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VAN HORSTMANN

BEN COUNTER

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VAN HORSTMANN

Ben Counter

Egrimm van Horstmann is the most promising wizard the College of Light has ever seen. Surpassing his mentors and reaching new heights of magical power, he seems destined to lead the college into a bright new future. But darkness follows van Horstmann, and where he treads, death follows. As enemies close in on him, van Horstmann's true motives become clear – he plans to unleash an ancient dragon imprisoned beneath the college and bring ruin to the Empire, in the name of Chaos.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Counter is the author of the Soul Drinkers and Grey Knights series, along with two Horus Heresy novels, and one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors. He has written RPG supplements and comic books. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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THE LIGHT PYRAMID was one of the great secrets of Altdorf, but there were greater.

True, the general population did not know it was there. The inhabitants of the Buchbinder district ascribed the strange geography of their home to some wild magic resulting from ley lines or a rogue spell in ages past, and the Light Order did nothing to discourage such beliefs. But there were plenty of people who knew of the pyramid, not least the magisters of the other seven orders along with those who had to deal with the Colleges of Magic as political entities: the Imperial Court, the churches of the Empire's major faiths, the orders of witch hunters and others.

A greater secret was that there was more than one pyramid. The second pyramid was a mirror of the first, built underground and inverted, its point as far beneath the ground as the Light College's pinnacle was above it. These were the vaults of the Light Order, a repository for everything they did not want seen by anyone outside the order. It was here, rather than the first pyramid's library, that they kept safe the most valuable and dangerous books, either those penned by the order's earliest and greatest magisters or tomes of blasphemy captured intact and read, under the strictest supervision, to provide an insight into supernatural threats like daemonkind and the undead. In these vaults were kept magical artefacts too valuable and too powerful to entrust to the pyramid above ground – the staves of the great magisters, ritual knives and blood chalices for the most direct of sacrifices, enchanted objects and armaments of every kind.

The magisters of the Fourth Circle, who answered directly to the Grand Magister and who numbered only half a dozen at any one time, were masters of these vaults. They were kept in strict order and perfectly maintained, in keeping with the mindset of the Light Order. The Fourth Circle did not mix with the rest of the order and they guarded their domain with such fervour that all save the Grand Magister were fortunate to even enter the upper vaults with any regularity.

It was therefore Elrisse himself who led the newly-appointed magisters into the vaults to witness what an acolyte could not – some of the greatest secrets that existed in Altdorf, in the whole of the Empire, painstakingly catalogued and studied by the jealous Fourth Circle.

Van Horstmann stood before a pedestal on which sat one such secret. It was one of over two dozen displayed in this vault, one of the uppermost vaults, a long room of cut marble and false pillars. Here were displayed magical swords and talismans created by the Light Order: an amulet of cold-forged iron in the form of two intertwined snakes, a chunk of crystal filled with dancing lights, a golden torc that slowly wept drops of blood. Van Horstmann had ignored most of them, given a few of them a glance, and moved to this pedestal at the far end of the chamber.

'The Skull of Katam,' said Magister Pendorf. Pendorf was of the Fourth Circle and was the oldest man van Horstmann had ever seen, his face little more than a sheaf of wrinkled skin behind a straggly grey beard. His voice was so dry and strained that it almost hurt to listen to it. He had shadowed van Horstmann the moment he entered, like the owner of a confectioner's following a quick-fingered child.

'From the barrows of the Mourkain,' said van Horstmann.

'You are learned,' said Pendorf.

'We seek knowledge,' replied van Horstmann. 'It is our weapon. We all seek it, you guard it.'

'Quite so.'

The Skull of Katam had, presumably, once been a human skull. Perhaps it had looked like a mundane skull when it was dug up from the burial mound that had once been a part of the prehistoric Mourkain empire. Now it was plated in silver and covered in jewels. Its teeth were diamonds and its eyes two fat rubies. Sigils were cut into the silver, each a variation of a star with eight points.

'Sigmund Haal died a week after he found it,' said van Horstmann. 'They say it spoke to him of his death, and his heart froze solid the next night. And that whoever owns it will eventually be warned of their death, though there is nothing they can do to avoid it. Whenever it speaks, someone dies.'

'Then I give thanks,' said Pendorf, 'that I have never heard it.'

Van Horstmann looked at the old man. His robes were trimmed with black and he wore around his neck a heavy amulet in the shape of a padlock. The image of a key was tattooed on his forehead. The magisters of the Fourth Circle were said to have a little madness in them, perhaps a prerequisite for the job of tending the vaults, perhaps the result of isolation from the rest of their order and exposure to the strange magics of so many artefacts. 'I understand that one magister of the Fourth Circle must die before another can take his place,' said van Horstmann.

'Nowhere is it written, but in practice, yes, that is so.'

'Then maybe it is the Skull of Katam that decides when one of your circle is to be replaced. Perhaps it speaks, one of you hears it and is struck dead, and another takes his place. Could that not be the case?'

Pendorf did not reply. It was impossible to read any emotion from his face. It was barely any more expressive than the jewelled skull.

Van Horstmann reached for the skull.

'No,' said Pendorf. 'The Skull of Katam is ill-starred. It cannot leave these vaults.'

Van Horstmann ignored him and picked up the skull. It was heavy, far heavier than mere bone. He realised it was solid right through.

Power crackled through his fingers where they touched the skull. Sparks of white magic arced from his palms. The rubies glowed brighter, a pink-red light bathing van Horstmann's face. He heard a click as the jaw unlocked.

'Do you know,' said van Horstmann, 'who Katam was?'

'You show no respect to this place!' rattled Pendorf. 'Our secrets are not to be toyed with as your fancy takes it! You... you are not welcome here, magister! You must leave!'

Two more magisters ran in. Both were ancient, though not quite as wizened as Pendorf. One struck the butt of his staff against the ground and flames leaped up around his other hand, boiling in place. The impression given was of a bowman drawing the string, ready to shoot. The other opened the tome he carried and read aloud.

'By the Pact of Teclis,' he said, 'to the sole custody of the Fourth Circle shall be given the vaults of the Light College, and entrusted to them will such artefacts as the Grand Magister deems necessary to be kept secure. No magister save the Grand Magister and those of his choosing may venture there and make use of such artefacts. All are bound to this law and all is forfeit in disobedience!'

'Him,' said a voice from nearby. For a moment, van Horstmann could not place it. 'Him. This one. He will carry me.'

Pendorf looked on dumbfounded. The other Fourth Circle mages were similarly stunned. Van Horstmann realised that it was the skull that had spoken.

He looked down into the ruby eyes of the skull.

'I have not spoken for three centuries,' it said. 'For none have been worthy to hear me. None have been worthy to hear my wisdom. But this one. This one is worthy.'

'I am a seeker of knowledge,' said van Horstmann to the skull.

'And I am a receptacle of knowledge,' replied the Skull of Katam. Its voice had a multi-layered quality, as if it was made up of several voices heard at a distance, or was almost swamped by its own echoes.

'They say that when you speak, people die.'

'They lie. They do so through jealousy, for I will not speak at all to those whose minds cannot contain what I must impart.'

'You... you cannot remove the skull from the vaults!' said Pendorf, his voice shaking.

'Who speaks?' asked the skull.

'One of the Fourth Circle magisters tasked with looking after you.'

'I suffered them with great pain. Now I have found someone to whom I can speak, they will not keep me within these walls if I desire to leave.'

'Then you will leave now,' said van Horstmann. He turned to the three magisters. 'Unless you wish to stop me, magisters.'

The magisters did not reply. They didn't even move. The fire that one had been holding, ready to strike, sputtered and died out.

With the Skull of Katam in one hand, van Horstmann walked past the magisters and out of the chamber. The other chambers of the upper vaults radiated out from the spiral staircase leading up to the above-ground pyramid. They contained a fortune's worth of artefacts – books written in ink distilled from unicorn blood and meteoric iron, swords that could sever a soul from the body, runestones that, when cast, could foretell the outcome of a battle still to be fought. But none of them were the Skull of Katam, and so van Horstmann ignored them as he returned to the pyramid.