

MARK OF CHAOS

By *Anthony Reynolds*

The dark forces of Chaos are an ever-present threat to the civilized lands of the Empire. Their regular incursions call for mankind to defend their lives to the last man if necessary. It is a crucible where heroes are made and legends are born! When a young commander is caught up in this carnage of war, he must prove his honour by tracking down and destroying one of the most feared enemy leaders.



The action-packed novelization of Namco Bandai's smash-hit RTS computer game is set against a backdrop of war on a formidable scale.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Reynolds hails from Australia, but has been working for Games Workshop in the UK for over five years. Much of that time has been within Games Development, though he currently works as part of the Design Studio Management Team.

Mark of Chaos is his first novel.

Also available

MARK OF CHAOS: THE COLLECTED CONCEPT ART

Matt Ralphs

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SOLDIERS DRESSED IN the purple and yellow livery of Ostermark stepped hastily out of the way of the stocky captain as he stalked up the hill, his horribly scarred face thunderous. He stomped through the mud, past hundreds of tents and pickets, through the vast throng of the army of Ostermark. Laughing and joking stopped abruptly as the captain came into view, and men lowered their eyes and turned away. One soldier saluted briskly, but the captain took no notice.

He marched past row upon row of limbered great cannons, their gleaming barrels being meticulously polished and oiled by their dutiful crews under the watchful eye of a frowning, middle-aged engineer. His helmet grasped tightly under his left arm, his right hand resting on the worn pommel of his sword, the captain stomped onwards. His eyes were set grimly on the massive purple and yellow tent that sat on the peak of the hill, elegant tapering pennants at its tip waving lazily in the gentle breeze.

A pair of guards stood at the entrance to the tent, halberds held to attention before them. One of them nodded to the captain as he approached.

'The Grand Count of Ostermark has been waiting some time for you, Captain von Kessel.'

'Good,' the captain replied curtly. He swept aside the heavy cloth flap and entered the grand tent.

The tent was gloomy and poorly lit. The grand count was an ill old man, and bright light hurt his cataract-ridden eyes. A thick, cloying fug hung in the air. Censers swung slowly from side to side by faceless robed figures exuded sickly smelling smoke. The movement of von Kessel as he entered the tent disturbed the hanging smoke, sending it swirling in eddies.

'Stefan? Is it Stefan who enters?' enquired a voice, reaching out across the dim, smoky tent.

'Aye it is, my lord,' the captain stated sharply. He marched into the middle of the grand tent, and slammed his helmet down on a map-strewn wooden table, making the goblets and writing instruments on its surface jump.

Grand Count Otto Gruber, flanked by a score of advisors and courtiers, was propped up in his leather chair. He stared at von Kessel with his wet eyes, unfazed by the glowering gaze of the captain. The count was an enormous man, big in every sense of the word. His bulk filled the massive leather chair, so that it looked ludicrously small for him, and he shifted his weight uncomfortably every few seconds. His face was bulbous and fleshy, and he wore a wig, tightly curled and powdered, upon his pallid head. He was sweating profusely, and a young man dabbed at his face and neck with a damp cloth. Several years previously, the count had suffered a virulent skin disease, and open sores could be seen upon his pudgy hands and on the rolls of fat of his neck. Blisters, some that had burst and spilt their contents, clustered around his left eye, which was partially closed, gummed-up and red.

'Where were my damn reinforcements?' asked von Kessel bluntly. He hated the sickly stink of the tent.

The count began to speak, but succumbed to a hacking, wet cough. Going bright red in the face, the veins of his nose and cheeks swelling alarmingly, the count hacked and spluttered, and spat into a bowl offered by a manservant. Another servant dabbed at his slack mouth, wiping the phlegm from his lips.

A figure that had been standing in the shadows behind the count's chair stepped forwards. He was a fierce-looking, rake-thin man in his early twenties. He wore simple, but obviously expensive, black clothes, and had a small beard on his chin that was neatly trimmed to a point. Stefan recognised him as Johann, the count's great-nephew and sole living relative. Gruber had married twice, although neither wife had borne him children, and as such, Johann was the count's sole heir.

'Your orders were to hold the pass. You disobeyed the elector's direct order, *captain*,' said Johann, just about spitting the last word.

Not taking his eyes off the count, von Kessel bit back a sharp reply, before he answered. 'I was speaking to the grand count,' he said, icily.

'You disrespectful wretch,' snarled the black-clad young man, stepping forwards, his hand gripping the ornate hilt of his rapier.

'Stop, stop,' rasped the Elector Count of Ostermark, waving a pudgy, ring-laden hand in front of him. 'Enough of this, Johann. Back with you.' The glowering young man removed his hand from his rapier, and stepped back, eyes flashing dangerously.

'The reinforcements, yes. What happened to the reinforcements? Andros?'

A copper-skinned Tilean advisor inclined his head towards von Kessel.

'The despatches were sent, my lord, as you requested. Doubtless the enemy intercepted them. An unfortunate and regrettable mishap,' he said smoothly in perfect Reikspiel, with barely the hint of an accent. He blinked as von Kessel snorted in derision.

'Yes, very unfortunate, yes,' said the count. He turned his watery eyes towards von Kessel, 'And so you disobeyed my order. Explain yourself.' All eyes in the tent turned towards von Kessel.

'I took the best course of action under the circumstances,' said the bristling captain.

'Your orders were to hold Deep Pass,' rasped Gruber, 'and to ensure that none of the enemy advanced towards the undermanned city of Ferlangen, or towards the foothills of the Middle Mountains.'

'And no enemy has done so. I routed them at their camp, and slew their war leader personally.'

'Yet you did not hold your post, as ordered.'

'My men would have been slaughtered. We were outnumbered five to one. I had not enough troops with me to hold the pass. We would have been surrounded and butchered. Once I realised that the reinforcements were not coming, I had to improvise, or be lost. I took the fight to the enemy, hitting them before dawn.'

The ageing elector count seemed suddenly distracted. He inclined his head to one side to watch a trio of flies buzzing lazily around the tent above his head. Bubbling spittle welled in the slack corner of his mouth, and his lazy left eye rolled inwards. The young man with the cloth stepped forwards, dipping his head respectfully, and dabbed at the count's mouth. Stefan's revulsion and pity were displayed clearly on his face.

'I did not raise you to improvise,' Gruber said suddenly. 'I raised you to be a loyal subject of Ostermark, despite your treacherous heritage.'

'Ferlangen and Deep Pass are secure,' snarled von Kessel. 'My loyalty is beyond question.'

'So you say, and so you return in triumph, having slain the war leader yourself. The hero once more, eh Stefan? Do you see yourself as the brave, triumphant hero?'

'I am no hero, my lord, and I have not returned in triumph. I have returned to find out why those despatches for reinforcements were never sent!'

'The despatches *were* sent, were they not, Andros?'

The advisor nodded his head. 'That is true, my lord. The despatches were sent.'

'There,' stated Gruber. 'You are mistaken. The order *was* sent. Be careful what you say, von Kessel,' said the elector count dangerously. 'Your future could be bright, and I have protected you as much as I can thus far. You have displayed your skills at war, time and time again, but at times like these, you remind me of your grandfather. Watch yourself. Do not insult me or my grandnephew, or cast doubt upon my word. My word is law, and yours is just the word of a decorated and competent captain, the grandson of a treacherous, daemon-worshipping cur.'

Not a breath stirred in the tent as Gruber's court waited to see the young captain's reaction. His face was grim, and he stared at Gruber.

Apparently unaware of the stare he was receiving, Gruber pulled something from a pocket within his jacket, and began to stroke it. Stefan saw that it was a toad, long-dead and stiff. Gruber stroked its lumpy back tenderly, and began to giggle to himself, a high-pitched, girlish sound. 'Isn't that right, Boris? His grandfather was a daemon-worshipping, treacherous cur.' Several of the courtiers shifted their weight, exchanging glances. One of them stepped forwards and bent to whisper in the elector's ear.

'What? I'm fine, get away with you,' said Gruber, waving a pudgy hand at the attendant. He looked back at Stefan. 'Do you know where my physician is?'

The captain looked at the count's advisors, but they were refusing to meet his gaze. 'No, my lord, I do not know where Heinrich

is. He has been missing for some weeks, has he not?' asked von Kessel, warily.

'Ah yes, he has, hasn't he. Never mind. The old fool is probably lost somewhere.' The sick man coughed. 'I could have had you strangled at birth, you know, for your grandfather's crimes. They wanted it so. People were afraid that you would turn into a traitor too, that you would have infernal dealings. You do not, do you?'

'No, my lord. I pray to our Lord Sigmar every dawn for his protection.'

'Good, good, that is good, but prayer is not always enough. Always remember that it was I who saved you, Stefan.' Gruber paused to cough before continuing. 'If only I had been able to save your dear grandfather. He was a good man, a dear friend, and a proud and noble elector count. The people of Ostermark loved him, and I loved him too,' said Gruber wistfully, smiling weakly. Then his smile faded.

'It only goes to show that the taint of Chaos is seductive, dangerous. The taint must have been in him from birth, but it was hidden well. Always be wary of it, Stefan, for it may also be in you.'

'I will, my lord,' said Stefan, uneasily. He said nothing for a moment, the silence feeling awkward and tense to him. 'By your grace, I shall take my leave.'

Stefan, his scarred face dark, turned on his heel and left the tent. He cursed himself inwardly – he had not left with any of his suspicions confirmed. Johann's acid gaze followed him as he walked out.

'THE LADDER, MATHIAS! Pull up the ladder!' Hensel shouted, loading the heavy crossbow with shaking hands. The enemy was streaming from the trees, their war cries filling the night. Fur-clad warriors raced down the hill through the coiling fog that swirled around their legs. The giant red-armoured warrior of Hensel's nightmares led the charge, roaring as he ran, his massive axe held in two hands over his head.

Raising the crossbow, Hensel aimed it hurriedly at the blood-red figure. The bolt hissed towards the warrior, flying towards his chest. Impossibly, the warrior swatted it aside with a sweep of his

axe. Hensel's eyes widened and he swore, scrabbling for another bolt. 'The ladder, damn it!'

Mathias tore his terrified gaze away from the approaching marauders, and scrambled towards the ladder. An axe, spinning end-over-end through the air, slammed into his back. The force of the blow knocked the young man out of the back of the watch post, and he fell to the muddy ground below, dead.

Hensel swore again, and dropped his weapon, scrambling back to pull up the ladder himself. As he gripped it, a gauntleted fist smashed into his face, and he was knocked backwards, blood spurting from his nose. A sneering warrior appeared at the top of the ladder, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

Drawing his short sword, Hensel lunged forwards, plunging the steel blade deep into the marauder's throat. Blood bubbled up the blade of the sword, but the warrior did not fall. His eyes gleaming hatefully, the marauder reached out and gripped Hensel around the throat. The strength of the man was astounding, and Hensel struggled frantically against the crushing power. Straining, he twisted his sword, and a great gush of blood spurted from the fatal wound. Still the warrior did not release his death-like grip, and Hensel's vision began to blur. His life slipping rapidly from his body, the fatally wounded Chaos tribesman fell backwards off the ladder, pulling Hensel after him. They fell fifteen feet, striking the ground with bone-shattering force.

All the breath was knocked from Hensel's body, and he struggled to dislodge the grip around his throat. The warrior beneath him was dead, the fall driving the sword deeper into his neck, almost severing his head from his shoulders, but the warrior's death-grip was still strangling him. Managing to pry the fingers loose one by one, Hensel gasped for breath, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. Pulling his sword from the dead warrior's neck, he rose unsteadily to his feet.

A massive axe smashed into his chest, shattering ribs and embedding itself deep in his body. Blood rose up into his throat, and he dropped to his knees, staring into the eyes of his killer. The massive red-clad warrior stood before him, the pitiless orbs of his eyes rippling with inner fire. He bared his pointed teeth, and his face twisted with savage joy as blood gushed over him.

He wrenched the axe clear of Hensel's chest, and the Empire soldier crumpled to the ground.

The warrior raised his axe to the heavens, and roared in his ungodly tongue. The words were incomprehensible to the dying Hensel, lying broken in the mud. Lightning lit up the night in a series of bright flashes. As darkness consumed Hensel, it seemed to him that the flashes were the Dark Gods expressing their pleasure at their minions' work.

'BLOOD FOR THE Blood God!' Hroth roared to the heavens, raising his bloodied axe high in the air for the gods to witness his tribute.

His heart was pumping with excitement, and he relished the surge of energy and power that suffused him now that battle was joined. Hroth knew that the great god Khorne, Lord of Battles and Collector of Skulls, was gazing down upon him, and he could feel that the god was pleased. The veins in Hroth's bulging arms strained with power as the rage grew within him.

Turning his fiery gaze upon the doomed Empire town, Hroth saw people running from their homes, their faces full of terror and their wails reaching up to the sky. The gods would enjoy that sound. With a roar, he broke into a run, heading straight down into the town. Dozens of his warriors ran a step behind him. They were all of the Khazag tribe, hailing from the far north-east, months' upon months' ride away, and all had sworn oaths of blood to him as their chieftain. The massive, bald figure of Barok loped along, to his left, holding Hroth's banner high, and to his right ran Olaf the Berserker, a pair of swords grasped in his meaty fists.

Surging down the hill through the clinging mud, Hroth saw that enemy warriors were moving through the chaos, roughly pushing the frantic commoners out of their way. As they saw Hroth and his warriors storming down the hill towards them, they halted. The front rankers dropped to their knees, raising handguns to their shoulders. Those behind wielded halberds, lowering them as one to create a rippling wall of spiked steel. Other soldiers joined them so that they blocked off the entire street.

Hroth growled in pleasure at seeing enemies that would stand and fight, and picked up his pace. His warriors ran at his side,

screaming and shouting. Shots rang out, and Hroth felt a burning lead ball scrape his left cheek, drawing blood. Several Khazags fell under the first volley, but he did not care.

Racing closer, he saw the puny enemy warriors frantically trying to reload their cowardly weapons. Several of them raised their guns once more and fired point-blank into the Chaos warriors, and then Hroth was on them.

With a sweep of his axe, he smashed aside three halberds aimed at him, the blow knocking the weapons from numbed hands. Reversing his strike, he cleaved his axe into the neck of one soldier, decapitating him cleanly. The axe blade carried on into the head of another, crumpling the steel helmet he wore in a spray of blood and bone.

Backhanding his fist into the face of another, feeling the skull crush beneath the blow, Hroth began to laugh. He waded into the midst of the enemy's formation, swinging his axe before him. With each blow another enemy died. In these close quarters, the enemy's halberds were useless, and they reached for short swords and daggers. Each blade that flashed towards Hroth was met with brutal force – arms were hacked from bodies, chests caved in and heads smashed to bloody ruins. Those weapons that did reach him shattered against his flesh, or were turned aside by his armour. Olaf the Berserker had dropped or lost his weapons, and ripped a man's throat out with his bare hands. The other Khazags laid about them with abandon, their brutal axes and swords carving through the Empire men with ease. Blood splattered all over Hroth, and he felt the hot metallic taste on his lips. He rejoiced at the slaughter, hacking left and right.

With a roar, he raised his axe above his head in both hands and brought it smashing down onto the shoulder of an enemy soldier, the blow carving its way through breastplate and bone, cutting him almost in two. Kicking the body away, Hroth swung around in search of a new enemy, but could find none. He stood, drenched in gore, breathing heavily. The ground was littered with severed limbs and broken Empire soldiers, and the air was heavy with the stink of death. Several dozen soldiers had been slaughtered for the loss of three of his own. He resisted the urge to swing his axe into a Khazag standing nearby.

Hroth stepped over the slain towards the fallen bodies of his tribesmen. One of them was still alive. Hroth knelt before him, seeing the growing red stain at his belly.

'Your blood will feed great Khorne this night, warrior of the Khazags,' said Hroth. The warrior, his face pale and drawn, nodded fearlessly, refusing to utter any sound of pain, for to do so would show weakness in front of his chieftain and the gods. Hroth stood and swung his axe down, hacking the warrior's head from his shoulders. Picking the head up by the hair, he tossed it to a large, bearded warrior wearing a helmet made from a wolf skull.

'Your brother was a brave warrior, Thorgar,' growled Hroth. 'His skull will bring you power.' The bearded warrior raised the bloody severed head of his brother in both hands, touching it to his forehead.

More handgun shots rang out through the night, and Olaf turned towards the sounds snarling, foam dripping from his lips. Without a word, Hroth and his warband broke into a loping run, heading deeper into the town, towards the sound.

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