THE DAEMON'S CURSE

The first Darkblade novel By Dan Abnett & Mike Lee

Since birth Malus Darkblade has been taught the most important lesson in dark elf society: do unto others before they do unto you. Even in the treacherous land of Naggaroth, Malus soon became infamous for his ruthless and evil nature. Little does the dark elf know that he's about to meet a creature as evil as him, maybe even more so.



Legends of a powerful magical artefact hidden deep within the nightmarish Chaos Wastes are too much for Malus and he sets off with his retinue in a quest to capture more power and influence. Deep within the Wastes, the daemon Tz'arkan has very different plans for Malus...

Darkblade: The Daemon's Curse is the first novel in an epic fantasy series that follows renegade dark elf Malus on his quest to free his soul from the clutches of the daemon Tz'arkan, then claim the power and the glory that is his birthright.

The Daemon's Curse 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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PUBLISHED BY THE BLACK LIBRARY

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

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ISBN: 1 84416 191 9



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from THE DAEMON'S CURSE

The wind shifted, blowing from the north-west, and the cold one's nostrils flared as it caught the scent of horseflesh. Without warning the one-ton warbeast snapped at the harbour lord's warhorse, its powerful, blocky jaws clashing shut with a bone-jarring crunch. The horse shrieked in terror, rearing and dancing away from the nauglir and drawing a stream of curses from the harbour lord himself. Malus pretended not to notice, drawing Spite up short with a jerk of the reins and a goodnatured kick to his flanks as he opened the letter the harbour lord had delivered to him.

The Shadowblade rode uneasily at its moorings as the leading edge of the winter storm reached up the Darkwine River and lashed Clar Karond with gusts of sleet and freezing rain. The black masts of scores of druchii corsairs crowded the skies along the waterfront, bristling like a forest of black spears – fully two-thirds of Naggaroth's nimble fleet anchored at the City of Ships during the long winter months, when the straits to the Sea of Chill were frozen solid.

The city lay in a broad valley bounded by the forbidding crags of the Nightsreach Mountains. Dry docks, warehouses and slave quarters dominated the eastern shore of the river and the city proper with its walls, tall manors and narrow streets rose to the west. The highborn citizens of the city kept their own docks on the western shore as well, and Malus had paid the harbour lord a substantial sum, in silver and young flesh, for the privilege of temporarily claiming one of the highborn docks as his own.

Three bridges of stone and dark iron connected the two halves of Clar Karond, and it was well known that highborn in the city paid bands of thugs to extort 'tolls' from travellers crossing in either direction. Any other day Malus would have relished such a confrontation, but not with almost two hundred human slaves in tow.

It was a fortune in flesh and blood that stumbled and shuffled down the *Shadowblade's* gangway, hobbled by chains that bound them at the wrist and ankle and linked them in two long coffles of a hundred slaves each. Malus's small warband of a dozen nobles mounted on cold ones and a company of spear-armed mercenaries surrounded the shivering slaves on the granite quay.

A handful of taskmasters kept the humans in line with the flickering tongues of long whips, while the troops turned their gaze outwards, watching the three narrow approaches leading to the quay and the narrow windows of the surrounding buildings. Nearly four hours had passed while the ship's hands had offloaded the volatile nauglir, the slaves and finally the warband's baggage. Night was drawing on, and every passing minute set Malus further on edge. The sooner he was out of the city and on the road to Hag Graef, the better.

The letter had been waiting for Malus when the *Shadowblade* arrived, delivered by the harbour lord, Vorhan, when he'd come to collect his bribe. The highborn turned the little packet over in his gloved hands, absently checking for hidden needles or razor edges. It was fine, heavy stock, sealed with a blob of wax and a sigil that was faintly familiar. Frowning, Malus pulled a thin-bladed dagger from his boot and sliced the package open. Inside was a single sheet of paper. Malus stifled an impatient snarl and held the paper close to his face, trying to make out the barely-legible handwriting.

To the Esteemed and Terrible Lord Malus, honoured son of the Dread Vaulkhar Lurhan Fellblade, greetings:

I pray this message finds you flush with victory and your appetites whetted after a season of blood and plunder off foreign shores. Though we have not met before, cousin, your name is well-known to me. Recently I've come to possess certain family secrets that I daresay would be of great value to a clever and capable lord such as yourself.

I await your pleasure at the Court of Thorns, dread lord. Great power lies for the taking if your heart is cold and your hand is sure.

Fuerlan, scion of Naggor

The highborn's eyes narrowed angrily when he reached the letter's signature. With a hiss of disgust he crumpled the paper in his fist.

'Word from the Hag, my lord?'

Malus looked over to see Lhunara nudging her cold one alongside his. Like him, she had added an articulated breast-plate of silvered steel over her coat of mail, and her swords were buckled to her high-canted saddle for an easy draw.

Her nauglir, Render, was a giant beast, fully a third again as long as Malus's Spite and half a ton heavier. Much of the creature's weight lay on thickly muscled rear legs; when coupled with a long, powerful tail, a cold one was capable of swift sprints and even long leaps at its rider's command. Its slightly smaller forelimbs came into play when walking or trotting for long distances, and to pin larger prey to the ground while the cold one's massive jaws and razor-edged fangs sliced flesh and pulverised bone.

Render's thick, scaled hide was a dark greenish-grey, with a ridge of larger, broader steel-grey scales running from its blunt, squarish snout to the tip of its tail. A pair of heavy reins ran from a ring on the saddle and clipped to steel rings that pierced the cold one's cheeks; though impressive-looking, they offered little real control over the huge creature. Nauglir were powerful and nearly impervious to injury, but they were also typically slow-witted.

Riders steered their mounts with sharp kicks from their knobby spurs and occasionally the butt of their lances, and used the reins more as a handhold than anything else. Lhunara held her lance upright, couched atop her right stirrup, dark green pennons crackling in the stiff wind.

'Just the croaking of a toad,' Malus growled, swaying in the saddle as Spite shied a bit from the presence of the larger cold

one. 'That lickspittle Fuerlan has kissed every boot in the Hag, and now he's set his sights on mine.'

Lhunara frowned, throwing a knobby scar at the corner of her eye into sharp relief. 'Fuerlan?'

'The hostage from Naggor. My cousin,' Malus sneered, 'as he was so careful to mention.' A thought occurred to him and he turned to the seething harbour lord. 'Lord Vorhan, when did this letter arrive?'

'Two days ago, dread lord,' Vorhan said, his words clipped and carefully neutral. 'Delivered by special messenger, direct from the Hag.'

Lhunara raised an eyebrow at the answer. 'A toad, but a well-informed one,' the retainer mused.

'Indeed,' Malus said. 'How long until we are ready to depart?'

'The slaves and the rest of the baggage have been unloaded,' Lhunara replied. 'Vanhir is still in the city, gathering provisions.'

Malus let out a curse. 'Sating his appetites for courva and soft flesh, more like it. He can catch up with us on the road, and I'll have a strip of his hide for every hour he's late.' He stood in the stirrups. 'Sa'an'ishar!' He cried, his voice pitched to carry across the quay. 'Make ready to march.'

Without a word, Lhunara heeled her nauglir about and sent it loping towards the rear of the slave coffles. Practiced over weeks of raids and marches, the warband shook itself out into marching order quickly and professionally, with the company of spearmen splitting into two files and marching along the flanks of the shuffling slaves. Half the cold one cavalry formed a rearguard under Lhunara, while Malus took the other half at the head of the column. 'Up, Spite!' Malus called, prodding his mount in the direction of the Slavers' Road. As the great beast stalked forward, the highborn reached back behind the saddle and lifted a black repeating crossbow from its carry hook.

The harbour lord's horse stamped and tossed its head, but this time its rider brought it under control with an angry hiss and a sharp twist of the reins. 'Does my dread lord require anything more?' he asked, fingering his long moustache. 'Casks of spirits for the cold nights? A butcher, perhaps? You'll lose a few of your stock before you reach the slave pits, I warrant.'

'My provisions are attended to,' Malus replied, cranking the complicated mechanism that drew back the crossbow's powerful bowstring and levering a steel-tipped bolt into the track. 'And my raiders are well-skilled at separating flesh from bone. You will, however, have the honour of escorting us across the city to the Skull Gate.'

The harbour lord's eyes widened. He was a young druchii for such a high-ranking position, which spoke of his cunning and ambition. Judging by the cut of his robes, his fine, reddyed kheitan and the jewels glinting from the pommels of his swords, he'd already grown wealthy lining his purse with bribes from the river trade. 'Escort you, dread lord? But that's not my responsibility...'

'I know,' Malus said, laying the loaded crossbow across his lap. 'But I insist. Without a guide, I and my valuable stock might come to mischief, and that would be... tragic.'

'Of course, dread lord, of course,' Vorhan stammered, his lean face turning slightly pale. Reluctantly, he kicked and cursed his skittish horse along in the nauglir's wake.

The streets of Clar Karond were made to kill the unwary. Like all druchii cities, high-walled houses loomed over narrow, twisting streets lost in shadow. Narrow windows – crossbow slits, in fact – looked down on passers-by. Each home was a citadel unto itself, fortified against trespassers in the streets, and against the neighbouring families to either side. Many streets and alleys led nowhere, coming to an end in cul-de-sacs riddled with murder-holes, or leading down into the poisonous sewers beneath the city. It was a place where strangers trod lightly, and Malus fought to keep from betraying his unease as the column worked its way slowly along the Slavers' Road.

The awnings of the houses kept much of the sleet and rain at bay, but the wind howled like a daemon down the narrow streets, driving many of the denizens of the city to seek their pleasures indoors. There was barely enough room for three men to walk abreast, packing the column tightly together. Lord Vorhan was between the spearmen guarding the slave files and the menacing phalanx of the nauglir leading the way; every now and then Malus stared back at the harbour lord, scrutinising his face for any telltale sign of treachery. Such a thing was to be expected when so much wealth was at stake.

Their best chance was to escape the confines of the city before the gates were shut at nightfall. If the column was trapped inside the city overnight, Malus had no idea where they could find a large enough place to encamp and keep watch on their stock. They would be at the mercy of every gang and cutthroat in the city, fighting in an environment where their cavalry would be at a disadvantage. Malus didn't care much for those odds.

Despite the risks, they had made good time, crossing most of the western half of the city in just over an hour. With Lord Vorhan at their side they'd made good time, avoiding costly detours. The sun was very low in the sky, creating a deep twilight in the shadow of the tall buildings. Pale green witchlight, streaming from the high windows, gleamed on the pointed helmets of the infantry and along the glittering edges of their spears. But the Skull Gate was close – Malus had begun to catch brief glimpses of the spiked ramparts in gaps between the buildings and their peaked roofs.

He gritted his teeth. If there was to be an ambush, it would have to be soon. Twisting in his saddle, he reviewed the order of the column, but the line was so long he couldn't see more than a third of the way along it until the rest was lost out of sight around a turn. There had been no sign of Vanhir and the provisions at all; he could have joined up with Lhunara's rearguard or could be stretched out in a stupor in one of the city's flesh houses for Malus knew.

Malus admitted to himself he'd been too clever by half when he'd accepted the highborn's oath of service rather than tearing out his guts. Lingering humiliation and a means to blackmail another highborn family had seemed like a cunning idea at the time. Now he vexes me at every turn, Malus thought balefully.

Lord Vorhan straightened in the saddle, mistaking the intent of the highborn's glare. 'Not long now, dread lord,' he called. 'Just around the corner up ahead.'

'Indeed?' Malus said. He raised his hand, and the column staggered to a halt. 'The vanguard will proceed,' he ordered, loud enough so his assembled retainers could hear. 'And you-' he pointed to Vorhan- 'will accompany us.'

Without waiting for a response, Malus spurred his mount forward.

The road continued for another thirty yards and turned abruptly right. The vanguard came around the corner in two columns, lances held high. Malus led the way, his hand resting lightly on the crossbow's grip. Around the turn, the road opened into a small square, the first Malus had seen since leaving the quay. Directly ahead lay the city gates, still open. A detachment of guards stood in the relative shelter of its high arch.

There was no one on the square. Malus surveyed the scene warily. The tall windows were shut tight against the building storm, and a thin coating of ice on the cobblestones revealed that no large body of men had passed through the square recently. The Dark Mother smiles on me today, Malus thought. He signalled to one of his riders to head back and call the column forward.

Lord Vorhan edged his horse forward. The harbour lord cleared his throat. 'The gate captain will expect a token of... courtesy... in order to keep the gate open long enough for the column to depart. I would be happy to facilitate the transaction of course—'

'If there's a bribe to be paid you'll pay it yourself,' Malus snapped. 'As a *courtesy* to me, you understand.'

Lord Vorhan bit back his reply, but there was no mistaking the hatred gleaming in his eyes. You may prove to be trouble next season, Lord Vorhan, Malus thought. I believe your career is going to come to a tragic and sudden end.

Perhaps reading the intent in Malus's gaze, the harbour lord blanched and looked away.

'On, Spite,' Malus commanded, giving the beast a kick. As one, the vanguard moved forward.

If the gate commander entertained any thoughts of enriching himself, the sight of a troop of highborn cavalry and the grim look of the young noble at its head quickly persuaded him otherwise. At the captain's urging, the guardsmen stepped out into the sleet and rain to give the cold ones a wide berth as they entered the echoing tunnel between the inner and outer gates.

The Skull Gate opened onto a road at the far end of the valley, passing through rock-strewn fields for a quarter of a mile before disappearing into a forest of black pine and hackthorn. From experience, Malus knew the road ran through the woods for another few miles before opening onto farmers' fields and pasture land. There, a branch of the road turned north and west, beginning the weeklong march to Hag Graef. Once out from under the ominous weight of the gatehouse, Malus nudged Spite out of the column and onto the roadside to watch the rest of the warband pass. He idly fingered the hilt of the skinning knife at his belt, hoping to see Lord Vanhir and the pack train trailing in the rearguard's wake.

Lhunara's cavalry troop was almost clear of the outer gate when Malus heard a furious bellow from one of the cold ones in the vanguard, now almost a hundred yards away. Suddenly, Spite jerked as two sharp blows struck the cold one's shoulder with a meaty *thunk*.

Malus was struck on the shoulder plate of his armour by a small, sharp blow. The missile ricocheted, buzzing within an inch of his nose. *Crossbows!* His mind raced as he twisted in the saddle, trying to look in every direction at once.

Pandemonium reigned all along the column. Slaves shrieked and wailed as more projectiles buzzed through the air. The taskmasters bent to their whips and cudgels with a will, battering the stock back into line, while infantry officers on either side of the road sang out orders to their men. More bellows of rage echoed from the vanguard – the cold ones likely smelled fresh blood. There were two black-fletched bolts jutting from Spite's right shoulder, the small wounds leaking a thin stream of ichor. The beast's scaly hide had clearly stopped much of their impact.

There! Malus caught sight of a small knot of figures crouching among the boulders along the right side of the road, firing bolts at the column in ragged volleys. They wore dun and grey robes that blended perfectly with the rocky terrain.

With a smooth motion, Malus stowed his crossbow behind the saddle and drew his sword from its scabbard with a ringing hiss. 'Lhunara! Crossbows to the right!' He pointed towards the attackers with the tip of his sword.

The druchii retainer caught sight of the attackers and her face twisted into a mask of savage glee. 'Sa'an'ishar!' She called to her rearguard. 'Ambushers to the right. Open order... charge!'

The air rang with the bloodcurdling war-screams of the cold one knights as they kicked their scaly steeds into a lumbering run across the rocky field. Lances still pointed skyward, they fanned out into a loose formation, dodging around large boulders and leaping small ones in their path. Malus hung back, looking along the length of the column.

The taskmasters had forced the slaves face down on the icy ground, and the twin files of spearmen had grounded their shields, facing outwards away from the road. A bonus for their captain, Malus noted. There were shouts and roars coming from the direction of the vanguard. More crossbowmen somewhere up there, he decided. The knights in the vanguard will take care of them. With that, he slapped Spite's flank with the flat of his sword and the huge predator leapt after Lhunara's knights with a hunting roar, sensing prey in the rocks ahead.

There was a score of the robed crossbowmen lurking in the rocks, and they stood their ground to fire a volley into the face of the thunderous charge. The light bolts sprouted from the snouts and shoulders of the oncoming nauglir, but the huge warbeasts had their blood up and nothing could stem their headlong rush. The knights, skilled riders all, waited until the last moment to level their pennoned lances, and drove their steel points home with a rending sound of torn flesh and splintered bone.

Lhunara, in the lead, bore down on a cluster of crossbowmen, trying to load their weapons for one last volley. Too late, they realised their mistake. Their leader let out a wild scream and grabbed for his sword as Lhunara's lance struck him full in the chest. Eighteen inches of hardened steel punched through cloth and light mail as though it were paper, splitting the druchii's sternum and ribs with a brittle crunch. The lance tip and the first two feet of a blood-soaked pennon burst from the man's back and struck another crouching ambusher in the side of the head. The druchii's skull burst like a melon, showering his fellows with a spray of blood, bone and brain matter.

The weight of the two bodies dragged the lance downwards and Lhunara let the weapon fall, drawing her two curved highborn swords as Render bit another shrieking crossbowman in two.

Malus caught sight of another small knot of crossbowmen slipping behind the cover of a large boulder, heading in the direction of the city walls. Gripping his sword tightly, he guided the cold one right at the cottage-sized stone. At the last moment he crouched low in the saddle, dragged back on the reins and shouted 'Up, Spite, up!'

The naughir gathered its powerful hindquarters and jumped,

The nauglir gathered its powerful hindquarters and jumped, landing for a heart-stopping moment atop the boulder before leaping down the other side. Malus caught a momentary glimpse of a cluster of pale, terrified faces staring up at him and picked one as his target, rising in the stirrups and holding his curved sword high.

Spite landed on two of the men with an earth-shaking crash, and Malus brought his sword down in the same motion, striking the druchii full in the face and splitting the man from crown to groin. Hot, sticky blood sprayed across the highborn's face and the stink of spilled entrails filled the air. Spite slipped and slid over a slick mush of mud, flesh and pulped intestines. A severed head bounced like a ball across the icy ground, leaving splotches of bright crimson in its wake.

A thrown spear hit Malus full in the chest, striking sparks as it glanced from his heavy breastplate. Two surviving ambushers were running flat out for the city walls and Spite needed no prompting to charge after them. The cold one covered the distance in three bounding strides, clamping his jaws on one of

the men and shaking his scaled head like a huge terrier. The druchii literally flew apart, arms and legs cartwheeling off in every direction. The man's lower torso hit the city wall with a gelid slap before sliding to the earth.

The second druchii veered sharply to the right, howling in wide-eyed terror. Without thinking, Malus vaulted from the saddle and sprinted after him, a lusty howl on his blood-spattered lips. They ran for nearly twenty yards across the rocky field before the druchii turned at bay.

Malus saw the man suddenly whirl, and without thinking, swept his sword in front of him, knocking the thrown dagger aside even before his mind had fully registered it. He lunged in, quick as an adder, but the man met Malus's sword with his own. Silvered steel rasped and rang as Malus blocked a low cut aimed for his thigh and then answered with a backhanded slash that nearly opened the druchii's throat. Malus pressed his advantage, hammering at his opponent's guard with heavy blows aimed at shoulder, neck and head. Suddenly the man ducked and lunged forward, his sword aimed for the highborn's throat. Malus twisted sideways at the last second and felt the flat of the cold blade slide along the surface of his neck.

The druchii looked down and screamed, registering the length of cold steel jutting from his thigh. Bright red arterial blood spouted from the wound in time with his beating heart.

Malus pulled his sword free and the druchii crumpled to the earth. With a snarl he drew back his blade for the killing blow – and a mighty impact sent him tumbling through the air. His trajectory was cut short by a large rock, and for a moment the world went black.

When he could see and breathe again, Malus saw Spite chewing the wounded druchii to bits. The nauglir's eyes rolled wildly in their armoured sockets and the warbeast shook its heavy head as though wracked with pain. Suddenly the cold one threw back its head and let out a wild roar, revealing rows of crimson-stained teeth as long as daggers. The nauglir spun in a circle, snapping at the air, then its nostrils flared and it charged off towards the road, bellowing in rage.

Malus felt his body go cold. He staggered to his feet. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. He staggered around the rock he'd struck and looked toward the road.

The cold ones had gone wild.

The huge beasts were lost in a frenzy of bloodlust, bucking and snapping at the scent hanging in the air. Every one of the dozen cold ones had thrown off their riders and turned their jaws on every living thing they could find. The knights themselves were safe – they coated their skin with the poisonous slime of the nauglir so the fierce beasts would think them pack mates – but every other man and woman within reach was fair game.

The spearmen had tried to make a stand against the berserk animals, but their shield wall shattered like glass under the impact of the raging beasts. Dozens of mercenaries were crushed or torn apart, their armour useless against a the nauglirs' powerful teeth and claws. The broken hafts of spears jutted from their heaving flanks, but the beasts were oblivious to pain or injury.

Then the cold ones fell in amongst the coffled slaves and the orgy of slaughter truly began.

'No!' Malus screamed as the roadway turned into a churning abattoir in the space of a dozen heartbeats. The slaves' cries mingled into a single, shattering wail of terror as the cold ones tore them to pieces, biting through bone and manacle with equal ease.

The highborn raced towards the carnage, dimly registering his retainers doing the same. His eye caught the black fletchings of the crossbow bolts jutting from Spite's shoulder. Poison, he thought. Something to drive the nauglir wild. The ambush had never been meant to make off with the slaves, but to eliminate them.

Malus ducked the lashing tail of a nauglir and darted to Spite's blood-streaked side. The cold one had its snout buried in the torso of a dead slave. With a quick leap, the highborn grabbed the hafts of both crossbow bolts and pulled them free with a wet pop. Spite shuddered and turned on Malus, and for a thrilling moment the highborn feared that the slime

no longer protected him. Then the huge creature bolted for the field to the left of the road and began to pace in circles, sniffing at the air. After a moment he settled onto his haunches, flanks heaving, his energy spent. The highborn raised the bolts in one blood-stained hand and shouted angrily, 'The bolts have poisoned the cold ones! Pull them out, quickly!'

Around him the other knights began attending to their mounts, pulling at the bolts sticking from their hides. Malus staggered into the field after Spite, stopping when he reached the nauglir's side before turning to face the devastation behind him.

For a hundred yards, the roadway was a red mass of churned meat. Bits of pale bone or glittering chain shone in the misty rain. The armoured forms of dead spearmen littered the ground, their bodies twisted into unnatural shapes. The cries of wounded men filled the air.

Two years of scheming, three months of hard raiding and a prince's ransom in flesh swept away in just a few minutes. Someone had ruined him in a single stroke, and it had been expertly done.

The rattle of armour and weapons carried across the field from the direction of the city gate. A contingent of the city guard made their way towards him, spears ready. Lord Vorhan walked his horse alongside the troops, his expression inscrutable. He reined in and studied the scene a mere ten yards away.

'A terrible turn of fate, dread lord,' he said darkly, shaking his head at the carnage. He looked at Malus. 'Perhaps your luck will turn next season.'

The highborn considered the harbour lord. 'Perhaps,' he said evenly, then plucked the crossbow from his saddle and shot Lord Vorhan in the face.

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