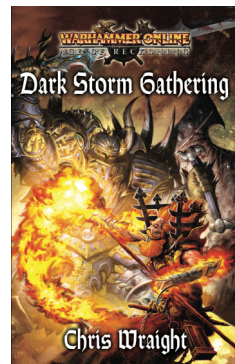


DARK STORM GATHERING

A Warhammer novel

By Chris Wraight

The grim march of Tchar'zanek is underway. Across the Empire of Man, the toll from plague and mutation continues to grow, and hope begins to fade. Only the intervention of the high elves offers respite, but they are beset by foes of their own, the murderous dark elves. When the prospect of treachery behind Imperial lines looms, four heroes must work together to uncover the corruption before all is lost.



About the Author

Chris Wraight is a freelance writer and teacher. A long time fan of Games Workshop background art and fiction, Chris is also into the novels of Patrick O'Brian, Philip Pullman and William Golding. His first novel, Masters of Magic, was published in 2008.

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Alexander Heisenherz was in a foul mood. This was in many ways his natural state. He hurried down the winding corridors of the Bright College with his robes flapping around him. His staff clicked as it struck the ornate tiling of the floor, and the iron heel sent stray sparks flicking into the shadowy recesses. He was late, and of all the many things in the world that he hated, being late was one of the worst.

Alexander was deep in the interior of the college, some distance underground in the hidden catacombs. He was moving through parts of the rambling structure that no acolyte or visiting dignitary ever saw. Around him on the walls, powerful sigils had been inscribed in crimson mosaics. The stonework, suitably enough, was a deep vermillion, lined with terracotta decorations celebrating the many aspects of the Wind of Aqshy, the spirit of fire. For the wizards of Alexander's order, whom the outside world knew as Bright wizards, fire was the element most closely attuned to their skills.

Like all human wizards, the Bright mages were limited to mastery of just one of the eight winds of

magic. These strictures had been laid down for hundreds of years, ever since the fabled elven mage Teclis had travelled to Altdorf during the reign of Magnus the Pious to instruct the humans in the ways of magic. The high elves themselves, so it was rumoured, could draw on the combined power of all the eight winds in their own spellcasting. Many human wizards, Alexander included, felt that the restrictions placed on the lore of the colleges were intended to keep humans back, rather than ward them from the supposed risks of the full spectrum of magic in all its danger and glory. But there was little that could be done about such a situation. The few humans who had tried to utilise more than one colour of magic had gone mad, or been driven into the arms of darkness.

With the colleges tied to the methods laid down by Teclis, dabbling in the pure essence of the unconstrained aethyr was the business of renegades and madmen. So the elves had maintained their monopoly on the reins of true power while drawing the realms of men into their plans. Or so it seemed to him, at least.

Alexander shook his head irritably as he walked along. Thinking about such things only worsened his mood. He arrived at his destination, and tried to relax. He was in front of a low, thick-looking door lined with iron. Protective wards had been inscribed in the metal, and the great icon of the college, the circular rune of Aqshy, had been inlaid into the wood in a band of gold.

He smoothed his unruly hair and clothes as best he could. Like most of the mages of his order, he wore

robes of deep red. His skin was inscribed with blood-coloured symbols, and even his hair and beard were flaming. His bizarre appearance was enough for most Imperial citizens to give him a wide berth, which suited him fine. Alexander was not over-fussy about his appearance like the ridiculous Gold wizards. Only his staff, the nexus of his power as a wizard, was looked after with all the care he could muster. Though a mage could work magic without a staff, the rune-studded instrument was as important to him as a sword was to a knight. It focussed his power and augmented it, acting as the fixed point about which his strange gifts coalesced. Alexander's staff was carefully polished and maintained, and to a fellow practitioner of the magical arts, revealed much of the Bright wizard's capability and temperament.

Alexander rapped the tip of the shaft heavily against the iron of the door. With a yawning creak, it opened by itself, revealing a small chamber lined with candles. In the centre of the cramped space, a low fire burned. The flames were unnaturally bright, and moved in strange patterns over the brazier which sustained them. Eerie shadows were thrown up against the walls of the chamber, which in turn were lined with endless scripts of tiny engraved writing. Alexander made no attempt to read any of the curving letters on the walls. They changed so often anyway, it was futile trying to get any sense out of them. Only the master archivist, whose distant ancestor had created the powerful magic which animated the room, claimed to be able to read the

shifting messages on the walls. But he was half-mad himself, and no one trusted a man who kept rats in the folds of his cloak and claimed they were his advisers.

On the far side of the brazier, a cowed figure waited for him. The door closed, wreathing the room in shadows. Only the unnaturally warm glow of the fire and the insubstantial flickering of the candles broke the heavy gloom. Even for a wizard used to such elaborate theatre, Alexander found himself slightly unnerved.

‘Greetings, Patriarch,’ he said uneasily, trying to shake his pervasive bad mood.

The seated figure threw back his cowl, and looked at Alexander with a weary expression.

‘When you first arrived here, Heisenherz, your consistent lateness was refreshing,’ he said acidly. ‘Now it is merely tiresome.’

The speaker was a large, heavy-set man with a shaved head and voluminous beard. One eye was unseeing and glazed, while the other was hawk-like in its intensity. His robes were of the finest heavy cloth lined with fur, and an amulet of luminous gold hung around his neck. He was Thyrus Gorman, Patriarch of the college, and one of the most powerful mages in the Empire. He looked as displeased as Alexander at having to spend more time than was necessary in the vaults of the Bright College.

‘Apologies,’ said Alexander. ‘I was detained with an acolyte.’

‘Not any more,’ said Gorman. ‘Whatever orders you were working under, you can forget them now. Things have changed. The war is altering everything. The Emperor grows intolerant of the number of wizards who remain away from the front.’

At mention of the war, Alexander felt a curse rise within him. He bit his tongue.

‘So I am told,’ Alexander said. ‘But, forgive me, I see little sign of this great war. Every year some horde or other fights its way out of a hole in the mountains and carves up a province or two. They always peter out after a while. If all the colleges were emptied every time a greenskin warlord rode into Stirland on a boar then our researches would grind to a halt.’

Gorman regarded him coldly from under impossibly thick eyebrows.

‘Political acumen has never been your strong point,’ the Patriarch observed, witheringly. ‘Thankfully, you aren’t in charge of deciding such things. You will depart the city immediately and head to the Observatory of the Celestial College outside Altdorf. Their Patriarch has received some strange portents, and wishes the facility to be better guarded. It’s an easy task, and you can be thankful you’re not being sent somewhere more dangerous.’

Alexander felt a wave of relief. Sharing a ramshackle observatory with a bunch of half-crazed amateur prophets was not his idea of a good time, but it beat trudging through the mud and gore with a column of

mutinous peasant soldiers. Most Imperial citizens placed wizards somewhere between a traitor and a rat on the scale of social acceptability, so at least he would be amongst his own kind.

‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘What do our Celestial cousins want with a Bright wizard? Can’t they look after themselves?’

Gorman ignored his tone.

‘The observatory is an institution of great importance. The Celestial College has been using it to scry the heavens in an attempt to foretell what may come to pass in the coming months. The need for their predictions has never been greater, and even you should have noticed that the skies have been strangely unsettled recently. There’s important work being done there, and someone with your unique gift for pyromancy will be of great help.’

The Patriarch leaned forward in the darkness, as if some hidden pair of ears might possibly overhear.

‘And there have been troubling portents,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Visions of flame and of ruin.’

Alexander nodded, with the faintest trace of a weary smile on his face. Where there were portents, it seemed they always involved fire and ruin.

‘Very well,’ he said, making to leave. ‘I’ll depart immediately.’

Gorman shook his head impatiently.

‘Not just yet. There’s one more thing.’

The Patriarch rummaged in a small pouch at his waist and pulled a metal token from it. It was a silver disc with a fine chain running through it. On the surface of the disc was an engraving of a griffon. On the rear was the Imperial coat of arms. Gorman handed it to him.

‘Normally there’d be some sort of ceremony involved with this, but there’s no time, and it would be wasted on the likes of you anyway. Congratulations. You’re now a member of the noble Order of the Griffon.’

Alexander looked at the disc with some distaste.

‘The what?’ he said, doubtfully, turning the metal token over in his hands.

‘I’m surprised you hadn’t heard. The Emperor himself has instituted it. There are members from all across the Empire. Great warriors, mighty knights, witch hunters, even the odd wizard or two. We’re all being encouraged to swell its ranks. Most of my other wizards are deployed with the Imperial armies doing useful work. As you’re one of the last to leave, I’m afraid you’re my best remaining candidate.’

Alexander snorted.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he said. ‘There must be a thousand Orders, conclaves and fraternities in the Empire. One more won’t make any difference.’

Gorman gave him a look of studied disapproval.

‘There are ambitious servants of the Empire who would give up their own families to be counted amongst the Order of the Griffon. Supreme Patriarch Gelt himself

is very worked up about it. And despite your lamentable attitude and general slovenliness, you have subtle gifts that can't be ignored. If you didn't, I'd have kicked you out of here long ago. Take the emblem, and wear it under your robes. You may scorn the honour now, but you'll come to recognise the worth of it in time. I won't tolerate any indiscipline from you in this matter. Just do as I say.'

Alexander pondered resisting, but after taking a look at his Patriarch's expression, decided against it. Some things just weren't worth fighting for. He slipped the chain over his neck and let the silver pendant hang next to his chest. Even in the heat of the fire-lit chamber, it felt cool against his skin.

'Very well,' he said. 'I'm grateful you thought of me. Does this come with any extra orders?'

'Nothing, for now,' said Gorman. 'Just look after the pendant. It's your mark of identification. Keep your involvement in this secret from those outside the Order, and in due course I'll arrange for a proper induction.'

He gave Alexander a resigned look.

'Try and live up to this, Heisenherz,' Gorman said. 'You're a good wizard. Perhaps you have the potential to be more than that. The only thing holding you back is your attitude. I've seen wars bring out the best in men before. My hope is that the same will happen for you. This is an opportunity. Don't spurn it.'

Alexander nodded curtly. Lectures of this sort had been common throughout his long apprenticeship at the college. Now he was a wizard in his own right and

the owner of an Imperial warrant, he had hoped the sermonising would end.

‘Thanks for the advice,’ he said, trying to keep his voice sounding sincere. ‘And I’ll look after the pendant.’

Gorman inclined his head, and gestured that he was free to leave. With some relief, Alexander turned on his heel and left the chamber behind. As before, the iron-bound door opened and closed behind him of its own accord.

A nice touch, thought Alexander, walking in a leisurely fashion back the way he had come. No doubt Gorman had his own clandestine route from the chamber back up into the spires of the upper college. The Patriarchs liked their little secrets and games. As for himself, he was glad enough to get out of the city and away from the cloying atmosphere of the colleges. The Celestial wizards might be fools and dreamers, but at least the air at the observatory would be clean. That was more than could be said of Altdorf.

□□*

Annika Bohringer crept through the tangled undergrowth as quietly as possible, keeping her head low. Her soft leather boots made little noise against the damp leaf matter of the forest floor, and her dun-coloured cloak and leggings blended well with the foliage. Behind her, Dieter made his way carefully. He was wearing the heavy brass-inlaid armour of a Knight of the Blazing Sun, and went more slowly. Only

his long training and enormous strength kept him from holding her up too much or giving them away.

She was glad of his presence. The forests of the Empire were always dangerous, but in recent times the very countryside seemed to have risen up against its masters. The land was stricken with plague, and though the worst of the pestilence had subsided, the baleful effects of infection were still everywhere to be seen. Where prosperous villages had once bustled and flourished, now empty husks stood mournfully, burnt out by the cleansing fire of her fellow witch hunters or destroyed by the madness of their former inhabitants. Crops rotted in the fields untended, and the thick matted canopy of the forest had begun to stretch back over lands long claimed by men. The Empire's hold over the vast homeland of Sigmar, ever tenuous, was beginning to fracture.

Annika clasped her pistol tightly, and ran her thumb along the precious surface of the esoteric weapon. She was a traditionalist in most respects, and in general preferred the crossbow or short-bladed sword to the newfangled gadgets of the engineers. But her flintlock was something special. Three long, exquisitely-bored barrels extended nearly twelve inches from the ivory-inlaid handle. They were arranged in a pyramid formation, with intricate carvings of dragons in flight etched along the length of the steel shafts. It was a machine of rare craftsmanship.

Only three had ever been made. One had been lost when its owner had led an ill-fated attempt to purge the lower Drakwald of beastmen twenty years ago. The other resided in an iron casket in Nuln, guarded by rings of elaborate traps and hidden deep in the vaults of the College of Engineers. Annika's was the only one left in use, and she cherished it. It had been given to her by the man who had made it, Augustus Ironblood, in payment of a debt of honour. It was rare indeed for a witch hunter to earn the gratitude of an Imperial citizen, and so she had taken it and learned to use it in preference to the crossbow. Long practice had made her a markswoman of the highest order. Now Ironblood was dead, and her skill with his greatest creation was the only way to mark his generosity.

Annika paused, and peered through the overhanging branches. The weight of the pistol in her right hand was comforting. Dieter arrived at her side, his sword drawn. He had an open-faced helmet on, and wore an expression of flat, calm concentration. There was nothing untoward in this. Dieter always wore a look of flat, calm concentration.

'Look there,' whispered Annika, pointing ahead with the muzzle of her weapon. 'More of them.'

Dieter nodded grimly. Perhaps twenty paces ahead of their position, the trees began to thin and the land fell away. Further ahead there was a break in the forest and rough clear ground stood open to the sky. In the past, the place might have been tended and

cultivated, but now the earth was overgrown with straggling creepers and brambles. Amidst the tangled briars, shapes were moving. They had the form of humans, but were each somehow distorted. All limped or dragged their limbs in an awkward fashion. Where the dappled sunlight fell on their faces, the skin looked pale and deathly. Some seemed to have odd growths protruding from under their rags, or patches of sores, or strange gaps where flesh should have been. None were untouched by mutation.

They had once been villagers, no doubt. Good men and women of the Empire, tilling the earth and keeping the ever-present tide of the forest penned back. Now they were ruined creatures of feral madness and affliction, the worst of the many consequences of the terrible Chaos-inspired plague. Annika looked at them with something akin to pity. Mutation was always something to be stamped out and purged, but these people had done nothing to deserve their fate. There were not enough pyres in the whole Empire for the bodies that needed to be burned.

‘Where are they going?’ she whispered, watching the shambling figures stagger and drag themselves vaguely northwards. ‘This group have more purpose about them than usual. A plan, even?’

Dieter narrowed his eyes.

‘They are drawn towards the heart of the contagion. Chaos has spawned them. Now they travel to meet the authors of their fate.’

Annika frowned.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘If so, they’ll find no welcome there.’

The witch hunter looked up, over the heads of the distant figures. The morning sky was chill and grey. The blankets of high cloud shifted uneasily in the incessant wind, as if the airs of heaven were troubled and tormented. The ice-cold breeze pried into every nook and gap in her clothing, and she shivered a little.

‘If our journey were not so important, I’d deliver these wretches from their torment,’ she said. ‘But there are too many, and time is short.’

Dieter looked at the shuffling mutants with a disappointed expression. She knew that to him they were an abomination for which the only palliative was the liberal employment of steel and fire. If Dieter had a flaw, she thought, it was a certain unwillingness to see the larger picture.

‘I agree,’ he said in a grudging voice. ‘Grauenburg’s lands are close now. The sickness seems to have hit these lands hard. More reason to suspect he has turned. Your judgement on the matter is surely confirmed.’

Annika smiled to herself. Dieter’s support was appreciated. Once he decided on a course of action, he stuck to it, and his faith in her was touching.

The two of them had been scouting out the hinterlands of Lord Grauenburg’s lands for days. There had been too many reports of plague outbreaks to ignore.

If she had had her way, an entire company of Templars would have been dispatched, with her at its head, to root out the heresy she was sure lurked here. If Annika's career had taught her anything, it was that you could never be too careful. But now the war had come, and even the witch hunters were thinly stretched. It had taken much persuasion for Volkmar to let her investigate Grauenburg's estates on her own. A single knight was a meagre escort for one of her rank, and Annika was more used to an entire retinue. What was worse, Dieter was a member of the obscure Myrmidia-worshipping Knights of the Blazing Sun, a cult whose activities she had always been faintly suspicious of. Though they were among the mightiest of the Emperor's servants, and their fame had spread from Nordland to Araby, their allegiance to a strange goddess of the south made them an unusual choice for a witch hunter's bodyguard. Still, Dieter's martial prowess and dedication were hardly in doubt, as his blood-stained sword and notched armour attested.

'There's definitely something up here,' Annika said, wrinkling her nose at the unusually acrid smell of the rotting leaf matter around them. 'The land itself seems strangely... wronged. But we need more proof before we can move against Grauenburg. He's powerful, and you can't accuse an Imperial lord without being completely sure.'

She shuffled forwards a little, trying to see if the mutants had passed out of their way and back into the trees.

‘I think they’ve moved on,’ she breathed, looking carefully ahead. ‘We should…’

Before she could finish, an gurgling cry of anger and pain filled the air. It was met with similar cries from every direction. The voices might once have been human, but they were now merely twisted mockeries, more like the calls of beasts. Annika felt a sudden cold stab of foreboding. She raised her pistol with her right hand and drew a hunting knife from its scabbard with her left.

‘They’ve sensed us,’ she hissed.

‘So they have,’ said Dieter softly without the slightest trace of emotion in his voice. ‘And I think hiding here will do us no good.’

He gestured forward, and Annika looked where he pointed. Perhaps a dozen of the limping creatures had turned back into the clearing and were coming directly for them. Whatever unnatural force had seized their wills and corrupted their bodies seemed to have augmented at least some of their senses as well. Unerringly, the broken and twisted mutants made their way straight for the witch hunter’s position. As they neared, some broke into a loping run.

Annika shook her head in frustration.

‘Mother of Sigmar!’ she spat. ‘We don’t have time for this.’

She rose from the thick covering of foliage and branches and took aim. Blackpowder exploded, and the crack of the report echoed through the trees. Two of the nearest figures fell to the ground, writhing a remembered reaction of pain. The rest hesitated for a moment, before resuming their lumbering march towards them. Dieter rose and stood by Annika's shoulder.

'Well, that's done it,' he said, dryly. 'We'll have to kill them all now.'

Dieter broke from cover and charged headlong into the nearest group of mutants. His sword flashed in the cold air, and he was soon surrounded by a whirling maelstrom of gore and severed flesh. He towered over the grasping hands and scabbling fingers around him.

Annika stepped out of the shadow of a towering oak and cast an expert eye over the figures approaching her. One was slightly taller than the rest, and seemed to have retained much of his physical bulk. Perhaps he had once been a village headman or some other worthy figure. Without hesitation, she straightened her arm and took aim. The blackpowder detonation echoed once more around the forest, and the plague victim stumbled in his path. Oblivious, his fellow peasants pressed onwards towards her, raising their hands in anticipation of ripping at her throat.

As they neared, Annika couldn't help noticing the strange, twisted features of their faces. Their eyes had the dull look of those long sunk into possession by whatever unholy force had taken over their minds, but

some still wore the expressions of anguish they had borne while consumed by the racking pain of illness. They were pitiful and utterly wretched. From the corner of her eye she could see Dieter wading through them, heaving his sword to and fro as they clutched at him. The stench of death and disease filled the air.

Distastefully, she took aim once more, and a third shot rang out. Another body stumbled and crashed into the bracken. But then they were too close. Annika shoved the pistol deftly back into its leather holster, and drew a short sword with her right hand. The hunting knife still in her left, she strode forward to meet the first of the mutants. It looked at her with hatred, and screamed. Lunging forward, it tried to scratch at her face and gouge at her eyes. Coolly, Annika sliced across its throat with her sword, followed by a plunge into its chest from the knife. The body of the mutant twitched and shuddered as the steel passed through it. Annika pushed it roughly aside.

Where it fell, there were more to take its place. Annika began to work harder, twisting and dancing away from the outstretched arms of the inexorably advancing plague creatures. They kept coming even as those before them were cut down, uncaring of anything except the strange compulsion to kill those whose kind they had once been. Annika punched a hulking monster hard in the face with the pommel of her sword, hearing the bone crack as she did so, before whirling around to face two scrawny creatures pawing at her cloak. The hunting knife

flickered, and severed hands and fingers fell to the ground. Still they came, and Annika had to plunge her sword full into the torso of one before it would stop trying to haul itself on top of her. She stepped back, feeling sweat begin to shine on her skin despite the cold. There were more coming.

‘Myrmidia!’ came a voice beside her, and she turned quickly. Dieter had spotted something behind her, and his armour-clad body slammed into a grotesque, misshapen grey-skinned wretch which had sneaked under her defences. The sword span around, and a shower of gore flew into the air. Shaken a little, Annika pitched herself into the fighting with renewed fervour. Her boot kicked out at two child-sized mutants which had crept through the low lying bushes to gnaw at her ankles. She swung her sword in a graceful arc in front of her, sending the plague creatures backwards in confusion before kneeling to dispatch the drooling children with the hunting knife. Rising quickly, she thrust her sword rapidly into the leathery flesh of yet another of the creatures. Even impaled on the weapon it still came forward, and it took a violent heave of the blade, nearly ripping the mutant in two, before it came loose once more. The momentary delay cost her, and one of the creatures came close to fastening a hand with six gnarled fingers on her shoulder. Annika turned smoothly, and the severed hand landed heavily in the undergrowth, joining the growing collection of gore-drenched body parts littering the forest.

The onslaught ebbed. Dieter's butchery seemed to have deterred the rest of the mutants. Annika looked up from the carnage. They had felled many of their number, and the few remaining beasts were limping back into the shadows. Dieter dispatched a final shambling creature before hurrying to her side.

'Pursue them?' he asked.

Annika shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'They'll regroup in the shadows, and more will come.'

She narrowed her eyes, watching the last of the plague creatures shrink from view.

'This attack was planned,' she said carefully.

'They wish to draw us further into the trees.'

Dieter looked doubtful.

'These creatures are mindless,' he said. 'Their wills have been stripped from them. They are slaves to their bloodlust.'

Annika shook her head.

'I think not,' she said. 'They are creatures of Chaos. A greater will may guide them.'

She looked about her.

'We're near the edge of the forest. From the map, the land changes to the west. Come.'

She began to stride purposefully away. Dieter still looked unconvinced, but dutifully accompanied her. From behind them, a thin wail rose above the trees.

'I do not understand,' said the knight. 'This place needs purging. Our duty lies behind us.'

Annika nodded.

‘If I had a hundred knights at my command, we would cleanse this entire forest,’ she said grimly. ‘But do you not see? The plague beasts are not at the heart of this. Their presence in the trees would deter all but the hardiest from pressing on. They are a distraction, a ring of mindless guards to protect against discovery of the graver corruption within. We must press on.’

They went quickly through the trees, mindful of the threat from more plague beasts. For the time being at least, the creatures seemed to have been beaten off. In time, the dense forest began to thin. They were nearing the edge. Then, with an unexpected suddenness, they broke into open country. To the north and south, the dark line of trees continued in an unbroken wall of shadow. But to the west the land was empty. Instead of tangled branches and briars, bleak moorland stretched towards the distant horizon. After the close world of the trees, it seemed strangely empty. The place had a grim feel about it. Then again, everywhere else in the region did too.

Annika scanned the vista before them, shading her eyes against the cold diffuse light of the grey sky. There were several large piles of granite protruding from some of the high points of the moors in the distance, and smaller collections of tumbled rocks wherever she looked. Her gaze swept across the distant peaks. Nothing was out of the ordinary. But then her experienced eyes noticed something awkward about a tall outcrop to the north. There were signs, subtle signals perhaps most

travellers would have missed. She was not a witch hunter for nothing.

‘Look,’ she said to Dieter, pointing to the granite formation in the north. ‘Those stones have been worked. There’s something there.’

Dieter looked at the rock towers carefully.

‘I see it,’ he said. ‘So the creatures were protecting something.’

‘Looks like it,’ she said. ‘These are Grauenburg’s lands. We may as well start looking here.’

They set off once more, heading in the direction of the distant peak. Behind them, a cold wind sighed through the eaves of the trees, but no plague beast followed them. The unnatural will which gave them purpose and direction also held them in the forest. It was little comfort. Annika sensed the aura of sickness grow. Whatever secret had been hidden in this place, they were coming to the heart of it.

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