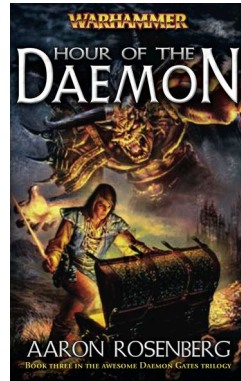


HOUR OF THE DAEMON

The third novel in the Daemon Gates trilogy

By Aaron Rosenberg

Alaric and Dietz have one last chance to track down the Khornate daemon and destroy it before it materialises and lays waste to the Empire. This time, their journey takes them into the dark heart of the Grey Mountains, where they must face a savage horde of beastmen and their mutated warlord. Even with the help of their reluctant allies, the wood elves, how can our heroes ever hope to triumph against such impossible odds?



About the Author

Aaron Rosenberg has written novels for WarCraft, StarCraft, Star Trek and Exalted. He has also written role-playing games, educational books, magazine articles, and short stories. Aaron lives and works in New York City.

In the same series

Book 1 – DAY OF THE DAEMON

Book 2 – NIGHT OF THE DAEMON

The following is an excerpt from *Hour of the Daemon* by Aaron Rosenberg. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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‘GREAT,’ DIETRICH ‘DIETZ’ Froebel said, reining in. ‘A festival.’

He glanced around. They had just passed through Altdorf’s North Gate, still dusty and tired from their long journey, and rode into a scene from someone’s nightmare. Skulls and strange, leering masks hung from walls and windows, and across distant bridges, as did ominous cloaked figures, death symbols, and even distorted animals. Streamers hung everywhere, creating a low ceiling to the wide street, hiding the late afternoon sunlight, and giving the city a closed-in feel. The large crowd didn’t help, filling the Empire capital’s broad avenues with a throng of bodies, and adding to the midsummer heat. From the look of things, the streets would be packed right down to where the River Reik cut through the city, and possibly across it. Many of the revellers wore hoods and masks, and Dietz saw a number of beasts and birds, and even fish, cavorting with the rest, masked in bestial visages.

‘Of course,’ his companion, Alaric von Jungfreud, said, slapping his horse’s reins lightly against his leg. ‘It must be Geheimnistag today. We’ve lost all sense of time.’ He rubbed absently at his right eye, which had been bothering him since they’d left the Border Princes, the irritation no doubt increased by the mild cold he had apparently acquired. Specks of dust and minor illnesses were the least of their troubles, though.

Dietz had hoped, when they’d arrived in Middenheim two weeks ago, that they’d be staying put for a while. The trek to the Border Princes had been long and harrowing; they’d survived exploring an

ancient tomb, fighting off the liche king within it, battling evil cultists, miraculously fending off a daemon, and manoeuvring their way through a four-way war. That was more than most men had to handle in a lifetime, and it had only been a month. He was tired, and he knew his friend and employer was as well. Alaric's normal good looks were wan, his face pale, his eyes glazed (especially the right one, which looked bloodshot), and Dietz had noticed a faint tremor in his friend's hands from time to time. Who could blame him? Most men never had to learn that daemons were real. They had faced two, or the same one two times, and the second time it had known Alaric's name and had taunted him. That was enough to drive even the sturdiest warrior stark raving mad. The fact that Alaric only looked exhausted and distracted was a mark of the strength hidden beneath his handsome features and elegant attire.

They both needed rest, and Middenheim was the place for it. Dietz's father, sister and brother were there, which meant they had a place to stay, and with any luck there wouldn't be any more statues or cults, or maps, or anything else to draw them back onto the road, at least for a little while. Dietz had been looking forward to a soft bed, a decent mug of ale, and a home-cooked meal.

Only Alaric had insisted on collecting the mask first.

That damnable mask! Dietz wished he'd never taken it from that temple in Ind. If he hadn't, maybe none of this would have happened. They never would have seen those statues in Rolf's shop, they never would have fought the cultists beneath the city, they never would have been given that map, and they never would have wound up in the Border Princes fighting for their lives against a daemon. They could have led much quieter, saner lives if he'd only passed the mask by and brought back a vase or a bracelet instead.

Of course, without their intervention, the Chaos cultists would have succeeded in their foul rituals. They had intended to summon a daemon, and they had almost managed it. Even with his and Alaric's interference, the daemon had begun to emerge before they could destroy the last statue and shut down the gate. If they hadn't intervened, what would have happened? A daemon would have been loosed on Middenheim, and then on the Empire? That could have

been utter disaster. As for the Border Princes, the Chaos priest Strykssen would have found someone else to invade the tomb if they hadn't appeared. He had been after the tainted gauntlet from the start, and he would have got it, given himself to the daemon, and started a war. He would have used it as cover to break into the town of Vitrolle, to take possession of the warpstone that the cultists had placed in the sceptre of their patron daemon – just as he had almost done, before they'd stopped him. The daemon could have been free to walk the earth in its true form. It would have raged across the Border Princes, slaughtering everything in its path, before turning and making its way over the mountains and into the Empire.

Yes, their horrible adventures had been necessary. Twice now they had stopped the dark designs of Chaos. Wasn't that enough? Hadn't they earned some peace and quiet as a result?

Alaric agreed. 'I just want to sit somewhere quiet, by a nice warm fire, sipping a glass of wine,' he assured Dietz as they'd ridden down the stone streets of Middenheim towards Hralif's shop. 'I'm not even sure I want to look at the mask for a while, not until recent events have faded into memory.' He frowned. 'But I'd feel better knowing it was back in my possession, and it's not fair to make Hralif hold onto it now that we're back, anyway.'

Dietz couldn't argue with that, so he scratched his tree-fox, Glouste, behind the ears and said nothing. Hralif was practically his brother-in-law, after all – perhaps he was by now, although Dietz hoped that he and Dagmar had waited for his return.

That mask was certainly nothing but trouble. Hralif would be better off rid of it.

They tethered their horses outside Hralif's carpentry shop, pushed open the door... and froze in shock.

'Morr's blood,' Dietz whispered. 'What happened here?'

The shop was a disaster. Hralif had always been a tidy man, not like his father – everything had its place, and his tools were always lined up neatly on his workbench or hanging from their hooks on the wall behind it. Shelves along the side walls held finished pieces, and larger works were lined up on either side, with a nice broad space to walk between them.

At least, that was how it had always looked before, including right before they'd left for the Border Princes. Now the shop was almost unrecognisable. The shelves had all been pulled down, their contents smashed and shattered, and the desks, chairs and wardrobes had been overturned, and in several cases smashed or split. Hralif's workbench had been tossed into the corner, only its sturdy construction keeping it intact, and his tools were scattered or missing. Dietz took all of that in at once, his hands automatically going to the hand axe and the dagger by his side, and beside him Alaric had drawn his sword as well. Glouste chattered her concern and alarm, taking up her preferred place around Dietz's neck, her stout tail beating rhythmically on one shoulder, and her alert little face peering at everything, whiskers twitching, on the other.

'Look there,' Alaric whispered, 'blood.' Dietz nodded, noticing the dark drops as well. He just hoped it wasn't Hralif's.

A sound from the far corner caught their attention, and Dietz led the way, picking a path through the destruction. There, behind and below the tilted workbench, he saw a pair of legs, and they were moving.

'Hralif?'

A groan answered his call, but Dietz had already stepped to one side far enough to peer around the workbench and see his old friend slumped in the corner. He quickly sheathed his weapons and dragged the bench clear so he could reach the carpenter.

'What happened?' he demanded, dropping to a crouch beside Hralif. He could see blood staining Hralif's shirt along the right side, almost certainly from a stab wound, and he had several bruises, and other slashes and cuts. Blood ran down his face from a nasty gash to his right temple. A heavy chisel lay nearby, and the blood along its narrow head showed that Hralif had used it to defend himself.

'Thieves,' Hralif gasped, glancing up at Dietz, and at Alaric behind him. 'They... burst in here... and tore the place apart. I tried... to stop them, but I... couldn't. They struck me... in the head... before they left.'

'One of you against several of them?' Alaric asked, sheathing his sword. 'Of course you couldn't stop them. You were lucky to

survive. If that last blow hadn't put you down they'd probably have killed you, to avoid any chance of you coming after them.' He frowned. 'But who would want to rob you?'

Hralif started to shake his head, but stopped and pressed a hand to his temple. 'I don't... know.' He tried to push himself up off the ground and winced. Dietz caught him under the arms and helped him stand, Glouste quickly nestling into his jacket to allow him easier shoulder movement. 'Thanks. They took... the money... but didn't... touch the... locked back room.' He frowned, clearly remembering. 'It was as if... they couldn't be bothered.' Then he glanced over at Alaric again, and something in that look sent a chill of premonition down Dietz's spine. 'They took... something else... too,' he admitted, and Dietz knew what was coming next. 'The mask.'

That got an immediate reaction. 'The mask? It's gone?' Alaric had moved towards the door as if he could still see the thieves somehow. 'Where? Why did they take it? Who were they? Did they say anything?'

Hralif shook his head. 'They never said... a word,' he answered. 'They were... rough-looking, unshaved and... unwashed... ragged clothes. One had a... jagged scar... across his nose and... right cheek. Another had a... thick gold earring shaped like... a bent nail.'

Dietz and Alaric exchanged a glance. They'd met others that had fit that general description: thieves and cultists.

Of course cultists would want the mask. It had the same runes on it they'd found on the gauntlet, and on the map: marks of Chaos.

'We need to go after them,' Alaric all but shouted, racing towards the door. 'They might still be nearby!'

But Dietz shook his head. 'How long ago did this happen?' he asked Hralif, already suspecting the answer.

'I don't know,' his friend admitted. 'I think I... blacked out.' He frowned towards the door, and the small window set in it, which showed that the sun had already set. 'It was before noon, though.'

‘That was hours ago,’ Dietz pointed out to Alaric, ‘assuming it was even today. Hralif has lost some blood, and taken at least one blow to the head – he might have been out for a day or more.’

Alaric started to argue, but then nodded, his shoulders slumping. ‘You’re right,’ he agreed. ‘They’re long gone by now.’

Perhaps it’s just as well, Dietz thought, though he didn’t say so. That mask had already caused enough trouble. It had been in Rolf’s possession when he had been arrested for heresy, a false accusation that had none the less cost him his life, and it had been the cause of this attack as well. They were probably better off rid of it.

That would have been the end of it, too. If Alaric hadn’t noticed the blood.

‘What’s that?’ Alaric asked as they exited the shop a few minutes later, supporting Hralif on either side. Dietz looked, but didn’t see anything. ‘There,’ his friend insisted, pointing again. ‘Right there. You don’t see it? It looks like... it looks like blood; like someone was wounded, dragged against the wall and left a smear.’

Hralif hadn’t seen it, but, then again, it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

‘Leave it,’ Dietz said. ‘We can look later, when it’s light out.’

Grudgingly, Alaric agreed, and together they took Hralif home. Dietz sent for a surgeon, and for Dagmar, and both arrived quickly. After that he allowed Alaric to drag him back to the shop, knowing Hralif was in good hands.

Dietz stared and stared, but he still couldn’t see the mark Alaric had indicated.

‘Maybe you’re imagining it,’ he’d suggested, but his friend refused to believe that.

‘I can see it,’ Alaric insisted. ‘I don’t know why you can’t, but it’s definitely there.’ He walked a few paces, staring closely at the wall, and then scanned the ground as well. ‘There,’ he said, pointing. ‘There’s another one, more like blood dripping from a wound. Come on.’ He set off at a fast pace, and Dietz matched him; even if the marks weren’t real, Middenheim had plenty of areas where it wasn’t safe to wander alone. That’s how he’d met Alaric in

the first place, happening across the younger man just in time to save him from some thugs down by the docks, and he wasn't about to let his friend and employer wander into the same sort of trouble.

They followed the trail that only Alaric could see, and it led them into the warehouse district, and right to a stables.

'I remember them,' the stablehand said when Alaric described the men, and proffered a silver coin to jog the lad's memory. 'They was here late yesterday. Seemed rough, but their coin was good. Wanted a wagon to Altdorf.' He shrugged. 'We had several going that way, so I sold 'em passage on one. Left an hour or so later.'

'Got them!' Alaric exclaimed as they left the stables. 'We know where they're going, and travelling by wagon will slow them down. If we leave now we can easily overtake them.' He was ready to ride off right then, but Dietz stopped him.

'We're not going anywhere,' he said, 'not until we know Hralif's all right.'

Alaric tried to argue, but Dietz refused to listen. Hralif was their friend, and Dagmar's intended. He hadn't seen a ring on either of them, so they weren't married yet, just as he'd thought, and it was his and Alaric's fault Hralif had been wounded at all.

'We can catch up to them just as easily tomorrow,' Dietz assured Alaric. 'As soon as we know he'll recover we can set out. Besides,' he added, directing their steps back towards Hralif's home, 'I could use a good night's sleep, and I'm sure you can as well, especially if we're to take to the road again.' That persuaded Alaric, and he did not protest again.

It was two days before the surgeon pronounced Hralif on the mend, and Alaric all but leapt into his saddle the minute the healer had gone. Dietz had hoped to stay longer, but he couldn't argue. The longer they waited the more of a lead the thieves had, and he had promised Alaric they would go after the men.

They did not catch up to the wagon on the road, which meant it must have reached Altdorf ahead of them. Dietz would have worried about their turning off somewhere along the way, but Alaric had spotted additional blood drops and even blood smears along the way. Dietz hadn't seen a single one of the marks himself, and he still

wondered if his friend might not simply be imagining them, but there was no way to tell if a particular wagon had left the road at any point along the way, so it had made sense to stay on the road all the way to Altdorf and hope the cultists really were going all the way to the capital.

So Alaric and Dietz forced themselves and their horses on. And here they were, finally, arriving during Geheimnistag.

‘How are we going to find anyone in all this?’ Dietz asked, gesturing at the crowd before them. Several clusters were marching down the street, waving banners and flags, and holding up strange carvings and figures. Many of the people off to the sides cheered and waved, though others were too busy with their own activities to notice the small parade moving past. Geheimnistag was the Day of Mystery, and many people celebrated by dressing in strange costumes, burning effigies and dancing in the streets. It was mayhem. Dietz hadn’t seen the festival in Altdorf before, and it looked to be even more of a madhouse than in Middenheim, where he usually celebrated the day by planting himself in a tavern and not leaving until after the revelries had died away.

‘I don’t know,’ Alaric admitted, glancing around. Off to one side, they saw a man and a woman dressed in the distinctive garb of the Strigany – loose flowing skirts on the woman, loose shirts, open embroidered vests and heavy gold-hoop earrings on both – selling small trinkets of some sort. Dietz resisted the urge to look more closely. Not all Strigany were rogues – the ones they had met had been nice enough – but they worshipped strange gods and daemons, and had strange ideas about flesh and propriety. He had a feeling whatever those objects were he wouldn’t want to examine them up close.

‘Let’s look around,’ Alaric said at last, also turning away from the Strigany and their wares. ‘We know they came this way. Perhaps we’ll find some trace of them.’ He didn’t sound very certain of that, but they had come this far. It would be a shame to travel all the way to Altdorf and leave empty-handed, especially since Dietz knew neither of them liked the city much. He’d never been comfortable here: too much bad blood between Middenheim and Altdorf. Alaric

disliked it for a different reason. He was a noble and had been raised on politics, but he hated such things with a passion, and avoided them like the plague. That usually meant avoiding Altdorf, the centre of the Empire and its political heart. At least, with the celebrations going on, they were unlikely to encounter any nobles.

‘I wish Lankdorf were here,’ Alaric muttered. ‘He could track them for us.’

Dietz nodded, but there was nothing to be said. They had waited outside Vitrolle for the bounty hunter, after the three of them had gotten separated escaping the town and the four-way war for its control, but Lankdorf hadn’t emerged. After two days outwitting bands of warriors from the various border princes, not to mention vengeful surviving cultists and random wild animals, Alaric and Dietz had been forced to accept the fact that their friend simply wasn’t coming. Whether he had been killed during the fighting or had simply fled via a different route, they had no idea, and they had no way of finding him. Dietz hoped he was still alive. Even though they had first met by becoming Lankdorf’s captives, he had come to respect and even like the quiet, competent bounty hunter, and his skills would definitely have come in handy now.

‘We’ll just have to look for ourselves,’ he said finally, making sure Glouste was secure inside his jacket before nudging his horse forward. It balked at the wild sights and sounds before it, and at the mass of people filling the street, but Dietz patted it on the neck and guided it slowly, steadily through the throng, which parted around them and then swallowed them up again.

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