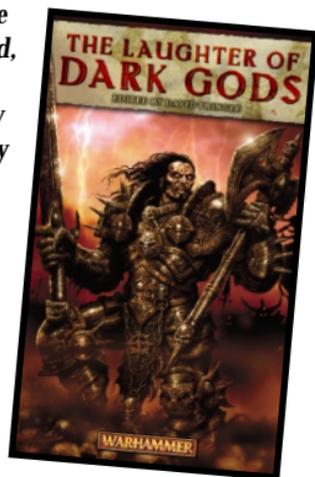


THE LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS

Warhammer Fantasy Short Stories

THE OGRE RAN a rope-like finger over the tip of his club. 'Shall I brain you,' he growled, 'before throwing you into the sea?' His shoulders moved in a grotesque shrug. 'Why make a mess?' And he laid his club delicately on the ground and advanced on me, hands spread. – from The Song by Steve Baxter

IN THE DARK and dangerous world of Warhammer, dead things walk, wild magic is all around and the fell powers of Chaos threaten to bring corruption to all. Here are eleven dark Warhammer fantasy stories, assembled by noted *Interzone* editor David Pringle.



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FROM
THE LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS
By William King

FROM THE BACK of his dark horse, Kurt von Diehl stared into the Chaos Wastes. A strange red haze hung over rainbow-coloured ground and the outline of the land seemed to shift like sand-dunes in a breeze.

He turned to look down at Oleg Zaharoff, the last survivor of his original gang. The rat-like little man had followed him all the way from the Empire through the steppes of Kislev to these poisoned lands at the edge of the world. Now their path led clearly out into the desert.

‘It’s been a long road,’ said Zaharoff, ‘but we’re here.’

Kurt raised his hand and shielded his eyes with one black-gauntleted hand. He drank in the scene. Visions of this place had haunted his dreams ever since he had slain the Chaos warrior and claimed his baroque black armour and his runesword. He rubbed the inlaid skull on his chest-plate thoughtfully.

‘Aye. Here hell has touched the earth and men may aspire to godhood. Here we can become masters of our own destiny. I have dreamed about making my way to the uttermost north, to the Black Gate. I will stand before great Khorne and he will grant me power. We will return and claim my inheritance from the brothers who ousted me.’

He spoke as a man speaks when he has a vision in which he does not fully believe, as much to convince himself as to convince any listener. He had his doubts but he pushed them

aside. Had not the armour already granted him a measure of the strength of Chaos?

He made himself savour thoughts of his coming revenge. Soon he would reclaim his ancestral lands from the treacherous kinsmen who had banished him to the life of an outlaw.

Guided by the call that had lured him across a hundred leagues, Kurt nudged his steed on down the path. With a last look back towards the lands of men, Oleg Zaharoff followed him.

NIGHT CAME, A darkening of the haze that surrounded them, a flickering of fearful stars in the sky. Far, far to the north a dark aurora danced, staining the sky a deeper, emptier black. They made camp for the night within a ruined building, surrounded by grasping, fungus-covered trees.

'This must have been a farm once, before the last incursion of Chaos,' said Zaharoff. Kurt slumped down against a blackened wall and gazed over at him interestedly. Zaharoff was a Kislevite and knew many tales about the Wastes that bordered his native land, none of them reassuring.

'Two hundred years ago, when the sky last darkened and the hordes of Chaos came, they say that most of northern Kislev was overrun. Magnus the Pious came to my people's aid and the host was driven back. But Chaos did not give up all the ground it had conquered. This must have been part of the overrun land.'

He picked up something, a small doll that had lain where it had been thrown aside. Some freak of this strange land must have preserved it, Kurt decided. Sadly he found himself wondering what had become of its owner.

Shocked by his own weakness, he tried to push the thought aside.

'Soon the horde will march again,' he said. 'We will drown the world in blood.'

Kurt was startled. He had said the words but they were not his own. They seemed to have emerged from some hidden recess of his mind. He felt something lurking back there, had done since the day he put on the armour. He wondered if he was going mad.

Zaharoff gave him a strange look. 'How can you be so sure, Kurt? We don't really know that much about this place. Only what you have dreamed – and that your armour came from here. How can you be sure that we will find what we seek and not death?'

The words echoed too closely Kurt's own darker thoughts. 'I know I am right. Do you doubt me?'

Zaharoff threw the doll to one side. 'Of course not. If you are wrong we have lost everything.'

'Go to sleep, Oleg. Tomorrow you will need your strength. Doubt will only sap it.'

Kurt laid his sword and axe near at hand and closed his eyes. Almost at once he fell into blood-stained dreams. It seemed that he climbed towards some great reward over a mound of ripped and squirming bodies. No matter how fast he climbed he could not reach the top of the pile. A long way above him something huge, with baleful eyes, watched his struggles with amusement.

THE SOUND OF scuttling awoke Kurt. He snapped open his eyes and seized up his weapons. Looking across at Oleg he saw his companion was gazing around in fear.

'They come,' he said. Zaharoff nodded. Von Diehl arose and made towards the entrance. Before he reached it, he saw his way was barred by small bearded figures clad in dark-painted armour and clutching axes and hammers. Their skins were green or white as the bellies of fish from some underground pool. They were the height of children but as broad as a strong man.

Kurt knew they were dwarfs – but seduced to the path of Chaos.

'Khorne has provided us with a sacrifice,' said the leader in a voice as deep as a mine. Kurt beheaded him with one swift stroke, then he leapt among them, striking left and right with sword and axe.

'Blood for the Blood God!' he cried, bellowing out the warcry which echoed through his dreams. 'Skulls for the skull throne!'

He ploughed into the dwarfs like a ship through waves. Behind him he left a trail of red havoc. Small figures fell

clutching at the stumps of arms, trying to hold in place jaws that had been sheared from their faces.

Kurt felt unholy joy surge through him, searing through his veins like sweetest poison. It seeped into him from his armour. With every death he felt a little stronger, a little happier. Mad mirth bubbled through him, insane laughter frothed from his lips. He had felt a pale foretaste of this madness in previous battles but here in the Chaos Wastes, under the eerie moons, it was like nectar. He was drunk on battle.

'Kurt, look out!' he heard Oleg cry. He twisted and took the stroke of a hammer on his armoured forearm. His sword fell from numb hands. He saw what Zaharoff had tried to warn him of. Two masked and goggled dwarfs were manhandling a long tube into position, bringing it to bear on him. He punched the hammer wielder in the face, feeling a nose break under the spiked knuckles of his gauntlet, then swung his axe back and threw it. The weapon went spinning through the air and buried itself in the head of the leading dwarf.

The warrior fell backwards, the tube lurched skyward and a gout of flame erupted from its tip. A white-hot sheet of flame blazed past Kurt's face. Something impacted on the structure behind him. The building exploded, the horses whinnied with terror.

He turned to look at the ruins of the old farm. Everyone else did the same for one brief moment. Kurt stooped and picked up his sword. The remaining dwarfs looked at him.

'Chosen of Khorne,' said the nearest one. 'There has been a mistake. We did not realize you were one of the Blood God's champions. Lead us and we will follow.'

He bowed his head to the ground. Kurt was tempted to hack it off, to continue the bloodletting, but he restrained himself. Such followers might be useful.

'Very well,' Kurt said. 'But any treachery and you all die.'

The dwarfs nodded solemnly. Kurt began to laugh until red tears ran down his face. His laughter died in his throat. He pulled off his helmet to check for cuts and he saw Zaharoff start, a look of pure terror crossing his face.

'What is it?' he asked. 'What do you see?'

'Your face, Kurt. It's beginning to change.'

KURT AND HIS warband pushed on further into the Wastes, seeking foes to slay and booty to plunder. Each day as they marched Kurt's face became more twisted, more like that of a beast. At first there was discomfort, then pain, then agony, but he endured it stoically. The dwarfs seemed pleased, taking it as a sign that their master was blessed by the Blood God. Kurt noticed that Oleg could no longer look him in the face.

'What is wrong?' asked Kurt. They were standing atop a butte of wind-sculpted ebony, looking down at a landscape where crystalline flowers bloomed.

In the distance, far to the north, Kurt could see dark clouds gathering.

'Nothing, Kurt. I am uneasy. We have encountered no one for days and a storm is coming from the north. By the look of those clouds it will be no natural tempest.'

'Come, Oleg, you can be honest with me. We have known each other long enough. That is not what worries you.'

Zaharoff looked at him sidelong. Behind them the dwarfs were stowing their gear, pitching small black tents with frames made from carved bone. Zaharoff licked his lips.

'I am troubled. I do not like this place. It is so vast and strange and empty. It could swallow a man and no one would notice he was gone.'

Kurt laughed. 'Having second thoughts? Do you wish to turn back? If you want to return I will not stop you. Go, if you wish to.'

Zaharoff looked back the way they had come. Kurt could tell what he was thinking. He was measuring the length of the way against his chances of survival on his own. To the south something large and black flapped across the red-tinted sky. Zaharoff shook his head, his shoulders slumped.

'I am committed. For good or ill, I will follow you.' His voice was soft and resigned.

Yorri, the dwarf chief, approached. 'Bad storm coming, boss. Best be prepared.'

'I'm going to stay and watch,' said Kurt. The dwarf shrugged and turned to walk away.

OVERHEAD BLACK CLOUDS boiled. The wind roared past, tugging at the fur of his face. Pink lightning lashed down from the sky.

He watched the horses buck and leap with fear. They could not break free from the iron pins to which the dwarfs had tethered them. He could see foam on their lips.

Thunder rumbled like the laughter of dark gods. Another bolt of lightning split the sky. The crystal flowers pulsed and flared with many-coloured lights as the bolts landed in the grove. For a moment the after-image of the flash blinded him. When he looked back the grove was transformed. Pale witchfire surrounded the blossoms so that there seemed to be two sets of flowers, of solid crystal and shimmering light. It was a scene of weird, alien beauty.

Among the mesas of the tortured land dark clouds prowled forward like giant monsters. He watched as the dust-clouds swept over the crystal flowers, obscuring their light. Flecks of dust drifted up over the edge of the outcrop on which he stood.

He watched rainbows of dust particles dance and spiral in the air before him. They seemed to trap the energy of the lightning and glittered like fairy lights. Where the dust touched him his face tingled and his armour grew warm to the touch.

Once more the lightning flashed. Exultation filled him. He stood untouched and unafraid in the elemental landscape. It seemed that part of him had come home at last. He raised his sword to the sky. Its runes glowed red as blood. He laughed aloud and his voice was merged with the thunder.

'DAMN DUST GETS everywhere,' said Oleg Zaharoff. 'It's in my hair, my clothes. I think I even swallowed some.'

'The dust is powdered warpstone,' said Yorri. 'Ash from the gatefires that still burn at the northernmost pole, where the fires of hell spill over into the world. Soon changes will start.'

'You mean around here?' asked Oleg.

'The land. Our bodies. What does it matter?' The dwarf cackled.

Oleg smiled crazily. 'I do feel different.'

'Chaos will make us strong,' said Kurt, trying to reassure himself.

A dwarf scuttled closer. He came right up to Kurt. 'Master, we have sighted prey. Coming into the grove of flowers is a

warband. By the colour of their armour and the lewdness of their banner I would say they are followers of thrice- accursed Slaanesh.'

At the mention of the name Kurt felt inchoate fury fill him. Visions of slaughter rose unbidden before his eyes. Sweet hate filled him. Ancient enmity lay between Khorne and Slaanesh.

'Prepare your weapons! We will attack them as they leave the grove.' The order had left his lips before he even had time to think.

The dwarf grinned evilly and nodded. Kurt wondered, was it just his imagination or were the slave-dwarfs' teeth growing sharper?

They waited at the edge of the grove where the path ran between two great mesas. The dwarfs grumbled happily in their own tongue. Zaharoff nervously sharpened his weapon until Kurt told him to stop. They crouched behind the shelter of some boulders. Nearby Yorri and his crewman had set up their fire-tube ready to blast the first target that came in sight.

The enemy came slowly into view. They were led by a woman clad in lime-green plate mail. Her yellow and orange hair streamed behind her in the breeze, and she smiled to herself as if in the throes of some secret rapture. Her mount was bipedal, bird-like, with a long snout and deep, human-seeming eyes. The woman carried a huge war banner. Spiked to its top was a child's head above the carven body of a beckoning woman.

A long chain of slender metal links bound a gross, bull-headed giant to the woman's saddle. The minotaur was half-again as tall as Kurt and muscled like a dwarf blacksmith. It looked at the woman with adoring, worshipful eyes.

Behind it marched half a dozen beastmen. Each had one exposed female breast, although the rest of their naked bodies were obviously male. At the rear were two twisted elves, clad in thonged black leather and carrying crossbows. When the dwarfs saw them they gibbered excitedly to each other.

Kurt gestured for the dwarfs to be silent. The Slaaneshi moved ever closer, seemingly oblivious to their peril.

'Aazella Silkenthighs,' muttered Yorri. Kurt looked at him. 'She is favoured by the Lord of Pleasure. Beware her whip.'

Kurt nodded and drew his finger across his throat. The dwarf once more fell silent. Kurt gave Aazella his attention. He noticed that behind her the storm had affected the crystal flowers. They had grown to be higher than a man, and seemed thinner and more translucent, like blooms of glazed sugar. Bloated black insects moved over them, gnawing the leaves.

The enemy were no more than a dozen yards from them when the eyes of the impaled head above the banner opened. It licked its lips and spoke in a horrid, lascivious voice: 'Beware, mistress. Foes wait in ambush.'

Kurt leapt to his feet. 'Blood for the Blood God!' he shouted, gesturing his men forward with a motion of his axe.

With a roar, the dwarf tube spat forth its projectile. The missile buried itself in the chest of the man-bull, knocking it from its feet. It fell to the ground, its entrails pouring from its ruined abdomen.

His men raced forward to attack as Kurt charged the woman on her steed. The animal licked out at him with a flickering tongue, long as a rope, glistening stickily. It reminded him of the tongue of a toad. He chopped at it with his runesword, cutting it in two. The beast retracted its stump, whimpering in pain.

He closed and struck it with his axe. The blade failed to bite on the creature's resilient hide. Above him the child's head kept up a babbling stream of obscenities.

Aazella lifted the standard and smashed it into his chest. The blow landed with surprising force and knocked him from his feet. Above him the beast of Slaanesh skittered and danced. Despite the black spots floating before his eyes he managed to roll clear of its talons.

He lashed out with his blade, hamstringing the creature. It fell to one side as he pulled himself to his feet. The woman let go of the standard and rolled from her saddle. With amazing agility she performed a handspring and came to land in a fighting stance, pulling a long metallic whip from her belt.

She licked her red lips, revealing fanged incisors. Then she smiled at him. 'You seek a pleasurable death, warrior. I shall see you writhe in ecstasy before you die.'

'Die, spawn of Slaanesh!' Kurt bellowed, rushing at her. 'Die in the name of Khorne!'

As he invoked his dread lord's name he once more felt the strength of murderous bloodlust flow through him. He aimed a stroke which would have split her in two. She avoided it like a gazelle leaping from a lion's spring, then stuck out a foot, tripping him.

'Clumsy man,' she taunted. 'You'll have to do better.'

He growled like a wild animal and leapt to his feet. This time he advanced towards her more cautiously, feinting gently with his sword, preparing to swing his axe. Somewhere he could hear the voice of a child, taunting him.

He struck with the axe and once more she evaded it. This time she struck at him with her whip. It looped around his throat, blocking his breath. As it completed its last coil, he found himself glaring into serpentine eyes. The head of a snake tipped the lash. It hissed and bit into his cheek.

Knowing he was poisoned drove him to redoubled effort. Determined to at least sacrifice her in the name of his god, he dropped his weapons and with both hands grabbed the whip's metallic line. He jerked her towards him.

So sudden was his move that she did not let go of the weapon but was drawn towards him. He released the whip and grabbed her throat with his mailed hands. He began to tighten his grip.

They fell together like lovers. From the bite in his cheek waves of pure pleasure pulsed, mingling with his berserk hatred. He shut his eyes and squeezed ever harder as the pleasure mounted. It burst inside him as intense as pain and then he knew only darkness and cold.

'WHAT HAPPENED?' KURT heard a deep, gruff voice ask. The words were his own.

He raised thick fingers to his face to feel the fur of his forehead. His arms felt like tree trunks, thick and bloated. His chest felt broader. His voice seemed to rumble from a chasm deep within him.

From off in the distance he could hear an agonized scream which ended in mad, gibbering laughter and a moan of pleasure.

'I thought you were dead, Kurt,' said Oleg. His face drifted into view. It looked blotched and leprous. Two small growths

had appeared on his forehead and his shoulder seemed to have a hump on it.

‘You’re not looking too well, Oleg,’ growled Kurt.

‘You have been... ill. After you killed the woman, you fell into a feverish swoon. You lay and gibbered for two long days.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘An unnatural thing. You both fell. Your hands were about her throat. I approached to give her the coup-de-grace but her armour rose from the ground and walked off into the wasteland. Her eyes were closed. I could have sworn she was dead.’

‘We have seen the last of her,’ boomed Kurt. ‘What became of her men?’

‘Yorri and the lads ate the beastmen. You can hear the screams of the elves.’

The little man shuddered. ‘Truly, Kurt, we are in hell.’

‘GREETINGS, BROTHER, WHITHER goest thou?’ The speaker was garbed in rune-encrusted plate. A full helmet obscured his face except for reddish glowing eyes. He was tall and thin, predatory-looking as a mantis. Behind him was ranged a force of mangy beastmen. They loomed menacingly against a landscape of redly glowing craters.

Kurt studied the other warrior warily, suspecting treachery. ‘I am bound for the deep lands near the Gates.’

‘Truly thou art the chosen of Khorne,’ said the other mockingly. ‘A thousand years ago I spoke similarly. I am sure the Blood God will reward thee suitably.’

‘Do not mock me, little man,’ said Kurt dangerously.

‘I do not mock thee. I envy thy determination. I had not the will to progress further in the service of our dark lord. I fear I was over-cautious. Now I wander these lands forlornly. ‘Tis a drab existence.’

Zaharoff spoke. ‘You do not seriously expect us to believe this tale? A thousand years!’

The slender warrior laughed. ‘Ten years, a century, a millennium, what does it matter? Time flows strangely here at the world’s edge. All who dwell within the Wastes learn that eventually.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Kurt.

'I am Prince Deiter the Unchanging'

'Kurt von Diehl'

'May I join thy quest, Sir Kurt? It may prove mildly amusing.'

'I'm not sure I believe in you, prince. A foppish, cowardly servant of Khorne.'

Once more the black prince laughed sweetly. 'You will find, Sir Kurt, that Chaos holds all possibilities. Here nothing is impossible.'

Zaharoff moved closer to Kurt. 'I do not trust this one. Perhaps it would be best to kill him.'

Kurt looked down at him. 'Later. For now he is useful.'

The beastmen fell into ranks beside the dwarfs. Dieter rode beside Kurt. Zaharoff limped along somewhat apart, keeping a cautious eye on their new companions.

The saga continues in
**THE LAUGHTER OF
DARK GODS**

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