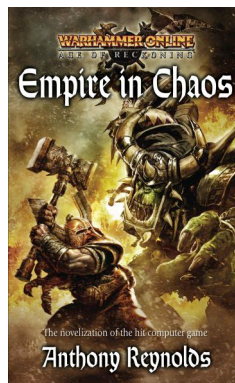


# ***EMPIRE IN CHAOS***

A Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning novel

*By Anthony Reynolds*

*The lands of the Empire are being ravaged by a terrible plague. When Annaleise Jaeger's village is overrun and destroyed by mutants, she and an injured elf captive are the only survivors. As the two unlikely companions fight their way towards Black Fire Pass, Annaleise discovers within herself powers of courage and faith that inspire all around her. With a grizzled witch hunter and a dwarf warrior, the heroes battle alongside the armies of the Empire and the dwarfs, above and below the earth, against greenskin tribes and the hordes of Chaos. Together, they must find their courage and help turn back the tides of darkness, lest all of the Empire be lost.*



## **About the Author**

After finishing university Anthony Reynolds set sail from his homeland and ventured forth to foreign climes. He ended up settling in the UK, and managed to blag his way into Games Workshop's hallowed Design Studio. There he worked for four years as a Games Developer and two years as part of the Management team. He now resides back in his hometown of Sydney, overlooking the beach and enjoying the sun and the surf, though he finds that to capture the true darkness and horror of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 he has taken to writing in what could be described as a darkened cave.

The following is an excerpt from *Empire in Chaos* by Anthony Reynolds. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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A CROWD WAS gathering in the village square. None stood too close to the guildhall, and many covered their mouths and noses with dirty rags and strips of cloth. Hugging herself for warmth, she went to stand beside Johann Weiss, a portly villager with heavy jowls.

‘What’s happening?’ she asked Johann quietly. He was the innkeeper of her workplace, and she had known him since childhood.

‘Three families left the village yesterday, all their possessions packed onto a single cart,’ he said, his voice devoid of emotion but his eyes tired and sad. Annaliese nodded fearfully. She had known the daughters of the families well.

‘They were murdered on the road. Not even the little ones were spared. This,’ he said with a nod of his head, ‘is one of those responsible.’

Grief and horror washed over Annaliese, and the innkeeper put a fatherly arm around her shoulders.

The men dragged their murderous captive into the centre of the village square. A solid, ancient gibbet stood there as it had done for countless decades, a blackened metal cage hanging from its crossbar. She had always felt a horrible loathing for the thing, and when she was young had sat aside as other children threw rocks at the condemned.

A skeleton was slumped within the torturous, black iron device, the remnants of a thief who had been placed there a year before as a

warning to others. The heavy chains holding the grisly remains aloft were slackened, and the metal cage plummeted to the ground with a crash and a cheer from the crowd.

Leonard Horst, a reed-thin villager with the stilted, stiff movements of a hunting stork climbed onto a rotting bale of hay, waving a hand for silence. He was the village warden, and a man with a reputation for harshness. He had once beaten a trader to death, it was said, for attempting to bypass paying his road tax. Nevertheless, he was a respected man, for none doubted his devotion to the village and its people.

‘The farrier Hellmaan and his family, and the families of his two sisters, have been brutally murdered on the road to Averheim,’ Horst said, his voice bitter and filled with hatred. Those in the crowd before him held weapons clenched tightly in their hands, their faces angry. The two men holding the captive pinned to the ground tightened their grip.

‘We return with one of their murderers: a hateful, black-hearted killer of elven kind.’

There were several gasps from the gathered villagers. Most had come to believe that elves were nothing more than stories told to children.

‘An elf?’ breathed Annaliese. She stepped away from the innkeeper and inched further down the hill, to better see the captive.

‘Hang him!’ called a man, and others shouted their agreement.

‘Burn him alive!’ another roared, a pronouncement that was greeted with a cheer.

‘Oh, we shall do much worse than that to him,’ said the stick-thin figure of Horst from the rotten hay bale. ‘He must be made to suffer long for the savagery that he unleashed upon those poor families.’

His voice rose in pitch, anger and bitterness fuelling his diatribe.

‘Let us gag his mouth that he may not incant his vile sorceries or cry out to his hateful gods for aid. Let us raise him in the gallows and pelt him with stones and rocks. Let us cut out his eyes and feed them to the crows! After a week in the cage, let us drag him forth and quarter him, his entrails carried to the four corners of the

village. Then he and all his hated kin shall fear us, and know the true vengeance of Averland!

A huge roar rose from the gathered crowd, and Annaliese was shocked and horrified to see her neighbours, good hearted and caring people, baying for blood and torture, their faces twisted into masks of hatred. She realised that it was fear and desperation that was fuelling this emotion – a need to blame someone for their horrific, hopeless predicament.

She saw the black haired elf pulled to his feet, glimpsing his pale, arrogant profile for the first time. Almost as white as the crispest snow, his face was angular and long, his eyes large, dark and almond shaped. He was aloof and distant despite the bruises and blood upon him, and she saw how he stood against the mob with his head held high.

Screeching metal accompanied the opening of the cage. The skeleton within was kicked free and the elf was dragged towards the vacant iron device. He struggled against his captors. Breaking the grip that one had on him, he smashed his elbow into the man's face, crushing his nose. With inhuman swiftness he kicked another state soldier in the face, and then spun, rolling his wrist so that the arm of the one holding him was turned until the elbow was facing the sky. With a sharp downward strike the elf shattered the joint of the soldier's overextended arm.

A heavy mallet smashed into the back of the elf's head, and his body went limp. Swearing, blood pumping from his nose, the first of the fallen men rose to his feet with a dagger in his hands and murder in his eyes. He stepped towards the slumped elf, but Horst stopped him with a hand on his chest.

'We will make sure his suffering is long and drawn out,' he hissed. The man sheathed his knife with a curse, and spat upon the elf.

The barely conscious elf, blood covering the back of his head, was dragged to the torturous man-shaped cage. He was pushed within the tight confines, and the cage door slammed shut. A rusted old padlock as large as a man's head was clamped shut, sealing him

within. He had no room to move. Half unconscious and bleeding, the elf was hauled up into the air. Rocks and rotten food pelted him.

Not wanting to see any more, and anxious to be with her father, Annaliese pushed against the crowd around her, panicked and sickened at the hate, fear and murderous intent she saw on the faces of those around her. Tears in her eyes, she pushed free of the frenzied mob, and ran back up through the snow towards her home.

Annaliese slammed the door behind her, breathing hard, wracking sobs rocking her body. She could still hear the muted shouts of the villagers, a dire sound of venomous hate fuelled by fear and despair.

Moving to the small kitchen adjoining the main room, she plunged her hands into a bucket of water and washed her face. The water was icy cold, and an involuntary shiver ran through her. She brushed her long blonde hair back away from her face and took a deep breath, calming herself.

If the elf truly did murder those families, then he deserved death, she thought – but not a long, torturous death. That was savage and barbaric.

She took another deep breath. That's when she heard the first screams.

Running through the cabin, she burst through the front door to see a very different scene than that she had just left. People were running in all directions, and she saw blood splashed across the snow. There was screaming and shouting, and her first thought was that the elf had somehow escaped, or that his allies had come to rescue him. But no, she could still see his caged form hanging aloft above the bloodshed below.

She saw a warrior dressed in the yellow and black of a state soldier in the pay of the Elector of Averland rolling in the slush, fighting with a drably dressed villager. Two other plainly clothed men dragged another to the ground, their hands around his throat. Others were knocked to the ground by the press of bodies seeking escape. What was going on? What madness was this?

There was a solid thump that shook the floorboards, and Annaliese started. It had come from her father's room, and a

moment later there was a scrape of wood on wood, and a crash. It sounded like the chair by her father's palette being pushed back and toppling to the floor. Tearing herself away from the insane, murderous savagery below, she stepped warily into the centre of the living area to better see into her father's room, her heart pounding in her chest. Floorboards creaked beneath her feet.

Dimly she perceived a low hanging mist coiling within the dark room. She saw the dark shape of a man on all fours beside the palette, and her heart skipped a beat. Her father was alive, and up out of his bed!

'Father!' she cried as she rushed to his side. As soon as she entered the room the temperature fell markedly. The fire that had been raging when she had left the cabin earlier had died away completely, and a ribbon of smoke rose from the blackened logs.

Annaliese dropped to her knees, putting an arm around her father's bony shoulders. His flesh radiated an icy chill through the rough linen undershirt covering his skin. His head hung low, and his lank dark hair fell down over his face.

'Father', she said once again, tears welling in her eyes. Days ago she had resigned herself to his passing.

He turned his face towards her. She had a glimpse of blue-tinged lips, and saw that her father's eyes were closed. His skin was grey and ashen, and she could see blue veins criss-crossing within.

Her father's cold blue lips curled into a sickly grin that made her skin crawl, and she felt revulsion and horror run through her for a moment. Then he began to convulse, his wasted muscles tensing as his entire body went into uncontrollable spasms. He fell to his back, and sickly, yellow froth bubbled at the corners of his still grinning lips. Annaliese cried out, not knowing what to do. She grasped her father's head tightly in her arms, holding him to her bosom in an effort to stop him smashing his head against the floorboards in his seizure.

It was over in a moment, and he went completely limp. Breathing heavily with the shock, Annaliese carefully laid her father's head back down against the floor. She could not hear him

breathing, and she felt for a pulse on his wasted, scrawny neck. There was none.

Closing her eyes, Annaliese allowed exhaustion and despair to wash over her. She couldn't remember when last she had slept, and her entire body heaved with sobs from the shock of her father's dying fit.

She opened her eyes to see a cold pair of eyes regarding her.

Blue flames flickered within the sunken sockets of her father's face, and Annaliese felt the edges of her sanity begin to fray.

She screamed involuntarily and scrambled backwards across the floor. The thing that had once been her father pushed itself onto its stomach, and began to claw its way across the floorboards towards her, fingernails digging into the floorboards. Its movements were jerky and stilted, as if it were some twisted marionette and someone was plucking at its strings.

Its face was still locked in a hideous grinning rictus, a manic death-grimace, and eyes of blue fire blazed coldly.

ANNALIESE SLAMMED INTO the doorframe as she scabbled frantically backwards. She tried to push herself to her feet, but fell backwards out into the living area of the cabin in her haste to escape the horrific creature clawing its way towards her.

It pulled itself forward upon wasted, skeletal hands. It was still half wrapped in blankets, and it dragged them along behind it. Still it smiled its deathly grin, its eyes blazing with icy fire fixed on her.

'Father!' she cried out as she kicked backwards out of the grasp of the creature as it made to snatch at her leg. 'Father, it's me!'

It spoke then, but the voice was not the one she knew so well, nor did the creature's lips move in time with the words that were spoken.

She could not comprehend the garbled torrent of words, and with horror she realised that it was not a single voice at all – it sounded as though a multitude of creatures were attempting to speak to her at once, their voices blurring and overlapping.

'Tzch'aaaarkan gharbol'ankh'ha mesch'antar'mor,' drawled the strongest of the voices, a sound that made Annaliese's skin crawl.

Rising to her feet finally, she ran into the small, stone kitchen and slammed the heavy door behind her. Her terror granted her strength, and she dragged the heavy wooden counter in front of the door. She backed away and leant up against the shuttered window, breathing hard.

That thing was no longer her father. She prayed to Morr and to Sigmar that her father's soul had passed on, that this truly was just his abandoned flesh and that his soul did not live on in torment within the foul creature. The idea was horrific, and she wished she had not thought it.

There was the wet sound of rotten wood smashing, and a cold hand grabbed her around the throat. Splinters of damp wood sprayed in from the window behind her.

Annaliese tried to scream, but found she could not, as the cold strength of the hand tightened its grip. She grabbed at the arm, her fingernails tearing at flesh. She felt her fingers go numb against its unearthly cold.

A sibilant whispering came from behind her. It was the same host of voices that had whispered forth from the throat of the creature, only this was spoken right into her ear.

‘Sth’aaark Tzch’aaaarkan,’ it hissed.

She scrambled around frantically as her vision began to waver, and her hand closed on a bone handled knife. In an instant, she lifted the knife and hacked at the arm that pinned her to the wall, feeling ice-cold blood begin to flow. The grip did not relent, and she sawed frantically against the wrist of the creature. Cold blood washed over her, making the knife so slippery that she almost lost her grip on it. The blood made the creature's hand slippery as well, and with a lurch, Annaliese freed herself from its grasp, pushing away, gasping for air.

A heavy weight threw itself against the door leading to the living area, and the wooden counter rocked from the blow. She threw her weight against it, and turned to stare wide-eyed at the smashed shutters of the window. A heavy arm swept the remainder of the wood away, and she flinched.



She saw the shape of the monster silhouetted against the pristine white snow outside. She could see nothing of its features except for its eyes, blue flames that flickered and burned coldly. It reached forward and ripped the shattered shutters from their hinges, not noticing the thick splinters of wood that pierced its flesh.

‘Always have a weapon to hand,’ her father had always told her. ‘And never allow yourself to be cornered – always have an escape route.’

Yet here she was, backed into a corner with nothing more than a carving knife. She cursed, knowing that on the other side of the wall was her father’s precious sword, agonisingly out of reach. No matter how poor they had become, he had never even considered selling the blade, and Annaliese had never broached the subject. It was the last link he had to his former life as a soldier, and she knew that he missed those times. But one accident had taken all of that away from him when the thumb of his right hand, his sword hand, had been severed. There was no soldiering work for a warrior that could not hold a sword.

Flipping the knife around in her hand so that she held it downwards like a dagger, Annaliese leapt forward as the deathly creature began to clamber through the window frame, a ceaseless cacophony of hateful gibberish spilling from its throat. She slammed the knife into the side of creature’s neck, the blade sinking to the hilt before ripping it free once again.

What would have been a fatal blow to any man barely slowed its advance. Reaching a blue-tinged arm further into the kitchen, it pulled itself through the window, falling with a limp thud upon the stone floor, dark, matted hair falling over its face.

Still, Annaliese didn’t need to see its face to recognise that this creature was once Jonas Scriber, the farrier’s apprentice. Its once ruddy, furnace-reddened face and arms were bereft of colour, and it pushed itself heavily to its feet, towering over the slight framed teenage girl. Its face, too, was set in a deathly grin, its broad features daemonically lit by flaming orbs. Its shirt was ripped open, and it bore several wounds, deep gashes in its skin that exposed the red

muscle beneath. It lurched towards her, as if trying to embrace her in its massive arms.

She ducked and slashed her knife across its gut, slicing the skin open. She was knocked to the side as the wooden bench blocking the door was wrenched away by a powerful push from the other side of the door, and she stumbled towards the monster that had been Jonas.

One of its heavy arms clubbed her to the ground, the blow numbing her shoulder and arm.

The multitude of voices seemed to get more excited, and they spoke quickly, the garbled words spilling from its mouth in a horrid torrent of foul, insensible words.

Pushing up with all her force, she rammed the knife up into the soft flesh beneath the monster's chin. The blade punched up through the roof of its mouth, sliding on into its brain.

It twitched for a second, transfixed, and with a push with her shoulder she sent the creature sprawling backwards, the gore-covered knife still clasped in her hand.

She felt another presence behind her and turned blindly, her bloody knife slashing out, carving an arc towards the creature that was her father. Too late she realised who it was, and though she tried to pull the blow, the knife bit deeply. Its head was knocked to the side by the force of the blow, and it stumbled into the door frame, falling to its knees.

With a cry, Annaliese dropped the knife and knelt by its side. Its head rolled around to fix on her once more, and she recoiled from its blood-drenched, smiling visage. It reached for her, but she surged up, sprinting into the cabin's living area.

Her gaze settled on her father's short-bladed sword. She pulled it from its display hooks in the log-wall, and turned grimly towards the dark shapes moving towards her, the pale witch-lights of their eyes casting a cold blue tinge across the room. She ripped the scabbard from the sword, and stood with the glinting blade held ready before her.

This was not her father, she reminded herself.

And if this truly was her time to pass into the halls of Morr, then she would be damned if she didn't take these creatures with her.

She stepped backwards to give herself some room, her mouth set into a determined line as she lowered herself into a ready stance, the short-sword held out before her.

‘You are not Jonas, and you are not my father,’ she breathed as the puppet-like figures staggered towards her.

The unnaturally cold air was filled with the tumultuous din that spilled from the throats of the monsters, a dozen voices whispering and hissing all around her. The twisted, slashed face of the creature that was once her father continued to grin at her as it advanced towards her, and she backed away frantically from its outstretched hands.

Annaliese was far from an expert swordswoman, but these creatures, with their stilted and awkward movement, were far from skilled foes. As the zombie-like creature that resembled Jonas reached for her, she hacked at it with her sword, the blade severing several blackened, frostbitten fingers. The creature’s eyes blazed ever brighter, until she plunged the point of the sword into its chest, piercing the heart. The fire flickered and died, and the creature slumped to the ground, a marionette with its strings cut.

A hand, as cold as death itself, grabbed her by her long blonde hair and wrenched her head back, and she saw the creature’s slashed face close to her own, its mouth opened wide as it lunged for her throat. The icy chill that exuded from the monster burnt her, and she threw herself to the side in desperation, leaving a handful of hair in its grasp. Annaliese’s head crashed into the leg of the heavy wooden table, and pain shot through her.

Voices were all around her, and when her vision cleared, she looked up into the twisted face of the monster. It stood over her hefting a heavy chunk of wood above its head, ready to cave her skull in.

‘Father, no!’ she screamed in desperation, but if it understood her it gave no indication.

She slashed with her sword, the blow hitting the creature in the shin, splintering the bone. Its leg collapsed beneath it and it fell to its knees. Annaliese was on her feet in an instant, and she lashed out blindly. Her blade hacked into its neck, cutting to the bone. It lodged

fast between the vertebrae, and the sword was wrenched from her hands as it fell to the ground.

Shaking frantically, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps, she burst through the door of the cabin and ran outside.

She fled blindly from the cabin, her home, stumbling through the snow, registering that there was the movement of people all around. She fell to her knees as she tripped over something – a dead body. She jumped to her feet with a moan of horror, adrenaline pumping through her.

People ran screaming, clutching their children protectively to them, fleeing in every direction. There was no order to the flight, for there was nothing but panic and terror in these people, and they fought each other in their haste to get away.

Annaliese was knocked to the ground by a middle-aged villager she knew, though she had never seen the look of abject horror on his face before, and he made no sign of recognition or apology as he fled blindly. Bodies were strewn across the ground, blood splattered over the snow and mixing with the muddy slush. There were shouts and screams of pain and fear all around, and she swung her head from side to side, trying to see the enemy, or a safe direction to run.

Some people were defending themselves with drawn weapons, and she gasped as she saw one wildly flailing villager impaled on the shaft of a spear. He didn't stop fighting then, either, but dragged himself further onto the haft of the weapon in his eagerness to get close enough to claw at the warrior.

A woman screamed as she was grabbed from behind. Her throat was ripped out by her attacker's teeth, blood spraying madly from the fatal wound.

She saw a wasted and thin figure crouching over a fallen woman. She began to back away, but as if feeling her gaze upon it, the emaciated creature raised its head. Its eyes were blazing blue orbs of fire and its mouth and chin dripped with blood. Clearly it had been feasting, but it dropped its meal and began staggering towards her, its movements jerky and uncoordinated, but with deadly intent.

With no weapon to hand she knew she was no match for this creature, and she turned and ran through the mayhem. She saw an

elderly man screaming and fighting frantically as he was pulled to the ground by two more plague victims, their eyes burning with cold intensity, and she faltered momentarily, seeing the desperate plea in the old man's face. An instant later, his cries were silenced as one of the creatures smashed his head into the ground with a horrible crack.

A terrified looking soldier swung towards her, the long spike on the tip of his halberd pointing in her direction. His trousers were stained where he had clearly lost control of his bodily functions, and Annaliese raised her hands up before her to show she meant no harm. The point of the halberd wavered dangerously before her, and she flicked a glance over her shoulder at the creature stumbling towards her.

'I'm not one of them,' she said as she turned back, though she may as well have been speaking a foreign language, for the soldier merely backed away from her, his weapon still lowered in her direction and his eyes wide with terror. He tripped over a severed arm, and fell backwards into the snow.

She darted past him and heard a horrible yelp from the fallen soldier. She did not look back. The only thing on her mind now was escape.

She found herself running into the village square. Disoriented amongst the surging crowd, her blind flight had brought her here, and she groaned in fear. The fighting was intense, and she saw that the doors of the guildhall had been smashed down from the inside. As she stood there despairing, she saw one of the boarded up windows blown out, and a pair of grinning, flaming eyed monsters crawled through the rotten wreckage of splintered wood.

The black iron cage still hung from the gibbet, and the dark haired elf was staring out across the madness below with wide eyes. As much as he shook the door of the cage, the rusted padlock imprisoning him within held fast.

Annaliese saw her chance – there was a thin alleyway between the butchers and the Golden Wheatsheaf, the inn where she worked. It backed onto farmland, and beyond were the woods. Seeing no one in the narrow passageway, she ran, sidestepping combatants that

rolled in the slush and the grasping hands of zombie-like plague victims.

A heavy set villager, a local huntsman, was fighting for his life against two of the plague monsters, a woodsman's axe in his grasp. He cut one of them down with a savage blow to the neck, but the other one reached for his face. He stumbled backwards to gain more room, swinging the axe over his shoulder.

On his backswing, the head of the axe struck the locking mechanism that held the gibbet cage aloft, freeing the chain and sending the cage plummeting towards the ground. The huntsman lost his grip on the axe, and the creature was upon him in an instant, tearing at his skin and flesh with skeletal hands curled like the talons of a bird of prey.

As he screamed in horror and pain, the black iron gibbet cage smashed into the earth with a clatter, and fell to its side. Several plague victims swung their heavy heads towards the sound, and broke off from their feasting to stagger towards the cage. Annaliese saw the elf shaking the bars of the cage frantically, but the lock held still.

She stopped short, biting her lip, glancing back towards the elf, still struggling against his imprisonment. It seemed an unnecessarily cruel way to die, even for one who had committed murderous, black acts.

Cursing herself, she rushed back into the fray, running lightly towards the cage. Several creatures were close to it now, and she heard the torrent of ungodly voices spilling from their throats raise in tempo in excitement.

Stooping, she swept up the fallen axe from the huntsman who was being eaten alive at the base of the gibbet, and hefted it over her shoulder before dashing towards the cage. With all her force and with a scream of anger and fear, she brought the axe crashing down onto the head of one of the plague victims trying to claw at the elf through the bars of the cage. It cut through its skull, splattering blood and gore over her dress and across the pristine white face of the elf, and the figure fell to the ground.

Annaliese caught the gaze of the elf, and was struck by his alien, defiant eyes. They were not black as she had first thought, those eyes, but had a slight tinge of lavender to them that merely enhanced the impression of inhuman, otherworldliness about him.

Praying she was doing the right thing, she brought the head of the axe crashing down on the rusted lock imprisoning the elf, smashing it asunder beneath the blow. She dropped the axe with numbed fingers, and without waiting to see his escape she turned and ran. She had given the elf a chance – it was now up to him to do with it what he would.

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