! This is the twentieth year of Karl-Franz’s reign. You’d think he’d have brought some culture to these people by now!’

Dietz shrugged. He’d been a bit surprised to see so many soldiers at the gate when they’d arrived, including several half-familiar faces, but he couldn’t fault them for searching their belongings. These were dangerous times and they were strangers here. Well, at least Alaric was.

As they passed out of the gate’s shadow, Dietz glanced around, eager to see how his former home had fared of late. The sights that greeted him, however, made him wish they had chosen a different city to visit. What had happened here? When they had left, Middenheim had been the rock of the Empire, the mighty stone city that no foe could breach. Its homes had stood high and proud, its streets smooth and clean, its people rough but lively.

All that was gone. As they rode Dietz saw rubble everywhere, homes in ruins, buildings shattered. Their horses moved slowly, carefully setting hooves between chunks of stone, rotten foods, old rags, and even bodies. Some of the figures stretched out on the paving stones groaned and twitched, but others lay still; whether in sleep or worse Dietz could not tell. Those people walking past had a hard look about them, a look of despair as if they had seen the pits of Chaos and had not escaped unscathed.

‘Madness,’ Dietz said softly, eyeing their surroundings. He had heard about the war, of course, and the plague – the sailors had told him during their return voyage, and both he and Alaric had counted themselves lucky to have avoided such events. Clearly they had not escaped its aftermath. He found himself wondering how many of his old friends had survived both

illness and combat. He was deliberately not wondering the same about his family.

‘Absolutely,’ Alaric agreed, but when Dietz glanced over he saw his employer rummaging through a saddlebag, not even noticing the dreariness around them. ‘That lout could have destroyed these items easily, with those ham-hands of his!’ Alaric exhaled sharply as his hands closed about something wrapped in several silk scarves, and pulled it loose to feel its contours carefully. ‘Well, the mask is intact, at least,’ he assured Dietz. ‘Now, as I was saying earlier, I don’t think the symbols are writing exactly. More of a pictogrammatic style, I’d guess, illustrating some significant...’

Dietz tuned out the rest of the lecture. He enjoyed Alaric’s company, and liked working for the young noble-turned-explorer, but by Sigmar the boy could talk! Since Dietz didn’t care to hear all the details of centuries-old writing, and Alaric could happily talk to himself for hours, the arrangement worked perfectly – Alaric continued to babble on about runes and carvings and ancient languages, and Dietz guided their horses down street after street, leading them through the city and back to Rolf’s shop. At least some parts of the city were intact, and he was surprised how happy he was to see the carved wolves’ heads still atop the mounting posts and the street lamps that resembled icicles, and the bite- and claw marks traditionally carved above every door, showing that Ulric had set his seal upon it and offered his protection to its occupants. Still, it was not all pleasant. Several times along the way Dietz had to kick loose hands as people grasped their saddles and reins, begging for coins or food or death, and he was finally forced to keep his gaze on the shop signs and street posts so that he would not see yet another starved, maimed wretch hobbling after them, pleading for help.

Rolf’s shop looked the same, at least, its thick stone front undamaged and the heavy wooden plaque above, supported by stout chains whose links were shaped into wolves biting their own tails, still well polished. They left their horses at a livery one street over, where the stable hand remembered them and promised them the best stalls, and tossed the saddlebags onto their shoulders. Glouste made a small sound of protest as Dietz’s bags rose perilously close to her, but forgave him an instant later and lowered her head against his neck again.

She had been one of the only saving graces during their long voyage back, and Dietz had distracted himself from all that water around them by testing the limits of his new pet’s intelligence. He had been pleasantly surprised – though he had never had a pet himself, Dietz had known boys with cats and dogs and even tame rats, and Glouste was smarter than he remembered any of them being. She clearly understood him, at least his

tone and simple words, and obeyed commands unless she was feeling unappreciated. One of the sailors, seeing the monkey pretend not to hear Dietz, had chuckled and said ‘got yerself quite the little woman there, friend. Mine demands baubles and fine food afore she’ll do aught for me – bettin’ yers is the same.’ Nor had he been wrong – though affectionate and surprisingly protective, Glouste had shown a strong will and a sense of humour, and often resisted Dietz’s instructions or obeyed in such a way as to cross his intentions. Alaric she alternately ignored and obstructed, and Dietz couldn’t help feeling that his pet still disapproved of the ‘monkey’ label his employer had given her.

‘Hello? Rolf?’ Alaric strode through into the shop, sidestepping a variety of carvings and sculptures. No one responded to his hail and so he continued on to the back of the shop. Dietz followed him, Glouste emitting tiny sneezes from her perch around his neck. In the rear wall was a wide doorway that led to Rolf’s outdoor workshop, and Alaric pushed his way through the thick leather curtain there. He immediately backed out again, coughing. ‘Damned dust!’ Pulling a silk handkerchief from one sleeve, he covered his mouth and nose, and stuck his head past the curtain again, blinking furiously to keep his eyes clear of the stone dust that swirled in the cold breeze. ‘Rolf, are you out here?’

‘Aye, and who’s calling now?’ a voice replied, and Alaric stepped outside, Dietz right behind him.

The area behind the shop had been fenced off and was littered with blocks of stone in various shapes, sizes, and states of carving. Near the far wall stood a heavy table and a large man leaned over it, chipping flecks of stone from a small block set before him. Rolf was as broad as a dwarf, though he swore no such blood tainted his line, and as tall as Dietz, with massive arms and hands, and thinning red hair tied back in a long braid. That hair looked greyer than Alaric remembered, as did the full beard, but perhaps that was simply the dust. Rolf’s eyes, grey as granite and twice as hard, seemed as sharp as ever, and they widened slightly when they finally spied him.

‘Alaric!’ The husky stonemason laid aside his hammer and chisel and turned, wiping both hands on the heavy leather smock covering his torso. ‘And Dietz as well – still with this young rascal, then?’

Dietz smiled and nodded. He had known Rolf for many years, from back when his own father had traded goods with the man, and it had been his recommendation that had first brought Alaric here. ‘Can’t get rid of him,’ he admitted wryly, earning a glance of mock-reproach from his employer.

‘Aye, and you’ve missed the worst of it, to be sure,’ Rolf assured them as he clasped their hands in turn. ‘First the siege and the war, and then the plague’ – he gestured past the fence, where the roofs of the neighbouring buildings could just be seen peeking up. ‘It’s a wonder there’s a city left!’

‘We saw,’ Dietz admitted, though he knew Alaric had barely noticed. He started to ask another question, but couldn’t bring himself to. The stonemason understood.

‘Your father’s still alive,’ he said softly, ‘though his sight’s utterly gone now. Dagmar still tends to him, poor lass. And Dracht – he lost a leg in the war and a son to the plague, but he’s back in the shop now, hopping about with the aid of a stick.’

Dietz nodded, grateful for the news. Both Dagmar and Dracht still alive – that was more than he’d dared hope. Deisen had been lost long ago, as had Dehanna, and Darulf had been killed by a panicking horse only the year before – their father had always claimed he chose their names because he felt ‘D’ was good luck, but Dietz suspected the man had simply never learnt the alphabet beyond that point. Rolf had not mentioned Darhun, which could only mean he had died as well, though whether from a blade or sickness Dietz did not know. He promised himself he’d visit his two surviving siblings while they were here, and perhaps even look in on their father if he had the time and the stomach for it.

‘Now, what have you brought me?’ Rolf asked finally, leading them back into the shop and over to his scarred desk, casting an amused glance to where Alaric was hopping excitedly from foot to foot. ‘It must be a rare treat for you to dance so.’

‘It is, it is,’ Alaric assured the larger man, setting the scarf-wrapped bundle down on the desk, safely away from a small carved wolf with impressively sharp claws. ‘From Ind itself, my good man, an exquisite find indeed. I believe the markings on it...’

Dietz took the opportunity to wander away – he’d heard enough from Alaric about the mask, so much so that at times he’d regretted finding it. Now he left the two other men to discuss the matter, knowing Rolf would never cheat them beyond the normal craftsman’s need for a small profit, and distracted himself by roaming the shop. Rolf was an expert carver, and though he trafficked in building blocks, most of his business was sculpture and fine carving. His work filled the large store, lintels and benches and sculptures leaning against the walls or lined up to create narrow aisles, and Dietz strolled among them, admiring several new additions. He could still hear snippets of the conversation towards the back, enough that he would hear Alaric if the younger man needed his aid or his input.

‘Fine work indeed,’ Rolf was saying, turning the mask over and stroking one chiselled cheek with a surprisingly delicate touch. ‘I’ve not seen the like of it, to be honest, but the carver was a true master to shape it so thin without shattering the material.’ He frowned and held it up so the light from the door shone upon it. ‘Not seen this stone before, either.’

‘Nor have I,’ Alaric admitted. ‘Much of the temple was marble, but this – I’d say some form of chalcedony, perhaps, but those bands that catch the light–’

‘Aye, they’re stunning,’ Rolf agreed, tilting the mask again, ‘and capture the sense of a cat’s stripes beautifully. The problem is, since I canna identify the stone, I canna say its quality. Oh, I can vouch for the craftsmanship, certainly, but not whether this is a valuable stone or some common rock to them, or even stone that’s been treated somehow.’ He held up a hand to stop Alaric’s protests. ‘I’m not saying it’s worthless – the carving alone makes it a prize for some, but without knowing the stone I canna tell you a fair price for it.’

‘Of course, of course,’ Alaric murmured, trying to hide his disappointment. He did not do a good job of it – as usual his handsome features reflected his mood all too clearly.

‘Not to worry,’ Rolf assured him, setting the mask back on the desk. ‘I know a few who might be interested. I’ll ask around, get a feel for it, and find out what they’re willing to pay. Then you tell me if that’s enough. If so I’ll set up the deal as usual. If not you’ll have your mask back and can take it elsewhere. Perhaps someone in one of the coastal towns knows this stone and can find a better buyer.’

Alaric hesitated a moment. He knew Rolf would try his best, but was loath to relinquish the mask at all. Still, they had brought it here from Ind to sell it, and he had already sketched it and its runes for future study.

‘Done,’ he said finally, and they clasped hands upon it.

‘Now that’s settled,’ Rolf said, folding the scarves back over the mask, ‘I’ve got a few new pieces you might want to see yourself. Came to me from a wandering tinker, a week or two back, and they’re not the sorts of thing I normally buy, but I knew they’d draw your interest. Got them back here for safekeeping, not the sort of thing I’d leave lying about.’

Dietz, still half-listening, had just turned down another aisle when Glouste distracted him. She had been glancing at the objects around them, her whiskers quivering with curiosity, and more than once a small squeak had indicated interest in a particular piece. This time, however, the sound was higher, more drawn-out and strangely trilling, and Dietz knew at once it

was not pleasure but fear. His pet confirmed this by leaping from his shoulders and darting back down the aisle and out of sight.

‘Glouste!’ Swearing under his breath, Dietz took off after her, following the brief flashes of red fur he saw far ahead. Fortunately, the doors were all closed and the windows covered in heavy metal grilles, so Glouste could not escape. Even so, it took several minutes before Dietz caught up to her, and then only because she had stopped her mad flight and was cowering within a small stone cabinet.

‘There there, little one,’ Dietz whispered, scooping her from her hiding place and tucking her into the front of his leather jacket. ‘You’re safe now.’ He stroked her head gently with one finger until her fur stopped puffing and the trilling faded back to her normal purr.

‘Now, what had you so frightened?’ he wondered out loud, retracing his steps and still petting her. The aisle they’d entered was near the back of the shop, and the piece he had almost reached before Glouste’s retreat was actually covered by a large sheet. Whatever it was stood taller than he did, and he could tell from the shape that it was more likely to be a sculpture than a building ornament, with a wide round base and projections above. His own curiosity aroused, Dietz tugged the sheet free. As its folds fell to the ground his face turned as white as the fabric, and it was a second before he could find his voice.

‘Alaric!’

‘What?’ Hearing the panic in his companion’s voice, Alaric all but dropped the scroll Rolf had been handing him and ran towards the sound. When he turned the corner and skidded to a halt, he found Dietz standing stock-still, pale as chalk, one hand still clutching the sheet. The other was inside his vest, where Alaric could just hear the frightened squeaks of that infernal tree-monkey. He quickly forgot about Dietz’s unruly pet as his eyes registered the object before them, and Alaric took a step back himself.

The sculpture was large, easily seven feet tall, and roughly carved. Indeed, at first glance it looked uncarved, simply a rough block of stone. On second glance the depressions and protrusions began to assume a pattern, to show some semblance of design, and then individual features began to appear. At least, flashes of them did – Dietz felt as if he’d been watching a fast-moving deer through a thick wood, catching brief glimpses of an eye here, a leg there, an antler over there, never seeing the creature clearly, but getting an image from the scattered impressions. The image here was far less wholesome than any deer, and his head ached from the memory of it. He had a clear impression of limbs, too many limbs, some of them coiled and others bent in too many places.

Flatter spaces along the back, near the top, suggested wings flared in the act of taking flight, and both men cowered back slightly, afraid the stone monstrosity might indeed take to the air. Something about the way the statue narrowed just above its base spoke of clawed feet gouging the rock below them, as if impatient to leap free. But its face was the worst – hints of something long and vaguely bird-like, a massive hooked beak, yet Dietz was sure he had glimpsed row upon row of teeth as well. And the eyes; those he could not deny seeing. Small and faceted, several sets of them above where the beak would be, glared out at him. Most of the other features vanished again when he blinked, so that he could not find them a second time, but the eyes remained, their stare clearly intelligent, and just as clearly malevolent.

Though carved from stone, the surface glistened slightly in the dim light, as if covered in an oily sheen – as if damp with sweat or blood. Everything about the sculpture spoke of power and violence, and madness – a madness that beat at the back of your brain and threatened to burst free, overrunning your senses and your sanity if you gave it a moment's opportunity.

'It's a thing of Chaos,' Alaric whispered, backing away farther and dragging Dietz back with him. Neither of them could take their eyes from the foul carving. 'I've – I've seen drawings like this, once before, back at the university. The master kept them locked away. A traveller had made them, sketches of sculptures he'd seen on his travels – through the Chaos Wastes!'

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