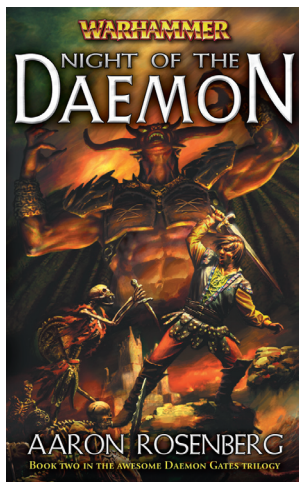


NIGHT OF THE DAEMON

By Aaron Rosenberg

THE OLD WORLD is a dangerous land where the thin veneer of civilization is easily stripped away to reveal the horrors of the Dark Gods of Chaos and their foul daemons.

Treasure hunters Alaric and Dietz are in possession of a map leading to a lost tomb – promising untold wealth and historic secrets, alongside a dire warning telling of the tomb's deadly guardian. As they follow the map into the Border Princes, the wild, lawless lands to the south of the Empire, they become embroiled in a deadly adventure that threatens to unleash an ancient daemon into the mortal realm. Can they decipher the map's secrets before the world they know is plunged into an age of darkness?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Rosenberg has written novels for *Star Trek*, *StarCraft*, *WarCraft* and *Exalted*. He also writes role-playing games, educational books, short stories, and magazine articles. He has won an Origins Award for one of his role-playing books and a PsiPhi Award for one of his *Star Trek* novels. Aaron lives and works in New York City.

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DAY OF THE DAEMON
Aaron Roserberg

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CLOUDS DRIFTED ACROSS the night sky, obscuring stars and slivered Mannslieb. Their shadows fell across the town, rippling over its tall sturdy walls, momentarily dimming the torches set along the tops. Within, the sounds of revelry continued unabated.

Something moved in the shadows beyond the base of the wall. A tall figure stood in the darkness, staring up at the barrier. Dark cloth concealed features, even gender, although something about the figure's posture and motion suggested a man. Beneath a long hood his eyes glittered in the dim light as they studied the wall. He stripped off thick gloves and raised one long-fingered hand, fingers splayed, to rest his palm against the rough stone. The hand stopped just shy of contact, a shudder passing through him.

The man raised his hand for a second time, and the air around him thickened. Wisps of fog or smoke swirled around his fingers as he pushed, his entire body leaning into the motion. Again his hand stopped inches from the stone.

After a moment the man tried again. This time the darkness seemed to rise around him, shrouding him until he was little more than a sensation of motion, a hint of substance. He did not move suddenly but advanced by inches, his raised hand closing the distance slowly but surely. Until, once again, it stopped. This time little more than a hairsbreadth separated flesh and stone. The air suddenly filled with a powerful stench, burning flesh and something far worse. For an instant the air was filled with hideous wailing torn from ravaged throats, but then the wind shifted and they were lost behind the music that issued from the town.

The man stood for a moment longer, unmoving, although his hand and arm shook with effort. Finally he pulled his hand back and stepped away, cradling it against his chest.

'Very well,' he muttered, his deep voice almost a growl. 'Your defences hold, for now.' He glared at the tall, wide front gate, securely fastened for the night, as if his eyes could pierce the wood and see the people beyond. 'Enjoy yourselves while you can, degenerates,' he warned, although his words were swallowed

by the night. 'Soon I will return, and when I do,' he said, his hands clenched into fists, 'your barriers will fall before me.'

Turning, he slipped away, his footfalls silent even in the still night air. Behind him a faint mark, a swatch darker than its surroundings, marred the wall where his hand had approached it. The grass nearby was blackened as well, as were patches further on, marking a trail as if scalding liquid had been poured out at regular intervals. By morning the marks would have faded, and no one would notice them.

'HALT! WHO GOES – wait, I know you!' The guard lowered his crossbow and peered at them, the weapon resting atop the heavy wooden barricade before him. The sounds of other soldiers marching around, patrolling the pass that disappeared into the mountains above, emerged behind him.

'Indeed you do,' Alaric replied. 'I am pleased to see our assistance has not been utterly forgotten so soon.' He preened slightly, adjusting the short sleeves of his soft leather jacket and the silk shirt-ties at his throat, brushing back a stray hair that had drifted across his handsome face. Then he shifted the weight of the rapier at his side, making his horse shuffle. If either of them felt the summer heat they didn't show it, but Dietz was sweating up a storm, his raw-boned face dripping moisture, his simple, serviceable leathers clinging to his long frame. Perhaps ignoring the heat was a noble thing. That might explain why the slender young man beside him was able to shrug it off so easily.

'You were here when the orcs attacked,' the soldier said, eyes widening as he remembered. 'You helped us fight them off.'

'That is correct,' Alaric agreed, nodding graciously. Dietz thought his friend and employer looked like a king receiving accolades and managed to stifle the amused groan that rose in his throat. Glouste, less concerned with propriety, chattered what might have been a rebuke from her perch upon his shoulder, although whether aimed at Alaric or himself, Dietz could not tell. He scratched the wiry, long-tailed tree-fox behind her small rounded ears to calm her and his pet's complaints changed to burbles of delight. Interrupting Alaric when he was so clearly enjoying himself might put the younger man in a foul mood.

Nonetheless, they were on a schedule, and couldn't waste much more time impressing some poor soldier.

'Time,' Dietz murmured, edging his horse close to Alaric's so only his young employer would hear him. He saw Alaric glance at

him, frown slightly, and nod.

'Yes, well, we are in a hurry,' Alaric said, never turning from the guard. 'We need to use the pass.'

'Use it?' That had the guard confused again, although Dietz wasn't sure he blamed the man. The Black Fire Pass was one of the only routes through the Black Mountains and into – or out of – the Empire. It was always heavily guarded, and this time they weren't working for one of the elector counts, or really for anyone. This time they were on their own, not that Alaric planned to let that stop them.

'Yes yes, we need to reach the Border Princes,' he said testily. He raised his chin, blue eyes flashing, blond hair streaming behind him, for that instant every inch the imperious noble. 'Now, either let us pass or take us to Captain Verten or Commander Haas.'

The guard straightened at the mention of his superiors. He glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting to see the two officers there. Then he chuckled at himself, nodded, and said something to someone below. A moment later two soldiers moved the barricade door aside.

'The captain is down in Grenzstadt with Sergeant Druber, getting supplies,' one of the men admitted, evidently having overheard their conversation, 'but Commander Haas is probably in his tent or near enough to make no difference in finding him. You know the way?' Dietz knew the man was debating whether to leave his post to accompany them or let them wander the pass unescorted. The three guards were alone at the barricade, but they were enough to secure it against anything but a major assault. Two might be hard-pressed to defend it and that was probably the guard's concern.

'We know it,' he assured the guard. 'We'll go straight to Haas.'

'Good.' The guard nodded, pushed the stout iron-banded door back into place, and then paused. He glanced up at them, his eyes wide. 'There isn't another orc warband coming, is there?'

'Not that we know of,' Alaric reassured him. 'We're simply passing through.'

Suiting the action to the word, he spurred his horse on, and he and Dietz rode up the trail and into the pass.

'WHAT ARE YOU TWO doing here?' Haas asked when Alaric and Dietz reined in. The stocky army commander had obviously just returned from a patrol and rock dust clung to his face and hands, although his uniform was no dirtier than usual. Dietz was pleased

to see his friend Adelrich beside Haas, and exchanged friendly nods with the scout. The ride to the army camp had taken two hours, but fortunately Dietz had remembered the route. He didn't relish the idea of wandering aimlessly through the narrow trails that branched off the main pass, hoping to avoid any stray orcs that might still lurk in the mountains. The camp looked much as he remembered it, an orderly array of tents set in rows in a large clearing, the larger command tent at the centre. There were men everywhere, sharpening weapons, drilling with blades, eating, sleeping, mending uniforms and marching on patrol.

'Sorry to trouble you, commander,' Alaric said smoothly, bowing from his saddle with the grace of the nobleman he was. 'We are simply passing through and felt it courteous to inform you of our presence.'

'Passing through? Where are you going?' Haas's eyes narrowed. 'What does Todbringer have you doing now?'

'Well, actually,' Alaric coughed nervously, 'we are not here on the elector count's orders.'

'No?' Haas studied him for a moment, and then turned his gaze on Dietz. 'Who did send you, then?'

'No one,' Dietz answered honestly. He didn't see any reason to tell Haas about the map, or about their reasons for investigating it.

'Are you bringing trouble to my door again?' Haas demanded.

'I'll have you know we were here to remove-' Alaric began, but Dietz cut him off.

'No trouble,' he assured the commander. 'We're just on our way to the Border Princes.'

Haas locked gazes with him for a moment, and then nodded. 'Fine, just so long as you're not leading another orc warband towards us.' The faint upward curve to his mouth indicated that he might in fact be joking, although Dietz decided not to chance it. You never knew with officers when they were joking and when they were deadly serious.

'We didn't lead that warband here,' Alaric objected. 'If anything, we-' Again Dietz cut him off.

'Can we stay the night?' he asked. 'We'll be gone in the morning.'

Haas hesitated for only a second before nodding. 'Fine, you can take that tent over there, its owners won't be needing it again.' He turned on his heel and walked away, although Dietz knew better than to take offence. The commander was probably preoccupied

as usual with the all-important job of defending the pass and the Empire.

Dietz dismounted and let out a soft groan of relief as he stretched to his full height. Damn and blast, it felt good to be out of the saddle! He didn't mind riding, but after the past few months he'd be happy never to see a horse again, much less climb into another saddle.

Adelrich was at Dietz's side, grinning, by the time his feet had settled on the ground. They clasped hands, the wiry little scout and the tall, raw-boned traveller, both relieved to see the other still alive. Of all the men who'd accompanied Alaric and Dietz during their months-long quest to find and destroy the Chaos statues scattered across the Empire, Dietz had identified with Adelrich most strongly, and the two had become fast friends.

'No drinks, I'm afraid,' Adelrich said sadly, 'not until Druber returns with supplies.' The two men had agreed to share a drink the next time they met and the scout was clearly disappointed that the army sergeant's poor timing would delay that.

It was Dietz's turn to grin as he reached back up to his saddle and untied a wineskin hanging there. 'Fortunately I brought my own,' he said, passing it to Adelrich, who took a long draught and sighed appreciatively.

'Ulric's beard, I needed that!' he said, returning the wineskin so Dietz could drink as well. 'Now, tell me how you've fared since we parted. No more strange encounters, I hope?'

'You have no idea,' Dietz replied, shuddering. He and Adelrich found a place to sit on the rocks near the camp's edge and traded the wineskin back and forth while Dietz scratched Glouste behind her ears and told of their experiences in Middenheim. Alaric wandered over to join them after a few more words with Haas, and chimed in from time to time as Dietz related their discovery of the first statue's disappearance.

They had parted ways after destroying the third statue in the pass and had thought their quest finished, the Chaos statues gone and the daemon attempting to use them safely repelled. Unfortunately that had not been the case. The original statue, which they had assumed was destroyed, had been spirited deep beneath Middenheim, and Alaric and Dietz had been forced to pursue it and its owners. Adelrich growled when they told him of their former companions, of Kristoff's treachery and Fastred's death, and shuddered when they described the mutants and cultists in the tunnels below the city. His face turned pale when

Dietz spoke of the ceremony Kristoff had performed, the gate it had created through the remaining statue, and the daemon that had begun to emerge. Alaric was white as a sheet too, clearly reliving those horrific events, and Dietz could feel his pulse beating rapidly and knew his voice was shaking as he remembered the mind-bending, sanity-shredding terror of the daemon. Glouste whimpered softly, the little tree-fox sensing her master's distress, and coiled herself around Dietz's neck in an effort to comfort him.

'Morr's breath,' Adelrich whispered finally when Dietz had finished his tale. 'I thought what we faced together was grim enough, but this! You beheld a daemon in the flesh! And fought it!' His voice held a note of awe.

'It did not fully emerge,' Alaric corrected, his voice shaky. 'We did not so much defeat it as destroy the gate and foil its attempt to cross over.' He shuddered, recalling the daemon's ever-shifting features, and its voice as it had bellowed at him even as the gate collapsed. His hand rose idly to rub at his neck.

'Even so,' Adelrich replied, 'you faced a daemon, a true daemon, and survived! And triumphed!' He took the almost empty wineskin from Dietz. 'You saved Middenheim, certainly, and most likely the Empire as well.' With that, the scout hoisted the wineskin in salute. He took a quick sip before handing it to Alaric, who sipped as well before giving it back to Dietz.

'How is Holst?' Alaric asked, trying to change the subject. He had not seen the Middenheim army sergeant since they'd arrived and was curious as to why. They all owed their lives to Holst and his men several times over after the hunt for the Chaos statues. Alaric regretted asking, however, when he saw Adelrich's face fall.

'Dead,' the scout admitted quietly. 'We've been cleaning up the remains of that orc warband we fought, killing scattered groups that escaped the battle and hid among the cliffs. Last week we came across a group of a dozen or so. Two of them had bows, those short horn bows they favour. One got off a lucky shot when he saw us. It took Holst in the throat. He was dead before he hit the ground.'

'Damn and blast!' Dietz lifted the wineskin, realised it was empty, and tossed it aside. He'd liked the quiet, competent sergeant.

'Commander Haas sent word to Middenheim,' Adelrich added. 'He said Holst had been a fine soldier and had given his life defending the Empire. The same thing he says about the others

we've lost.'

'Holst deserved better,' Dietz said quietly. 'They should have given him a medal, after all we faced.'

'He wouldn't have worn it anyway,' Alaric pointed out. 'It would have made too much noise clinking against his armour.' All three of them laughed, realising it was true, and felt a little better.

Still, it was with some relief that they watched Sergeant Druber's return, a few hours later. He was carrying supplies, including several fresh wineskins, one of which they appropriated to toast their fallen friend.

THE NEXT MORNING Alaric and Dietz spoke briefly with Haas, thanking him for his hospitality and catching him up on recent events in the Empire. They had come well provisioned for their journey, but accepted a wineskin and a few packets of dried fruit and travel bread from Druber anyway, to supplement their own fare. Then they left the camp, following the winding path back to the larger pass and turning their backs to the Empire, their horses pointed towards the Border Princes. Adelrich accompanied them until noon before turning back.

'Be careful,' he warned as he said goodbye. 'We've cleared the immediate area of orcs, but they are like rats; there're always more of them lurking somewhere nearby, and if they are lurking, they're likely to be hungry.'

'We'll watch ourselves,' Dietz replied, patting the crossbow at his side. It had belonged to Fastred Albers, another friend who had died recently, and it reloaded automatically. Dietz was sure that the big, generous explorer would have wanted him to have the weapon, and he took good care of it.

'I still expect that drink in Middenheim,' Adelrich said as they clasped hands.

'Definitely,' said Dietz. He waved and kicked his horse forwards, Alaric's steed moving beside his. Within minutes they had rounded a small bend in the pass and Adelrich was gone from view.

They rode in silence for some time, both glancing nervously around in case of ambush. The pass was wide enough for ten men to ride abreast, but somehow it felt as if the walls were closing in on them, and the sky seemed to weigh down upon them. The ground was rough, bare stone still jagged despite centuries of travel, and here and there Dietz saw hints of old ruins. For once his companion showed no interest in investigating them, a rare thing indeed.

'I hate these mountains,' Alaric commented finally, hiding a faint shudder. 'It's as if they're frowning at me, glowering at me.'

Dietz looked around, studying the high cliffs on either side, and nodded. Too much blood had been spilled here for these peaks to be anything but ominous.

'Let's leave them behind,' he suggested, and spurred his horse into a fast trot. He heard Alaric's mount clattering along behind him, and together they raced towards the far side of the pass and the lands that lay beyond.

'YOU DIDN'T TELL him about the map,' Alaric commented when they slowed their horses an hour or so later. The Black Fire Pass was a hundred miles long so there was little point in tiring out their horses at the start of their trek. Thus far they had encountered nothing worse than a few loose rocks, a few cracks they had been forced to jump and some startled lizards. It was the first thing either of them had said since spurring their horses, but Dietz understood what Alaric meant.

'Didn't see the need,' he admitted, patting his horse's sweat-covered neck. Alaric nodded. He liked Adelrich and trusted him, and knew Dietz did too, but his friend was right. Why go into the story about the map when it wasn't necessary? Besides, the fewer people who knew about it, the better. That was one of the first lessons he had learned in his antiquities classes back at the university. Keep the information to yourself and those who have to know it and you minimise the chances of someone stealing your discovery out from under you.

And this could be quite a discovery. They still couldn't read the entire document – lack of care or deliberate malevolence had destroyed portions of the old parchment. What they could read, however, was fascinating and drew him like a moth to a flame.

'It seems to be a map to an ancient tomb... in the Borderlands... famed for... treasures beyond imagining.'

The name was impossible to make out, although Alaric had stared at that portion of the manuscript so many times he felt he could trace its shattered lines in his sleep. Whatever had come before and after was also gone, but this was enough to inflame his curiosity.

A tomb in the Border Princes! He had heard of such things, of course. Several of the university professors had mentioned such troves and one, Professor Auguste, had even taught a very popular class on ancient tombs. The Border Princes were littered with

old ruins, which was not surprising since the stretch of land between the orc and goblin infested Badlands and the Empire had been invaded, conquered, and occupied by at least four different cultures in the past thousand years. At least two of those civilisations had revered their dead enough to bury them in elaborate tombs, along with astounding treasures. Of course, most of those places had been looted long ago, and many of them had been outfitted with a variety of deadly traps to kill any who dared disturb them, but that only made the attempt more exciting.

They had another reason for going. The ancient scroll that accompanied the parchment, the one with the map on it, was also difficult to read but a few landmarks stood out on it. So did the glyphs along the side, which were already far too familiar for Alaric's comfort.

The glyphs matched several of the marks he had seen etched into the Chaos statues they had recently destroyed. Something in or near this tomb bore the mark of Chaos.

Their friend Rolf had died because of those statues, and his son Hralir had passed the two parchments to Alaric, following instructions that his stone-carver father had left before his execution. Alaric considered it something of a last request for him to find that tomb, and poetic justice for him to destroy any Chaos taint he found there.

So far as Alaric was concerned, there was no reason for Adelrich to get wrapped up in their problems a second time, and Dietz had evidently felt the same way.

'He might have helped us find it, though,' Alaric pointed out, as much to himself as to his companion. Dietz only grunted in reply. 'After all, we don't know where we're going, exactly. Adelrich might have had some idea, some suggestion on where to start.' The Border Princes was said to be a nightmare to navigate, in part because it was broken into a cascade of petty nations and in part because those miniature kingdoms frequently changed their borders, and their rulers.

Dietz didn't bother to reply, but the expression on his face told Alaric they were probably thinking the same thing. The scout wasn't the ideal person to show the map to. The real expert had been Renke, the Imperial geographer who had accompanied them to the first two statues and who had been killed by the treacherous Kristoff when Renke suspected his loyalties. This quest could prove equally dangerous. That was another reason they had not told Adelrich about the map. The scout might have insisted upon

accompanying them, and Alaric suspected that neither of them could handle causing another friend's death.

'We have the river,' Dietz commented finally. They had puzzled over the map every night during their ride back across the Empire and had finally realised that the wide, wavy line at the bottom was a river. More specifically, it was the Blood River, which separated the Border Princes above from the Badlands below. Not having anything else to go on, Alaric had agreed they should head towards the Blood River and then reorient from there. By that time they'd have been in the Border Princes for several weeks and were more likely to recognise other landmarks from the map.

'I know,' Alaric agreed. 'I just wish we had a clearer idea of the location, and of how long it will take to get there.'

They rode on in silence for a while, allowing the scenery to distract them. The Black Mountains were certainly impressive, their dark peaks towering high above, and the pass itself would have fascinated Alaric at any other time. He spotted definite dwarf architecture several times, the remnants of outposts and forts they had built long ago to defend the entrance to the Old Dwarf Road that ran nearby and led off to the fabled Karaz-a-Karak. In other places he spotted monuments, or what was left of them. They rode past – and twice through – old battlefields, bones and bits of metal and wood still scattered across the bloodstained ground. Once Dietz's sharp eyes spied the remains of a funeral pyre, the blackened wood and ash probably marking the destruction of orcs after a major conflict. Alaric felt the itch to explore the sites, but memories of their mission, and of Rolf, kept him to the pass, as did more practical concerns.

Haas was a fine commander and his men had done an excellent job, first destroying the large warband that had threatened to tear through the pass and into the Empire and then mopping up the remaining orcs. But the mountains were vast and filled with hiding places. The orcs were very good at burrowing into caves and crevices, and even with a force ten times the size Haas would not have been able to find them all. Alaric and Dietz spotted orcs moving about several times, and three times orcs spotted them as well. The first time they kicked their horses into motion and galloped away before the handful of orcs could descend from the ledge where they perched. The second time, the orcs emerged from a cave just off the pass, but Dietz shot the first one in the chest and they safely passed the rest. The third time the orcs appeared almost underfoot, but Alaric had kicked one away and

then skewered it with his rapier. Dietz had shot two more, and the rest had backed away just long enough for the horses to break free. They rode hard for an hour before slowing again, but the remaining orcs had not pursued them.

FINALLY, AFTER ALMOST ten days of travel, Alaric and Dietz reached the end of the Black Fire Pass. Grey cliffs closed in above, the pass narrowing to a single wagon width and then dropping down steeply as the mountains fell away. Both men took deep breaths as they emerged into the lands beyond, enjoying the smell of trees and dirt after so many days surrounded by nothing but rock.

The small village of Munzig stood near the end of the pass. It was little more than a crude trading post with a few ramshackle homes for those who traded there all year round. It had high, sturdy walls, however, and armed guards patrolled them, cross-bows and spears in hand. Alaric and Dietz paused long enough to get a few additional supplies, although the prices were so steep they bought sparingly, before heading out again. A few of the traders had eyed Alaric's fine clothing and handsome sword a little too long and he wanted to put some distance between himself and those men before they decided his finery would look better on them.

Dull brown dirt cloaked the rocks on either side of the pass and stunted bushes clung to them, masking the terrain with sickly greenery. An hour's travel saw the end to the stone altogether. The soil was deep brown and the small bushes were replaced by large, looming trees with dark dull bark and grey-green leaves. The foliage formed a thick canopy overhead, blocking out the light of the sun, which was both a blessing and a curse. The sun was high overhead and they would have been broiling out in the open, but the shade made their surroundings dark, gloomy, and difficult to navigate. A road had been cleared through the forest but the massive trees seemed determined to reclaim that ground. On several occasions, they were forced to step their horses carefully past tangled roots and thick vines, or hack through interwoven branches that hung across the path in a leafy barrier.

'Charming place,' Alaric commented as they picked their way along. 'I cannot imagine why more people do not visit it simply for its natural beauty.'

'Heh?' Dietz hacked at a vine blocking their path and absently swatted away the snake that ducked down from a low-hanging branch. 'Less beauty, more speed.'

Despite their best efforts it was past nightfall by the time they found a place to make camp. The forest had offered several tempting little clearings, but both men had agreed they felt too much like traps, as if the forest was lying in wait for them to drop their defences. The copse they finally selected was really just a cluster of three sad-looking trees amid the denser forest, but there was enough space between them to build a small fire and stretch out and they could see not only the sky but also anyone approaching. The forest around them seemed to glower like a put-out old woman who'd been denied what she saw as her rightful reward.

The next morning the sun blazed down on them, the copse's foliage doing little more than adding a flurry of small shadows to the onslaught. Dietz and Alaric blinked against the early morning light as they stoked the fire enough to brew water for tea, ate a quick breakfast, and then dowsed the fire with dirt and gathered their gear and their horses. The sun was still inching its rays across the land, chasing away the shadows, when Alaric and Dietz were up and riding, their horses plunging back into the welcoming shadows of the forest to seek relief from the heat the day promised.

THEY REACHED AKENDORF three days later.

'Lovely,' Alaric said facetiously, glancing around as they topped the rise and headed down towards the town. 'I can see why people forsake the Empire for this paradise.'

The valley below was narrow and shallow, little more than a long depression in the surrounding hills. The town filled the valley floor and had a sturdy wooden wall ten feet high around it. Gates on both sides stood open, but only a few people were visible near them. The land around the town was clearly given over to farms, their crops forming a patchwork across the valley, the lighter hues standing out against the forests all around. They could just make out the broad ribbon of the Thunder River to the east, its waters separated from the valley by a single ridge of low hills. Enough water trickled through in places to provide decent irrigation, it seemed, and the farms seemed to be prospering.

'Not so bad,' Dietz replied, taking in the sight. Alaric sighed. Dietz was a good man, an excellent companion, and a trusted friend, but despite his upbringing in Middenheim he was horribly provincial in some ways. The town below probably didn't even have a decent tavern! Still, they probably had an inn, or at

least a farmer willing to rent them his barn for the night. It would certainly beat sleeping on hard-packed dirt and scraggly grass as they had the last few nights.

'Best be wary,' Dietz continued. 'People who flee here are often running from something.'

He was right, of course. They had both heard the stories, although neither of them had been here before. The Border Princes were renowned across the Empire, and not always for the best of reasons. Stories claimed that a man could rise from slavery to kingship here, just on the strength of his own right arm. Certainly some of the local petty tyrants had once been peasants or worse and now ruled lands of their own. Life here was brutal and usually short, and each person was out for himself, willing to kill for power, money, or simple pleasure. Criminals often fled the Empire and took refuge here, knowing it was not worth the Empire's trouble to send men after them. Some of those villains rose to power here too, carving out realms where they could act out their depravities without restriction – paradise, indeed.

As they drew closer – for the distance proved greater than they'd realised – Alaric and Dietz could see that the town was of a decent size. It boasted at least three two-storey buildings, all handsomely crafted from mountain stone and aged wood. They saw farmers working in the fields though none of them returned the travellers' friendly nods as they rode past. It never hurt to make a good impression on the locals.

Then, a mile or more from the town gate, they heard a commotion – the sounds of raised voices and of wood on flesh.

'Ah yes,' Alaric said out loud as they followed a bend in the path and discovered a scene laid out before them, 'the bedrock of the civilised world – random senseless violence.'

They saw a man clutching onto a thick wooden fence post, struggling to stay upright. His simple, mud-spattered clothes and the deep tan on his face, neck, and arms suggested someone who worked the fields, either a farmer or a farmhand. The eight or nine men who were beating him looked much less wholesome, with their battered mail, dirty cloaks, ragged beards and simple but well-honed weapons. Two of them were holding the farmer's arms, prying him away from the post, while a third prepared to brain him with a large tree branch.

'Damn and blast!' Dietz was charging before Alaric even realised his friend had moved.

'What the...?' Alaric turned his horse and hurried after his

friend, cursing under his breath as he did so. Dietz could be a hard man, but he had a good heart and sometimes his moral outrage got the better of him. He was charging the motley crew of warriors, enraged at the notion of so many trained, armed and armoured men attacking a single man. 'Excellent way to meet new people, Dietz,' Alaric muttered under his breath, even as he drew his rapier. Then they were in the thick of things, as always.

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