

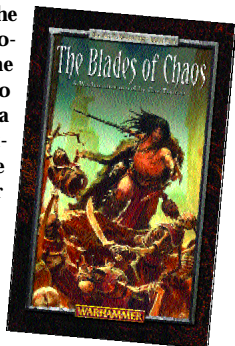
The Blades of Chaos

Slaves to Darkness • Book Two

A Warhammer novel by Gav Thorpe

FOLLOWING THE CATAclysmic events in *The Claws of Chaos*, Kurt Leitzig sits uneasily as a chosen warrior of the gods. To prove himself to the Norse tribes, Kurt gathers a war party and sails to the fabled lands of Araby where they discover a deserted city of rising pyramids and long forgotten tombs. Overtaken by their lust for gold, the pillagers awaken an army that has been dead for thousands of years – the dreaded tomb King Nephthys has been unleashed!

Gav Thorpe works for Games Workshop in his capacity as Warhammer Loremaster – something to do with making stuff up and designing games, apparently. He has written an armful of short stories for *Inferno!* magazine, plus a number of Warhammer 40,000 novels.



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from THE BLADES OF CHAOS

THE JEERING CRIES of the Norsemen at the oars rang in Kurt's ears as he watched the Imperial greatship disappearing astern. Beside him, Jakob was curled up on the deck, blood running from his nose and ears. He rocked back and forth, spittle dribbling down his chin into his blood-matted beard. The shaman's spell had been powerful, more powerful than he had anticipated, and the price he had paid was heavy. He stared up with unseeing eyes as Kurt crouched down and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'By the gods, Jakob, that was a worthy display,' Kurt told the incapacitated shaman. 'I never knew you had so much power. I think that the sacrifice of the fishermen and the militia really bought us some favour with the gods!'

Jakob's eyes slowly focussed, and he croaked hoarsely coughing up blood. He shook his head slowly from side to side, sweat dripping from him. At his feet his scattered runestones lay still, smoking gently, a burned circle left on the deck evidence of the magical energy unleashed in the summoning of the wave.

'Get him some water,' Kurt shouted, and Bjordrin responded, running over to the water butt and dipping a clay goblet into the barrel. He carried it back to Jakob and dribbled a few drops on the shaman's lips. With a splutter, Jakob sat up, brushing aside Kurt's hand and snatching the goblet. He downed the contents in one long draught and let the cup fall from his fingers as he slumped back to the deck.

'Don't ask me to do that again,' he said, his voice cracking, and closed his eyes. An involuntary shudder convulsed Jakob's body and he rolled over and vomited up the water he had just drunk. 'Leave me be,' he said.

Kurt stood and strode out into the middle of the deck, along the central walkway between the longship's banks of oarsmen. He gave a wordless cheer, raising his arms into the air, and the crew echoed his triumphant yell.

'Fjaergard!' Kurt shouted. 'The gods smile upon us this day! See the devastation wrought by their messenger, enjoy the sweet victory! This is but a minor glory to the victories that await us in Araby.'

There was more cheering as Bjordrin gave the order to ease up on the oars, and the Norsemen stood from their benches, easing tired arms, patting each other on the back and quenching their thirst from the water butts. They then turned their attention to the three dead men who were sprawled on the deck, smashed by the greatship's cannonballs, and the split rigging and torn sail that flapped constantly against the mast. Without any word from their leaders, they set about preparing the bodies for burial and repairing the damage. Bjordrin came and stood next to Kurt, one eye on the work being carried out.

'Any sign of Jarlen's ship?' Kurt asked, inquiring after the second ship that had set sail with him. In all, fifty-three of the Fjaergard had accompanied the Chosen on his great voyage, nearly two-thirds of the whole village, enough to crew two ships. After the attack on the Nordland fort, Kurt had sent Jarlen and his ship to scout ahead and they were due to meet later that day.

'He'll be waiting for us,' Bjordrin said. 'We should see him before mid-afternoon.'

Kurt nodded and stood in thought for a moment. Though it had ended well enough, the encounter with the greatship had shaken Kurt. Relaying Bjordrin's whispered commands, the crew had responded readily enough to his orders, but his inexperience of naval warfare had left Kurt tense and unnerved. If he hadn't demanded the Jakob raised the daemon seas against the enemy, then the full weight of the greatship's guns would

have reduced them to splinter and bloodied flesh in a single broadside. It was an experience he didn't want to repeat any time soon.

'They'll be after us again soon enough,' Kurt said to Bjordrin.

'They'll be shaken, and not ready for a fight for a time yet, but yes, they can get under way again in short order,' the Norseman said. 'They'll make their other repairs on the way.'

'Do you think it was a mistake to split our ships?' Kurt asked, examining Bjordrin's expression for any sign of disapproval.

'No, you did the right thing,' Bjordrin replied. 'I wouldn't take four ships against a greatship, never mind two. At least this way, even if we'd been taken, the others would have been able to get back to Fjaergardhold.'

'I'll not turn back before we've even started,' Kurt said with a snarl.

'I didn't think so,' Bjordrin said. 'That's not what I meant. I mean for us to carry on, and we'll go wherever you say.'

'I want us to stop hugging the coast once we've met up with Jarlen,' Kurt said, pacing towards the prow of the ship, Bjordrin keeping step beside him.

'Crossing the Sea of Claws is one thing,' said Bjordrin, 'but heading into the Great Ocean is too much for us.'

'I want to reach Araby, and I want both ships to get there with as many of the crew left alive as possible,' Kurt said. 'This will be the greatest adventure of the Fjaergard, but it'll never happen if we creep along the coast every mile of the way. Not only is that greatship going to be after us, but we have to go past Marienburg, greatest port of the Old World. Ships put in and out of the Reik by the dozen each week, many of them warships. Even if we make it past the Reik, which we won't, we still have the rest of the Wasteland with its forts, the long coasts of Bretonnia, the shores of Estalia, to survive.'

'It is not just the wind and waves of the ocean that you are pitting us against,' Bjordrin told him with a shake of his head. 'Out in the deeps, the legends say there are worse things than the warships of men. There is the great kraken that can swallow a ship whole, and the leviathans of Jaenz, great serpents

that can scent a man from a hundred miles and will pursue that scent until he is dead.'

'You sailors always say the same things,' said Kurt. 'If all the tales were true then no ship would be able to move for fish-tailed mers, horned sharks, whales the size of buildings and civilisations that lie beneath the waves.'

'Sneer if you want,' said Bjordrin with a shrug. 'We live under the shadow of the gods in Norsca, and we see the things that stalk the forests and mountains, that lie in the caves beneath the world. And even if you dismiss them as children's tales, then you cannot argue against the fact of the elves.'

'Elves have not been heard of in these seas since they left the Old World, centuries before the coming of Sigmar,' Kurt said. The mention of the Empire's founder made the Norseman snarl, and he kissed his fist and raised it to his forehead in a sign of appeasement to the gods.

'I will do as you say, but out in the ocean we will be at the mercy of the great powers, so it is best that you don't offend them with the names of usurpers,' Bjordrin warned. He turned and walked back down the ship, leaving Kurt to stare out at the wide sea.

IT HAD BEEN twelve days since the run-in with the greatship, and the weather began to worsen. To the west dark clouds blotted the horizon for many miles, slivers of lightning and thunder crashes testament to its ferocity. Bjordrin was anxious, and the shouted messages from Jarlen, when the other longship pulled alongside for a lengthy exchange, voiced similar discontent. But Kurt would not be persuaded to head for the shore, anxious that such a storm might dash them all upon the rocky coast. Bjordrin tried to tell him that the storm would have blown out most of its strength by the time it struck them, but the Chosen warrior would not listen, and Bjordrin silently fumed.

That night, the crew huddled into what cover they could find as the wind whipped over the longship, the waves crashed over the sides onto the deck, and the rain lashed down from the moonless sky. With a tight grip on the rigging,

Kurt stood on the weatherside of the longship roaring his defiance into the howling wind.

He could feel the energy of the storm invigorating him, its power flowing into his blood. The longship bucked and heaved on the heavy swells, the rain scoured his face, and lightning flickered overhead. The elements tried everything they could to shake him free, dashing him left and right with surging waves, but Kurt held on with his iron grip, sometimes almost floating in the water, or flying on the wind. He laughed as salt spray whipped at his face, turning to grin at his comrades as they huddled on the leeside, their shields above their heads to guard against the rain, the timbers of the boat creaking with the strain, the wind singing through the rigging around them.

'Is this not a fine verse for our saga?' Kurt said, his bellowing voice carrying above the tumult of the storm. 'The seas themselves rose up against us, and we conquered them!'

'Get down from there, you'll be washed away!' said Aelfir, struggling to stand up and hurl himself towards Kurt. He reached out a hand to pull Kurt down onto the deck, but the Chosen took a step away and grinned.

'So the Longaxe has found a foe he cannot defeat?' said Kurt, laughing, his sodden hair whipping against his face like a flail.

Aelfir muttered something to himself and dashed back across the deck to his kinsmen, shaking his head and complaining. At the stern, Kurt could see Bjordrin and two others wrestling at the rudder, fighting against the storm to keep the longship from pulling herself to pieces between the great forces of the wind and the sea itself. Kurt gave them a hearty wave, but they were too busy to respond.

FOR A LONG while the storm threw the longships across the ocean, trying to hurl the Norsemen into the raging seas, or rip the masts from their decks. However, nobody was lost overboard, and there was minimal damage as the storm began to wane, and the clouds broke. The midday sun shone done through the gaps in the dark skies, gold glinting on the wave tops, the lessening wind fresh and clear. A crack appeared in

the cloud above and the warm sun shone down onto the two ships, a rainbow coming into view ahead.

'See how the gods bless us!' Kurt said, pointing to the rainbow. There was cheering from Jarlen's ship, which had been brought perilously close in the storm, and was less than a hundred yards to the starboard and slightly astern. Bjordrin staggered down the ship, pulling off his soaked furs as the rain eased to a light shower of droplets, shaking the moisture from his cloak.

'We were lucky,' Bjordrin said quietly. He pointed over the prow, and there on the horizon could be seen the dark outline of a coast. 'Another half a day and we would have been crushed against those cliffs!'

'So I was right to stand out at sea?' Kurt asked with a smile.

'No,' Bjordrin said, and Kurt's smile disappeared. He peered up at the sun as the clouds scudded in front of it across the sky. 'We've been pushed south, almost directly south, I reckon. If we had turned east towards the coast, only the edge of the storm would have caught us.'

'Do you have any idea where we are now?' Kurt said, looking away to hide his disappointment.

'Won't be able to tell until we get a clear night to see the stars,' Bjordrin said, glancing up at the sky. 'There's a few clouds about but I think tonight I should be able to make a guess at how far south we are.'

'Good,' said Kurt, looking back at the Norseman. He turned to walk down the deck but Bjordrin stopped him with a hand on his arm.

'I don't know if any Norseman has ever been this far south,' Bjordrin said. 'Certainly none of the Fjaergard. By your account, that is the land of Estalia. Why not skirt the coast and find a village or town? There's honour enough in that.'

'I asked if you would follow me, I had your oath,' Kurt said, pulling himself up to his full height. 'This is why I demanded it. I will not give up, I will not let my name be forgotten by time. Nor yours, or any of the others who come with us. What we do here is the stuff of legend, and we must see it through.'

'You feel aggrieved that you were doubted, I understand that,' Bjordrin said, taking a step back. 'But this is a great risk. You may well be remembered for your folly as for your daring.'

'I would rather die trying than be remembered as the Chosen warrior who made empty promises,' said Kurt.

'There is another thing,' Bjordrin continued in a low tone. 'Another reason we should stay in sight of the shore.'

'You don't know the way,' Kurt said with a short laugh. 'I knew that as soon as we set out. By the gods, this is a voyage of discovery as well as loot, that's the whole point!'

'So how do you propose we find this land of Araby?' asked Bjordrin.

'I have seen maps of the lands that lie to the south,' Kurt said, clapping a hand to his shoulder. 'The coast of Araby lies far, far to the south of Fjaergard, weeks of fair sailing. If you can read the stars and tell me when we're that far south, we simply turn east until we sight land.'

'But why not just follow the coast to begin with?' asked Bjordrin with a shake of his head. 'It makes no sense to me.'

'East of Estalia lies the land of Tilea, and at its southern tip I have heard there is a large island,' said Kurt. 'It is called Sartosa and it is peopled by pirates. Even their kings and queens are pirates, and they and the corsairs of Araby rule the coast from the Badlands to the Great Ocean. They travel in fleets of many ships, more than a match for our two vessels. If we are seen, it is us who will be the raided, not the raiders.'

Bjordrin absorbed this news sombrely, looking deep into Kurt's eyes. The Chosen smiled and squeezed Bjordin's shoulder.

'Just find out where we are, and we shall let the gods guide us to our destiny,' Kurt said with a nod. 'I can feel that we are far from them now, their breath grows weaker in my ears, but they are still there. They still watch over me, and the rest of you.'

THAT NIGHT, THE weather was calm, the wind dropping to little more than a few desultory puffs. The sky was clear and the sea placid. Kurt had heard of the calm before the storm, but

the calm after the storm was something he had never encountered. The stars were different this far south, and as he stood at the prow listening to the slow lap of waves on the hull and the faint stirrings of the wind around the ship, he was contented. Though it had been a wrench to his soul to leave Heldred and Anyata, now that the great adventure was truly underway, he was glad.

Anyata's words came to mind, and he resolved that he would earn honour and glory for his family, whatever the cost. This was the life he had chosen, the life of the marauder, and now he lived by its rules.

A change in the steady rhythm of the waves caught Kurt's attention, an increase in tempo that disturbed his thoughts. They were drifting with a bare mast, letting the current carry them south, and the only sounds were the weather, and the snores and sleepy mutterings of the crew. He turned and saw Aelfir at the tiller, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. There was a man stationed to keep watch on either side too, and they were both in view, clearly alert.

A splash to Kurt's right took him to the starboard side, where Jarlen's ship coasted along less than a hundred yards away. All seemed to be well on the other vessel. He gave their lookouts a wave, and received raised hands in return.

The splashing sound drifted over the water again, further astern, and Kurt walked back along the length of the ship, jumping from one oarsmen's bench to the next following the noise. Moonlight dappled on the water, and as Kurt headed astern he saw an area of whiteness roughly fifty yards astern of Jarlen's longship.

Feeling ill at ease, he strained his eyes, and saw what looked to be a faint bow wave, but there was nothing in the water he could see. The whiteness intensified, and he realised it was coming from beneath the waves, and was closing on Jarlen's ship. Confused, he called to Aelfir and pointed. The Norse veteran looked for a long while, and then turned back to Kurt, eyes wide with terror.

'Ware! Ware! Leviathan!' the steersman screamed. As Kurt looked on he saw a shape rising out of the water. Or rather, he

saw a silhouette block out a large patch of reflections on the water, up and up until it obscured a swathe of stars along the horizon. Five glowing white orbs lifted into the air, bathing the sea in their baleful light.

Aelfir's shouting had roused the crew, and they leapt to their feet, reaching for swords, maces and axes and unhooking their shields from the side of the ship.

'Danger astern!' bellowed Kurt, waving his arms furiously to attract the sentries on the other ship. He heard a distant shriek as the man at their tiller turned and saw the monstrosity bearing down on him. Kurt watched him fleeing the aftdeck yelling incoherently, and switched his gaze back to the beast.

Its skin glistened darkly in the moonlight and the pale whiteness that shone from its eyes. Fins and tentacles thrashed across the surface, propelling it after the longship with considerable speed. As it closed the distance, a great maw opened and the moon shone from rows of sword-long teeth, the upper jaw twice the height of a man. The air was filled with a great clamouring from both vessels and Jarlen's men scrambled for weapons, while Kurt's crew yelled warnings and encouragement.

'Get us alongside, we have to help!' roared Kurt. Aelfir stood transfixed for a moment, until Bjordrin appeared and shoved him from the tiller and took control. Others jumped to the oars, ramming them through the oarlocks and pulling independently until Bjordrin started shouting out a rapid beat for them to follow.

The leviathan crashed into the stern of Jarlen's ship, its jaws smashing through planking, ripping apart the rudder and sending shards of timber scything along the deck. The longship sagged in the water as the beast's weight bore down on it, and the prow lifted into the air until the keel was exposed and water was flooding into the stern, tumbling men, ropes, barrels and weapons down the length of the ship.

Tentacles as thick as a man lashed out onto the stricken ship, bony hooks biting deep into the hull in a deadly grip. Smaller appendages whipped back and forth from the bubbling sea,

striking out at the men, sending them tumbling, carved apart by chitinous blades.

'We must get away,' yelled one of Kurt's crew, Aelfwine the Viper, hurling herself at the tiller and wrenching it from Bjordrin's hands. Bjordrin grabbed a handful of her plaited blonde locks and pulled her away, but the rudder swung freely, pitching the ship away from the monster, toppling people to the deck.

'We fight together and we die together!' roared Kurt, pulling himself to his feet. Aelfwine collapsed to the deck as if struck. Kurt ripped his sword free, seeing Bjordrin grab hold of the tiller once more, and charged towards the prow. The crew fell back from him as he passed, seeing the wytchfires burning in his eyes, the runes carved into his skin glowing now with a ruddy light.

Kurt leapt up onto the dragon figurehead right at the prow, sword pointed at the leviathan.

'Pull harder!' he demanded, waving his free hand to the rhythm of Bjordrin's calls. 'Break your backs if you need to! Pull!'

The longship was crashing through the waves on a converging course with Jarlen's ship and Kurt could see the crew trying to fight back against the creature from the ocean's depths. They hacked at the thick tentacles with axes and swords, fending off the whiplash attacks of the creature with hastily-raised shields.

Kurt was barely ten yards from the creature now, and the air was thick with its stench – a mix of rotting fish and effluent. He could see now that it had not one jaw but three, two lower maws extending out from under the main jaw to gnaw at the longship's hull below the waterline. Two pale white eyes swivelled towards him, and Kurt saw malign intelligence in that gaze. For a moment he and the creature stared at each other, sharing a strange moment of recognition. Kurt could feel the touch of the gods on the beast, and perhaps it saw the same in him.

The moment passed.

A limb flailed up out of the waves towards the Chosen, a booming crash of water as the creature attacked. Kurt struck

one-handed with his sword, the blade deflecting off the bone plates and ridges that dotted the member. It cracked against the figurehead, nearly toppling him, and Kurt was forced to leap back onto the deck.

'One last pull! Now!' Kurt bellowed, and the crew gave an almighty heave on the oars. The longship surged forward, ramming into the massive bulk of the creature and jarring to a halt.

Kurt was flung forward, but he managed to get his right foot under the fall and surged up, using the momentum to leap from the longship onto the deck of Jarlen's vessel. He saw the bald Norse captain shouting orders to his crew, double-headed axe in his hands as he swung at the tentacles. The dead and injured littered the deck, which was awash with blood and seawater.

'Bind the ships together, we're sinking!' pleaded Jarlen, spitting blood between shattered teeth.

'We'll both go down then,' came an answering cry from Kurt's vessel, but before he could yell the order, Bjordrin was at the side, flinging a rope across.

Kurt grabbed it in his left hand and pulled, swinging the other longship around until his muscles burned with the strain. Ducking beneath a swiping limb, he made the rope fast to a bench.

Other Norse were leaping across with ropes in their hands and Kurt left them to it, ducking his head and barrelling down the ship towards the leviathan.

With an incoherent scream, Kurt leapt from the deck, a two-handed grasp on his sword, straight at the beast. The sword blade punched through an area of flesh between two of its eyes and the leviathan heaved, dragging the ship even further into the water.

A tentacle swung out of the gloom and hurled Kurt to his back. The grasping appendage circled around his thigh, buckling his armour under the strain. One of the creature's secondary jaws swung up over the stern, swaying left and right, teeth like daggers snapping together as the tentacle dragged him close.

Kurt sawed at the limb between the bony hooks and the flesh parted suddenly, the wounded tentacle whipping back into the water.

'Come and eat this!' he growled, launching himself again at the leviathan. He felt the power of the gods surge through his body and he swung his sword with his full weight behind it. Teeth shattered from the blow, and the tip carved a bloody furrow across the creature's face. A strange squeal, unbelievably high pitched, emitted from the creature, and two of its major limbs released their hold on the ship, which buoyed up under the lessened burden.

Kurt hacked left and right, only vaguely aware of others just behind him, unable to get any closer due to his wild sword swings. White pus-like blood fountained into the air as Kurt plunged his sword into one of the eyes, and the creature gave out another piercing screech and reared up, releasing its grip on the ship.

Kurt was tossed a dozen yards into the air, limbs flailing. The creature, obviously not used to such resistance, was slipping back beneath the waves, but as Kurt plunged downwards towards the sea, he arrowed his body, sword held in front. He was not a great swimmer, but he carved into the sea like an arrow, the sword tip brushing against flesh, the milky white life fluid of the leviathan bursting out in a cloud around him.

Kurt thrashed under the surface, feeling his blade bite heavily several times, and then the glowing light from the eyes dimmed as the creature fled to the ocean's depths, plunging him into darkness.

His battle-fury spent, Kurt began to panic, realising that the weight of his armour was dragging him down after his adversary. He would rather die than discard his armour and forced himself to calm down. Sheathing his sword, he could see a faint light wavering above and struck out with slow, even strokes of his arms and legs. Shapes splashed into the water around him, and there were figures swimming down towards him, arms outstretched to help him to the surface.

Breaking above the waves, Kurt gave a monstrous roar with what little breath remained and then gulped in a huge lungful

of air. To his left, Aethwine held his arm, kicking strongly towards the ragged timbers of Jarlen's boat; to his right was Kothi Silvercraft, who helped him pull himself up on a rope lowered by Bjordrin.

Kurt flopped over the ship's side and lay on his back on the deck, gasping for life. A cluster of faces appeared in his vision, to be waved away by Jarlen, who knelt down beside him.

'By the gods man!' the captain grinned. 'None who saw that can ever doubt that you are favoured by the gods.'

Bjordrin's bearded face appeared next to Jarlen, his expression one of concern.

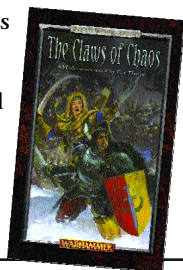
'Better hope we don't meet any elves, eh, Chosen?' he said with a sigh.

Lashed together, the two ships drifted southwards on the current, both crews too exhausted from their endeavours to row or make repairs.

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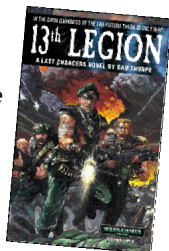
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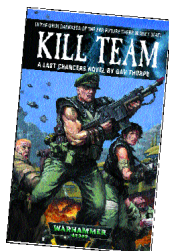
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