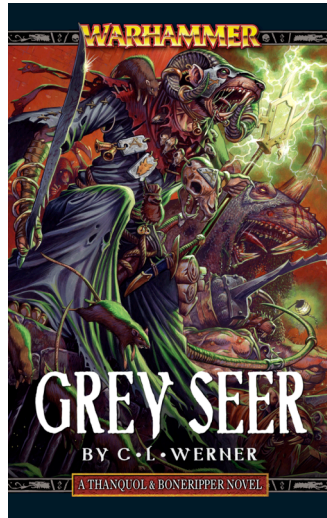


GREY SEER

A Thanquol and Boneripper novel

By C. L. Werner

Nefarious Grey Seer Thanquol, skaven sorcerer and arch-enemy of Gotrek & Felix, embarks on his own adventure to recover the deadly artefact known only as Wormstone. With this dread substance, he plots to poison the city of Aلدorf and rise to power in the eyes of his masters amongst the Council of the Thirteen.



About the Author

C. L. Werner was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story in *Inferno!* magazine. His Black Library credits include the Chaos Wastes books *Palace of the Plague Lord* and *Blood for the Blood God*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang* and the *Brunner the Bounty Hunter* trilogy. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer World.

Visit the author's website at www.clwerner.wordpress.com

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‘Fast-quick, flea-maggots!’

The scratchy voice was thin as a whisper, like the rasp of snakeskin against cobblestone, but it carried through the dank, crumbling tunnels like a thunderclap. Scrawny rats with jaundiced eyes and matted fur skittered away, hugging the earthen walls as the fury of the voice moved them to flight.

For others, retreat was an option long ago taken from them. Emaciated creatures nearly as thin as the starveling cave rats, their scarred bodies covered in stringy brown fur, cowered and grovelled but heavy chains of corroded iron forced them to stand their ground. Each of the creatures was a horror of blisters and scabs, their bodies gouged by the violence of whip and fang. Only the most sardonic of observers would liken them to men, though there was a loathsome mockery of man in the shapes they wore. The things that dangled limply from their wasted arms were as much paws as they were hands. Naked tails, scaly and pallid, lashed the floor between their clawed feet. Above the iron collars that circled their necks was a narrow head, pinched and pulled into the rodent-like visage of an enormous rat. Yet even here could be found a gruesome echo of humanity, for it was more than the blind fear of vermin that shone in their beady red eyes, more than the unthinking pain of a

simple beast that gave their gaze its stamp of dejected misery.

‘Fast-quick!’ the voice snarled again. This time the words were punctuated by a loud crack as a scaly whip, like the severed tail of one of the creatures, flashed through the green-shadowed gloom of the tunnel. Something cried out in a wordless shriek that spoke equally of pain and terror. The echoes of the cry had not even started to shudder through the tunnels when the slaves were moving once more, attacking the walls with their clawed hands, slashing and scratching at the earth and rock with frantic desperation.

Kratch coiled the macabre whip around his arm, exulting in the panic of the slaves. Not the slightest twinge of sympathy for the miserable throng moved him; pity was a concept utterly alien to the skaven mind. The slaves existed only to further Kratch’s own position and power; beyond that simple fact, Kratch had no concern for them or their suffering. It was the most basic foundation of skaven society: the weak existed to exalt the strong. Kratch rubbed his white-furred hands together, a pleased gleam in his eyes, as he considered the wisdom of such an arrangement. Perhaps he would have been less pleased had the Horned Rat not smiled so kindly upon Kratch and made him one of the strong. But the skaven god had favoured him, shaping him in the belly of his brood-mother and placing his mark upon Kratch. The ratman lifted a paw to his forehead, stroking the bony nubs protruding through his fur. Horned skaven were the chosen of their god, the voices and instruments of his will. More than the frayed grey robes and warpstone charms he wore, it was his horns that marked Kratch as one of the exalted, one of the grim brotherhood of sorcerer-priests known as the grey seers.

As he stroked his tiny horns, some of the pleasure ceased to sparkle in Kratch's eyes. He had been marked, but he was still far from the magnificence he wanted. Kratch was young, barely eight winters from the whelp-nests, his horns still developing and his magical knowledge small. He was only an adept, an initiate into the secrets of the grey seers, not a grey seer himself. One day he would wield such power, but until then he would be an apprentice, serving those who Kratch knew were his inferiors for all their horns and magic.

Kratch looked away from the frantic slaves, casting an appraising glance over his shoulder at his current 'master'. Grey Seer Skabritt was several times again as old as Kratch, his horns grown into a double-curved knot of bone that encased the sides of the priest's head like a helmet. Skabritt fancied himself a cunning strategist and plotter, weaving a nest of intrigue and deception to cloak his activities from his many rivals and enemies, but Kratch knew he could do so much more with Skabritt's resources and power.

The adept lashed his tail in annoyance. Looking at Skabritt caused Kratch's blood to boil with resentment. The grey seer stood well away from where the slaves were working, surrounded on all sides by his armoured stormvermin. The big black-furred skaven kept an easy grip on their halberds when they weren't scratching fleas from their fur. So very like Skabritt to spare himself any chance of danger. Distance would protect him from any cave-in that might result from the attentions of the work gang on the crumbling walls. The stormvermin would guard him against the unlikely, but possible event of a slave revolt. The armoured ratmen would cut down any berserk slaves long before they could lay a paw on Skabritt.

However, such hazards were perfectly acceptable for Kratch to be exposed to. The skaven gnashed his fangs as he reflected on that fact. Skabritt had insisted it would be a good learning experience for his apprentice, something to bolster his abilities to command and lead the unwashed masses of the Under-Empire. More pragmatically, Skabritt could always get another apprentice if something went wrong.

‘Fast-quick!’ Kratch growled, spinning back around and striking out with his whip. He wasn’t sure if the brown-furred wretch he struck had really been slacking off and didn’t really care. Lurking about in this forsaken network of burrows – burrows that had been sealed off since the skaven civil war – was far from Kratch’s idea of safety and comfort. The number of stormvermin Grey Seer Skabritt brought along, and the amount of warpstone tokens he had spent in the markets of Under-Altdorf arming them, told Kratch that his mentor expected trouble. That Skabritt had not shared from what quarter he expected that trouble didn’t do much to reassure Kratch.

Still, the adept reflected, Skabritt would hardly put himself at risk for some miniscule gain. Whatever he hoped to find in the abandoned burrows the slaves were excavating, it would be something of importance. Perhaps some lost cache of warpstone or a lost trove of Clan Skryre technology. Kratch began to salivate as he considered the magnitude of such a find. Skabritt would earn the favour of the seerlords and the Council of Thirteen itself presenting them with such a treasure. Or perhaps he would instead choose to deal with a single clan, tempting them with the power his discovery would offer them. Under-Altdorf was a nest of intrigue already, each of its dominant clans striving against the others for

control of the city, the largest in the entire Under-Empire with the exception of Skavenblight itself. Clan Skryre would pay well for anything that would tip the balance in their favour, just as the other clans would pay to keep such power from slipping into their paws.

Whatever Skabritt chose to do, Kratch would be there, clinging to his tail every step of the way. Even if only the smallest portion of the wealth and glory Skabritt was after trickled down to his apprentice, Kratch would take it. Unless of course he saw some way to cut his mentor out of the equation. Accidents did sometimes happen, like the time a swamp troll had broken free in the mines beneath Rat Rock and nearly devoured the grey seer. In the right paws, a sharp file and a rusty chain were as deadly as any assassin's poisoned dagger.

A sharp squeal of alarm stirred Kratch from his murderous visions. The adept cracked his whip against one of the slaves, slashing through its mangy hide, then wrinkled his snout in disgust. The workers were venting the musk of fear from their glands. Kratch fought back the instinctive response to do the same, his contempt for the wretches overcoming the tyranny of biology.

The slaves were skulking away from the wall of the tunnel. Kratch could see a dark opening where the bloodied paws of the skaven had broken through into a sealed chamber. A murky, stagnant odour wafted from the opening, overcoming even the pungent musk of the frightened slaves. Kratch felt a tremor of anxiety as his senses drank in the cold, evil smell. He quickly calmed himself. Anything with such an intimidating stench would also be obscenely powerful. His thoughts turned to visions of some lost trove of warpstone quietly festering away in the dark for six centuries and again his jaws became moist with anticipation. There was

certainly a suggestion of warpstone about the clammy stench issuing from the darkness.

Kratch started to scramble down from his perch atop a pile of loose earth. Sounds behind him had the adept spinning about in alarm, one paw slipping to the dagger concealed in the sleeve of his robe. A gruff snarl froze Kratch's hand. The adept winced, screwing his eyes shut and lifting his head, exposing his throat in deference and humility to the creature he called master.

Grey Seer Skabritt had been drawn from his cautious observation point well away from the excavation by the clammy smell issuing from the opening. There was a feverish light shining in the priest's eyes as he shuffled forward, his stormvermin flanking him.

'Yes-yes,' Skabritt chortled, clapping his paws together. 'Mine it is! Power-strength! The Wormstone belongs to Skabritt!' The grey seer's eyes narrowed with suspicion, casting a hostile glance at slaves, stormvermin and apprentice alike. In his injudicious enthusiasm he had let too much slip off his tongue. The priest seemed to almost swell with malignity as he drew energy into himself, his eyes glassing over with a greenish film of light. After a moment, he allowed the energy to dissipate, satisfied that none of those around him knew of what he spoke. The ignorance of his minions filled Skabritt with contempt. There was no danger such wretches could pose to him. Kratch was careful to maintain his subservient poise, to keep any suggestion of his thoughts away from Skabritt's keen nose and penetrating gaze. The grey seer's scrutiny of his apprentice lasted only a moment, then he was turning his attention back on the tunnel. Skabritt was growing forgetful with his years. He had forgotten the apprentice who had scoured the records of Under-Altdorf for him, sniffing out any mention of the

war with the plague priests of Clan Pestilens and the doom of Clan Mawrl. He had forgotten the many weeks Kratch had spent poring over the rat-hide scrolls and their cramped lines of hieroglyphs. Skabritt had forgotten that everything he knew about the Wormstone, his apprentice had learned first.

Stormvermin kicked and bullied their way through the huddled throng of cowering slaves as Skabritt ordered them forward. Warpstone lanterns were pulled down from the crumbling walls, casting the tunnel into blackness. Kratch scurried after the light, not trusting the darkness to guard him against the attentions of a vengeful slave. He crept after the rearmost of the stormvermin as Skabritt entered the exposed chamber. The light from the lanterns warred against the centuries of darkness that filled the burrow, casting green shadows against the dripping walls. The burrow was not large, its other entrances as choked with rubble as the one Skabritt's slaves had broken through. The other clans of Under-Altendorf had been most thorough in their plot to bury Clan Mawrl alive. Evidence of how successful they had been was littered all across the floor. The bones of hundreds, perhaps even thousands of skaven were scattered everywhere. Even a cursory glance told Kratch that something had fed off the dead, the marks of fangs clearly visible on the bones, though whether the damage had been done by common vermin or fellow skaven was impossible to determine.

Kratch quickly dismissed the question, his focus shifting to the object standing almost in the exact centre of the burrow. Here the skeletons were at their thickest, piled about the object as though seeking succour from it in the long hours of their slow deaths. Kratch's fur crawled as he looked at it, as its evil smell hammered at his senses.

Yet even in the midst of his fear, he could not deny the fierce desire and awful hunger the thing provoked in him.

A sickly yellow haze surrounded the Wormstone. The artefact was the size of a skaven, the colour of swamp slime laced with veins of pitch-black. Two hundred pounds if it was an ounce, the smell that came off it told Kratch what formed the bulk of its composition.

Warpstone, the sorcerous rock that was the very foundation of skaven civilisation. It was food, power, wealth and more to the ratkin, used to power their technology, feed their brood-mothers and fuel their industry. A piece of warpstone the size of the find he now gazed upon was more wealth than any but the strongest clan-leaders and sorcerers could ever expect to possess.

There was something more in the scent of the Wormstone, something that reminded Kratch of what he had read. The warning checked the adept's greed, and he backed away from the glowing rock.

The stormvermin, however, were ignorant of the Wormstone's history. Two of them rushed forwards, snapping and spitting at each other as they rushed for the massive shard of glowing rock. One of the ratmen slashed his paw across the other's face, staggering his rival as black blood spurted down his forehead. For an instant, it seemed that Grey Seer Skabritt might intervene, but then the priest's face pulled back in a gruesome sneer. Skabritt was a big believer in object lessons: the more ghastly the better.

The foremost stormvermin covered the last few yards between him and the Wormstone with a fierce pounce, his teeth bared in challenge to any who would contest his new possession. Skabritt's tail twitched with amusement

as the defiant warrior stretched his arm around the massive rock. Instantly he cried out with a pained squeak, leaping away in terror. Kratch could see the same ghoulish light that surrounded the Wormstone now glowing around the stormvermin's arm. Was it a trick of shadow, or were there really gigantic maggots burrowing into the warrior's fur?

The stormvermin was scratching and tearing at himself now, his body twitching in a fit of agony. The ratman whose eyes he had nearly scratched out snickered and drew his sword. No thought of seizing the tainted Wormstone now, but the stormvermin could still glut his need for revenge against his treacherous rival.

As the avenger approached the twitching wretch, the stricken stormvermin reared up, lunging at his rival with paws spread wide. Kratch realised with revulsion that the sick skaven wasn't attacking, he was appealing for succour. The swordsrat backed away in revulsion, horrified by the squirming ripples beneath the sick skaven's fur. He wasn't fast enough; the paw of the maddened wretch struck his foot, leaving a touch of the glowing taint on his clawed toes.

The swordsrat shrieked and brought his blade smashing down. The sick skaven's head burst open like an overripe melon, exploding into greasy quarters. From the grisly mush, fat green worms plopped and slithered.

The watching skaven vented their glands at the sickening sight. Several stormvermin braced their halberds, pointing the blades at the now infected swordsrat, trying to keep both him and the glowing worms in view. Kratch began trolling through his mind for a spell that would guard him against the ghastly magic he had witnessed, prayers to the Horned Rat rasping through his fangs.

Skabritt was unmoved, however. A fiendish, exultant light was in his eyes now. ‘This,’ the sorcerer hissed, ‘this is the weapon that makes Skabritt seerlord!’ His master’s words had barely registered with Kratch before the adept’s attention was riveted once more upon the Wormstone. The bones piled behind the relic were moving, heaving and undulating like a boiling pool of pitch. A new scent imposed itself upon his snout, a thick beastly reek like an orc abattoir after a hot summer day mixed with the stink of wet rat ogre.

The stormvermin were too preoccupied with fending off their infected comrade, jabbing at him with the points of their halberds, trying to keep him back without puncturing his hide and spilling more glowing worms onto the floor of the burrow. They did not see the pile of bones rise up, did not see the old gnawed skeletons crash back to the floor as something immense and monstrous shook them from its peeling hide.

What it was, Kratch did not know. He suspected such a thing had no name. It was immense, bigger even than the blind burrowers that Clan Moulder used to expand the caverns of the Under-Empire. There was certainly the suggestion of rat in its overall shape, a loathsome bulk that conspired at once to appear both bloated and emaciated. Patches of piebald fur clung to random bits of its anatomy; the rest was leprous and dripping. Its paws were oversized, like those of a snow bear, and tipped with more talons than it had toes. The head was withered to the point of being almost skeletal and the eyes that stared from either side of its peeling snout were swollen and pale. It lashed its tail against the floor and scabbled forwards, darting to the carcass of the slain ratman.

Now the stormvermin could not fail to notice the monster. They froze, eyes wide with fright as they stared

at the imposing beast. The rat-thing ignored the warriors, instead snuffling at the floor, licking green maggots into its maw with its thin slimy tongue. The stormvermin backed away from the feeding monster, nearly trampling Kratch in their slow retreat.

Along with the healthy warriors, the infected swordsrat also withdrew from the monster, visibly shivering as he watched it feed. The sick skaven blundered into one of his former comrades. Instantly the stormvermin cried out, slashing the swordsrat from throat to belly with his halberd. Glowing worms oozed from the wound, slapping against the floor like greasy raindrops. The sound caused the enormous rat-beast to lift its skeletal head. The monster sniffed at the air, then its jaws opened in a sharp hiss. Before any of the skaven could turn to run, the beast leapt across the burrow and was in their midst. Giant claws ripped and tore the tight knot of warriors, shredding armour like paper. Squeals of terror and agony became deafening as the smell of blood enraged the beast still further, provoking it into a frenzied state.

Kratch didn't wait to see anything else. The adept dived from the burrow, scurrying on all fours in his haste to flee. In the tunnel, the panicked slaves were struggling to rip the iron spikes that anchored their chains to the crumbling walls from their earthen fastenings. When they saw Kratch, some of them abandoned their efforts, turning instead toward the savage taskmaster. Several leapt at him, tearing the empty air with their bloodied paws as they reached the limit of their chains.

Kratch backed away from the maddened slaves, but found his retreat blocked by something warm and furry. Grey Seer Skabritt's scent held an unfamiliar taint of fear, but Kratch still recognised the smell. He lifted his

gaze to the sorcerer-priest. Like the stormvermin, Skabritt's eyes were wide with fear. Unlike the warriors, however, fear was not the only thing Kratch saw in his mentor's stare. He saw anger, the smouldering fury of a mad genius who at the moment of triumph sees his prize stolen from him.

Then Skabritt's eyes were changing, glossing over with a greenish luminance as he drew upon the arcane power of the Horned Rat and the warpstone talisman he clutched in his fist. Kratch could feel tendrils of energy oozing into his brain, trying to smother his thoughts. It took all of his own willpower and sorcerous knowledge to drive them back, to free his mind of their numbing touch. The adept slumped to the floor, physically drained by the effort of resisting Skabritt's spell.

The slaves were not so fortunate. From the ground, Kratch could see them grow still. Fear withered from their eyes, dispelled by a green glow that was an eerie echo of Skabritt's own charged gaze. When the grey seer gestured, the mob stirred, pulling once again at their chains and the iron staples anchoring them to the walls. This time, however, they did not attack the task as a disordered rabble but rather as a unified body guided by a single will: that of Skabritt. One after another, the combined strength of the slaves tore the staples from the walls.

The last staple came free just in time for Skabritt. The sounds of carnage and slaughter had faded from the burrow. In the exposed mouth of the chamber, its mangy pelt smeared in the black blood and yellow fat of the stormvermin, the rat-beast snarled and spat. Skabritt spun about, glaring at the loathsome creature and pointed a clawed finger at the monster.

At his command, the ensorcelled slaves surged forward, a chattering mass of claws and fangs. Like a furry tide, they crashed upon the rat-beast, crushing it beneath their sheer weight of numbers, bowling it over and slamming it into the crumbling wall of the tunnel. Earth and rock showered down from the ceiling, throwing dust into the musty air.

The rat-beast fought back, disembowelling slaves with every turn of its massive paws, snapping spines with its iron jaws. For all their numbers, for all the grey seer's magic, the stink of fear began to rise from the tangled knot of skaven sweeping over the monster. Skabritt gave voice to an inarticulate howl in which was both terror and outraged fury. The sorcerer-priest scurried forwards, desperate to reinforce his hypnotic control of the craven slaves.

Kratch watched the grey seer rush closer to the battle and his mouth pulled back in a predatory smile. He pulled a small piece of blackish-green rock from beneath his robes, a tiny sliver of refined warpstone. The adept's teeth gnawed at the rock, letting little bits of stony grit burn their way down his throat and through his body. Now it was Kratch's eyes that began to glow with an unholy light, the apprentice's brain that roared with the mighty power of the Horned Rat. Kratch could feel his body pulse with strength, swell with godlike vitality. He felt the essence of the warpstone flow through his entire being, hearing its seductive whisper crawl through his flesh.

It was almost worse than Skabritt's spell, fighting down the euphoric mania of the warpstone, but Kratch knew if he lost control now, his opportunity would be lost. That cold, ugly fact helped him maintain a grip on his reason. He forced his eyes to focus on the rat-beast and the

slaves, on Skabritt now standing so very close to the fray.

On the crumbling walls and weak ceiling of the tunnel. It seemed so easy. A few words, a few gestures, and the primordial power that raced through his body was reaching out. Like a great hammer, it smashed against the walls, it battered against the ceiling. A deafening roar thundered through the tunnel. In that last instant, Skabritt turned, locking eyes with his apprentice.

Kratch grinned back, baring his fangs in challenge to his hated mentor. Then thousands of tons of earth and rock came crashing down, obliterating Skabritt's expression of disbelief. Grey Seer, slaves and rat-beast, all were buried in the collapse.

Kratch coughed, spitting dirt from his mouth, choking on the dust that filled the tunnel and stifled the warpstone lanterns. He wiped at his almost blind eyes, even as he was pressing a rag to his snout to act as a filter for his nose. Briefly, Kratch considered waiting to see if the entrance to the burrow had remained intact. Skabritt was not the only skaven who could put the Wormstone to good purpose.

It was the memory of the stormvermin who had been infected by the Wormstone's power rather than the dust and dirt that made Kratch decide to flee. He would not brave such a fate as he had seen. He would let others take those risks.

Yes, Kratch decided as he scurried through the raw, desolate tunnels, he would need helpers if he wanted to recover the Wormstone and reap the rewards of such a find. Kratch's muzzle dripped as he salivated in anticipation of those rewards. He knew where to find his allies. He knew where his report about Skabritt's discovery would benefit him the most.

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