

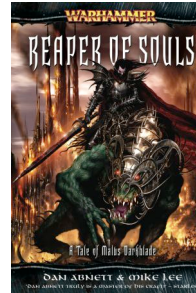
REAPER OF SOULS

The third Malus Darkblade novel

By Dan Abnett & Mike Lee

A member of the dark elf race, Darkblade's reputation as a warrior is beyond compare and his cruelty is legendary – even by the standards of the dark elves. Having been possessed by the foul daemon Tz'arkan, Malus undertakes a perilous quest to regain five magical artefacts that will free his soul or damn him forever!

Together with comicbook legend Dan Abnett, Mike Lee brings a fresh perspective to the Warhammer world and unleashes the monster that is Malus Darkblade!



About the Authors

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips Lone Wolves, Titan and Darkblade, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

Mike Lee was the principal creator and developer for White Wolf Game Studio's *Demon: The Fallen*. Over the last eight years he has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.

IN THE SAME SERIES

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Book 2 – BLOODSTORM

Book 3 – REAPER OF SOULS

Book 4 – WARPSWORD

The following is an excerpt from *Reaper of Souls* by Dan Abnett & Mike Lee.

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The whispering dragged Malus Darkblade back from merciful oblivion. With a snarl he opened sleep-gummed eyes and fumbled in the darkness for the bottle by his side, already wincing in anticipation of the taste of sour wine. Then he realised with a jolt that the low, urgent voice wasn't muttering in his head, but somewhere in the room nearby.

Malus bolted upright from the tangled sheets, sending a clatter of empty bottles rolling from the ruined bed onto the wooden floor. His mind reeled, and for a few sickening moments the motion swirled in counterpoint to the pitch and roll of the ship around him. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the hint of danger, even as he clenched his teeth and tried not to be violently ill. Malus blinked in the blackness of the captain's cabin, an involuntary groan escaping his lips.

The voice whispered again, this time a little louder and more intelligible. 'Forgive me for waking you, my lord—'

Malus squinted in the direction of the voice. The silhouette of a man stood at the foot of the broken bed, limned by the faint glow of a witchlight lantern burning in the passageway beyond the open cabin door. The highborn glared coldly at the apparition, trying to focus his wine-addled thoughts. 'Gods Below, Hauclir,' he grated. 'If I could kill you with just my eyes you'd be a steaming puddle on the deck. Do you have any idea what time it is?'

‘Just a bit past midnight my lord,’ the retainer said. ‘That’s why I’m here. It’s happened again.’

The words brought the highborn up short, a vicious curse dying on his thin lips. He bent his head and drew a single, hissing breath, summoning the cold clarity of his rage. When he lurched from the bed his brain still felt swollen and his mouth tasted like a midden heap, but his thoughts were cold and clear.

Wreckage littered the captain’s cabin of the corsair ship Harrier. Resources were scarce. After the battle she’d fought at the Isle of Morhaut almost a month ago, there were always more pressing repairs to be made as the wounded vessel limped home. Squares of triple-layered canvas were nailed over broken window frames on the stern and port side of the cabin. Cabin doors scavenged from other parts of the ship were nailed over holes in the port bulkhead and the ceiling where catapult stones had punched through the ship’s ensorcelled oak. One stone had crossed the cabin and smashed the frame of the polished thornwood bed before coming to rest in the pile of horsehair mattresses; the other was still buried halfway in the deck between the bed and the room’s large map table. Smashed sea trunks, piles of clothes, bits of armour and discarded weapons were piled among chunks of jagged wood and broken crockery. Still wearing a fine coat of blackened mail over his dark leather kheitan and robes, Malus paused only long enough to pull on his boots, then, with practiced familiarity, he wove among the piles of debris and grabbed his heavy cloak and sword belt from the charred map table.

‘Let’s go,’ he said as he swept past his retainer and into the passageway beyond.

A long, deep-throated groan echoed along the cramped corridor as the Harrier sank into the trough between two waves. Malus adjusted his footing to the sloping deck without breaking stride and shrugged into his woollen sea cloak. In the back of his wine-fogged mind he began counting the seconds as the ship reached the bottom of her descent. Harrier was wallowing in the heavy seas, not riding along the surface of the waves as she should. The highborn counted

to five before he felt the hull tremble as the ship nosed into the oncoming wave and then slowly began to rise again.

Malus wondered how much water had just washed along the upper deck and poured into her holds, adding to the weight of the gold and silver loaded there. Too much weight and the ship could spring her seams, drawing yet more water into the ship, until the moment finally came when Harrier would sink to the bottom of a trough and keep on going, straight into the jaws of the Dragons Below.

The plunder had been a necessary evil, Malus thought ruefully as he buckled on his swords. He'd led nine ships and more than a thousand men deep into the North Sea, to find and destroy the lair of a band of Chaos-tainted pirates called the Skinriders. The confrontation with the Skinrider chieftain's personal war fleet at the island's anchorage had been a brutal, close-quarters battle between the nimble druchii corsairs and the Skinriders' larger, heavier warships. In the end, only Harrier and less than a hundred sailors from among the nine ships had survived. Had Malus tried to deny the druchii the spoils of their victory he had no doubt they would have killed him on the spot.

As it was, he was captain only by default. Harrier's true master and her first mate were both dead and he commanded by virtue of his highborn rank and the writ of authority he carried from the Drachau of Hag Graef. Malus reached the ladder at the end of the passageway and steeled himself for the climb to the upper deck. Like the mounting pressure in the ship's holds below, he wondered how much longer his authority would hold.

The ship's ladder climbed through the corsair's citadel, the aft section of decks that contained the quarters for the ship's officers, the chart room and the work space for the ship's chirurgeon. Malus rose as far as the main deck and turned down a cramped, dimly-lit passageway that ended at a sturdy oak door. Two corsairs stood to one side of the door in the fitful glow of a failing witchlamp, their weather cloaks dripping a steady stream of saltwater onto the deck. The druchii sailors straightened perfunctorily as Malus approached,

but their eyes were downcast and their expressions sullen. The highborn brushed by them without a glance – he assumed they were part of the watch and as such they had no business being away from their posts. If he acknowledged their presence it meant he had to deal with the infraction and at the moment he wasn't certain how such a confrontation would play out. The realisation galled him to the core, but his rage was muted beneath the weight of gallons of bad wine. At the moment, Malus wasn't certain if that was a good or a bad thing, but it was definitely a necessary thing, so long as the balance of power on the ship remained precarious.

Malus pushed the door open and got a sharp spray of cold water against his face and neck that cut through the buzzing in his head like a flensing-knife. A gust of damp wind threatened to pull the heavy door from his hand.

Bracing himself and clutching his cloak tightly about him with one white hand, the highborn stepped carefully out into the night. A sharp wind was blowing from the north, making the Harrier's sails rattle and bang, keening like a tormented spirit among the frayed rigging above. The chill air buffeted the highborn from above and behind and the deck beneath him heaved as the ship was pummelled by the cold, slate-grey waves. Weak globes of witchlight cast eerie pools of greenish light along the main deck, but beyond the ship's smashed and splintered rails there was nothing but darkness and the crashing of the sea. It was a mild summer night, as far as the North Sea went.

The highborn paused, finding his feet and Hauclir brushed past him, heading for the main mast. The former guard captain wore dark robes and an indigo-stained kheitan of human hide under a shirt of fine, blackened mail. He wore no heavy cloak to ward off the wind and spray – after years standing watch on the battlements of Hag Graef he was hardened to far worse weather than this. Like the sailors, his skin was a dusky shade of pale, owing to a lifetime spent in the harsh elements, but the scars criss-crossing his hands and face were a testament to battles of a different sort.

The retainer was stocky for a druchii, with powerfully muscled arms and legs. He wore a short, businesslike sword and a heavy, knobbed cudgel at his belt. He was a far cry from the avaricious, dandified officer Malus had first encountered at Hag Graef's Spear Gate more than five months before, choosing simple utility and efficiency over jewelled weapons and fine robes. His long black hair was bound back into a thick braid tucked into the back of his kheitan and his angular cheeks were fringed with a rakish black beard he'd grown since the battle at the lost isle.

Despite an utter lack of respect for Malus's rank and an insolent streak that was almost suicidal in its frankness, Hauclir had proved himself a surprisingly capable and loyal retainer since entering the highborn's service. It was a difficult dance, acting as insubordinate as possible while remaining just indispensable enough not to be slain out of hand and Malus had to admire the man's dedication and craft.

Hauclir led Malus to the mainmast, altering his course at the last minute to swing wide of a portion of the deck near the mast's iron fitting. Malus's boot came down in a puddle of sticky gore.

'Mind your step, my lord,' Hauclir muttered just a moment too late, then pointed halfway up the length of the mast. 'Look there.'

The shape was a darker shadow against the Harrier's black sail; Malus thought he could just hear the creaking of a rope as the body twisted in the shifting wind. As he looked up he felt warm, heavy drops spatter against his face, smelling of hot copper. Though he couldn't see any details, he knew well enough what hung there – a naked man, his belly opened and his guts pulled out and his eyes no more than red, weeping hollows emptied by crude, clawing hands. Malus growled deep in his throat. The haze of bad wine was starting to thin and a painful buzzing was beginning in the back of his head. 'How many does this make?' he asked coldly.

Hauclir folded his arms, his bearded face twisting in a grimace. 'Eight, my lord.'

Malus craned his head, picking out the other shapes hanging like grisly trophies from the spars of the battered ship. The first killing

had occurred the night after the Harrier had left the lost isle and began her torturous journey home. At the time, neither Malus nor Hauclir had known what to make of it. Was it the settling of some old score, or an obscure offering to the Dragons Below for a safe return home? The highborn had only been on two cruises in his entire life: his traditional hakseer-cruise upon reaching manhood and a single slaving cruise to the Old World many years later. He was a novice in the ways of the sea and Hauclir had never set foot on a ship before the expedition against the Skinriders. Bruglir, Malus's illustrious brother, had commanded Harrier, but he and his first mate had died in the battle and the crew regarded Malus as an interloper at best. The highborn was reluctant to begin scourging the handful of survivors for information. So he had refrained, willing to ignore the murder as an isolated event and focus on making port in Naggaroth. At first it had seemed like the proper course of action. Then, three days later, another body appeared.

Hauclir studied the bodies and theorised that it had to do with the treasure lying in the corsair's hold. Every sailor aboard could claim a drachau's ransom in gold as their share of the loot, but greed was a fever that only grew when fed and sailors were wont to gamble as a way of passing time. The former guardsman concluded that the dead men were hapless souls caught cheating at dice or hassariya and were strung up in a form of sailors' justice to warn off other gamblers.

Malus mustered the crew the next morning and ordered a stop to the killings, then Hauclir and a cadre of sailors gathered the crew's swords and locked them away in the ship's armoury. The crew turned sullen at the order, but they obeyed, and after some consideration Malus declined to press things further by ordering the bodies be cut down. Hundreds of leagues from Hag Graef he knew perfectly well that he had only as much authority as sailing tradition and the crew's morale lent him.

It was only after the fifth killing that Hauclir noticed a worrying trend – there were only a handful of sailors on board whose loyalty

Malus could count on and one by one they were being gutted and left to hang.

Enquiries were made. Sailors were flogged. The morale of the crew worsened, but no one knew who was behind the killings or even why they were committed. Malus ordered the bodies to be cut down, but at the end of the day they still hung from the ship's spars. Given the choice of pressing the issue and perhaps sparking a confrontation, Malus had gritted his teeth and let the matter slide, unwilling to risk eroding his authority further. He decided on ordering Hauclir and his chosen men to lay in wait for the killers, hoping to catch them in the act and then publicly torture those responsible in the most brutal way he could imagine.

Three more men had died since. Malus rubbed his forehead, trying to clear his thoughts and banish his growing headache. 'How did this happen?' he asked, his voice leaden with menace.

Hauclir started to respond, then caught himself. After a moment he shook his head. 'I don't know,' he said grimly, showing fashionably filed teeth. 'I was watching from the citadel deck. I had men in the masts above and men at the bow. Duras was walking the deck every fifteen minutes, but just after the change of the watch, there it was.'

'It would have taken two men at least,' Malus growled, his fists clenching. 'The body is gutted like a pig for the feast, yet there is no trail of blood?'

The former guard captain shrugged. 'It could have been wrapped in a spare piece of sailcloth and already tied at the wrists. All they would have to do is throw the line over the mast spar and haul away.' Hauclir cast his eyes about in the cavern-like gloom, his expression tight with anger and frustration. 'The deed could have been done in less time than it takes to tell of it and it's as dark as a witch's heart out here. I could have had a man standing at the foot of the mast and still not have caught anyone.'

Malus could feel the rage simmering in his chest as the effects of the wine began to recede. 'Enough of this,' he hissed. 'My patience

is at an end. Pick ten men at random and start skinning them. I want names.'

'We can't do that,' Hauclir said.

The highborn turned and struck the retainer across the face with the back of his hand. The flat crack was lost on the wind in an instant, but Hauclir rocked back on his heels, blood spurting from a split lip.

'I am the captain of this ship,' Malus snapped, 'and no one sheds the blood of this crew save me, by law and by custom. I should have started flaying men alive as soon as this began.'

'We couldn't have done so then and we dare not try it now,' Hauclir said levelly, wiping away a stream of dark blood with the back of his hand. His eyes were bright with pain, but his expression was cold and disciplined. 'By the time we'd filled out our crew with survivors from the rest of the fleet there was perhaps one man in ten whose loyalty we could count on. Now there are two. Believe me, my lord, I've faced more than one mutinous barracks in my time and I know for a fact that once you've shown your hand, only one of two things can happen – the men either back down and accept your authority without question, or they turn on you like a pack of starving nauglir. If you press the issue I don't think there is much doubt which way they'll go.'

'And you think it better I appear weak and let these killings go unchecked?'

Hauclir took a deep breath. 'I think we avoid starting a fight that we can't win, my lord.' He jerked his head in the direction of the ship's wheel. 'Old Lachlyr says we're no more than twenty leagues from the north coast of Naggaroth – how he knows is a mystery to me, but these sea birds have their own instincts about such things. He says we'll sight land by dawn tomorrow and from there it's another day or two down the Slavers' Straits and into the Sea of Chill. We could make port at Karond Kar in three days, pay off the crew and be rid of them. There won't be another killing before then, so you can avoid a confrontation altogether and keep our skins intact.'

‘Unless these men are being killed because there’s a mutiny afoot and the killers are eliminating the loyal crew members before making their move?’ Malus considered the dangling corpse thoughtfully. ‘They could be hanging the victims as a warning to others so as to keep them in line. Sighting land tomorrow might be the signal to make their move and seize the ship and the entirety of the gold for themselves.’

The retainer shook his head. ‘No, I’ve already thought of that. Why wait? If enough of the crew were willing to kill us and claim all the gold they could have done it any time they liked. Why go to all the trouble to hunt out the loyal ones? These aren’t subtle men, my lord. If anything, they’ve turned more feral since we left that damned island.’

Malus muttered a dark curse, but had to admit that Hauclir was right. At first the crew’s spirits were high in the wake of the battle and the looting that had followed, but once they’d returned to the open sea the mood of the sailors had become increasingly tense. First it had been just the original men of the Harrier, but it had gradually spread to the other survivors as well, like a strange fever. Pain sharpened in time with his thoughts and the buzzing in his head was growing louder. The highborn gritted his teeth. ‘There’s some purpose to these killings, Hauclir. If it’s not mutiny, then what is it? It’s too regular to be anything but a plan...’ The highborn’s voice trailed off as his eyes narrowed in realisation.

The pause brought Hauclir’s head around. ‘My lord?’

‘The killings,’ Malus said. ‘How do you know one won’t happen before we reach Karond Kar?’

Hauclir frowned. ‘Well, each man was killed about four days apart, just at...’ The retainer’s eyes widened. ‘Just at the change of the moons.’

Malus nodded, his expression turning murderous. ‘Exactly. This isn’t mutiny, Hauclir. This is sorcery.’ The highborn turned on his heel, striding quickly back the way he’d come.

It took several moments for the full weight of Malus's words to sink in. Hauclir's eyes widened and he hurried after the highborn. 'But what does it mean, my lord? Where are you going?'

'To the source,' Malus said angrily. 'My dear brother has some explaining to do.'

The oak door had become a grisly shrine.

At first it had been merely carvings – sailors incised their names into the door or the frame, hoping for a blessing, or inscribed small prayers for the death of their foes. Some of the prayers had been embellished over time as the carvers returned and sought to rededicate themselves to their god. Flowing lines of druchast, elegantly carved by calloused hands, were surrounded by vivid depictions of battle scenes comprised of scores upon scores of artful lines cut into the wood. Even Malus was impressed at the artistry and skill of the devoted sailors who had spent hours working their prayers into the steel-hard surface of the door.

Later, however, the offerings became less artful and more direct. Names were painted in blood, or sometimes the aspirant merely pressed a bloody palm print to the door's wooden surface. Then someone took a carpenter's nail and put up a severed hand taken from a Skinrider. Severed ears became popular, as well as scalps.

From there it was only a matter of time before the devout began piling severed heads at the foot of Yasmir's door.

The stench was profound. Malus had not been in this part of the ship since the Harrier had left the Isle of Morhaut and the gory spectacle had been gruesome even then. The highborn counted two score Skinrider heads before giving up in disgust. The pain in his head was much sharper now, beating against the back of his eyes like a drum and an invisible charge seemed to play over the surface of his skin, setting his hair on end. He suddenly found himself craving the taste of that damned sour wine.

Malus paused at the blood-soaked door. As near as he could tell it hadn't been opened in some time, possibly not at all since they'd left the island. During the few sober moments he'd had over the last

few weeks it had seemed like a blessing not to have Urial haunting the main deck like some misshapen crow. Now he wasn't so sure.

Urial had been in that room with his half-sister for weeks. Malus had no love whatsoever for Yasmir, but the realisation unsettled him nonetheless.

I must still be drunk, the highborn thought sourly, rubbing a hand across his face. Yasmir was beautiful beyond words and as cunning as an adder. Back at Hag Graef she had held the young nobles of the court in the palms of her hands and made them bleed for her sport. Yet it was her love for her brother Bruglir that made her useful to Malus. He needed Bruglir's fleet in order to reach the island and deal with the Skinriders and with Yasmir's backing he could ensure Bruglir's cooperation. Urial, on the other hand, was a bitter and twisted man who had just as much reason to hate his own family as Malus did. Having been given to the Temple of Khaine as a sacrifice, the deformed infant had survived immersion in the sacrificial cauldron – a sign of the god's favour. He'd become a servant of the temple and had learned many arcane arts and for this reason Malus had need of him as well. So Malus had woven a web of promises and lies that had bound his siblings to him. Or so he'd imagined.

With Urial's influence as a servant of the temple Malus was able to persuade the Drachau of Hag Graef to issue a Writ of Iron, giving him the power to commandeer Bruglir's fleet and seek the lost island. Yasmir's influence was the real iron behind the writ, however; a force that Bruglir could not oppose. Urial, in turn, loved Yasmir and Malus promised that by the end of the campaign Bruglir would no longer stand in Urial's way.

In the end they were all betrayed to one degree or another.

Bruglir was killed in battle with the Skinrider chieftain, but not before being betrayed by his sea mistress Tanithra. Yasmir was betrayed by Bruglir's faithlessness and her hatred for him awakened a part of her that had lain dormant during her sheltered years at the Hag. Her desire for slaughter had transformed her into a living manifestation of death – in Urial's words, a saint of the Bloody-

Handed God. Even Malus was forced to admit that her ability to kill with her long knives was supernatural in its terrible grace and skill. The crew saw her fight during a desperate boarding action in the teeth of a late winter gale and afterwards her quarters became a shrine to the Lord of Murder.

Malus raised his hand to the bloodstained door. There was sorcery at work within; he was starting to be able to sense it, like a stench burning at the back of his throat. The buzzing in his head began to take the shape of words, but he focused on the door and its bloody inscriptions instead.

He paused, his hand inches from the dark wood. The skin prickled as it came into contact with currents of unseen power. After a moment, he withdrew his hand. Why knock, he thought? With all that power at his command, Uriel no doubt already knows I'm here.

Malus Darkblade nodded raised his boot and kicked the door open in a shower of splinters and twisted metal.

Reaper of Souls can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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