

DARKBLADE: LORD OF RUIN

The fifth tale of Malus Darkblade

By Dan Abnett & Mike Lee

In the world of Warhammer, no race is more feared than the dark elves, and no member of this race is more cunning and treacherous than Malus Darkblade. Tricked by the foul daemon Tz'arkan, Malus has a single year to find five artefacts and return them, or his immortal soul will be forfeit. After many months of hardship and adventure, Malus has just one artefact left to find - the Amulet of Vaurog. On the run from Har Ganeth, the rogue dark elf is captured and taken to Naggarond, where he is ordered by the Witch King to lead the defence against a Chaos invasion. As battle rages around him, with assassins and traitors dogging his every move, what chance does Darkblade have of ever finding the amulet, let alone getting back to Tz'arkan before his time runs out?



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 best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and the acclaimed Horus Heresy novel, *Horus Rising*.

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The following is an excerpt from *Darkblade: Lord of Ruin* by Dan Abnett & Mike Lee.

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SMOKE HUNG LIKE A pall over the City of Executioners, wreathing the broad hill in streamers of grey that tasted of cinders and the grease of cooked flesh. High in the blade-like towers of the temple fortress the sacrificial bells were ringing, calling to the faithful to bare their blades and give thanks for Har Ganeth's deliverance. Tortured screams and the howl of hungry mobs rose like a paean into the cloudy summer sky.

The fighting had raged for more than a week, and the lower quarters of Har Ganeth had suffered the worst. Two days after the riots had ended the narrow, maze-like streets were still choked with corpses and the charred remains of burnt-out buildings. Fresh splashes of vivid red painted the rust-coloured walls of the White City, and the shadowy avenues reeked of the charnel stench of the battlefield. Shopkeepers and tradesmen picked their way carefully amongst the piled debris, looking for useful bits of salvage. Groups of young children ran along the cobblestone streets, brandishing tiny, stained knives and rawhide cords strung with severed fingers decorated with rings of silver and gold. Axes and meat cleavers flashed and thunked into dead flesh, separating vertebrae with a wet crackle as the druchii collected severed heads to stack outside their bloodstained doors. Only a few days before, many of those same folk had taken up torch and blade and risen against the priests of Khaine's temple, believing that the apocalypse was at hand. But the would-be Swordbearer of Khaine was revealed to be an impostor, and the leaders of the uprising either driven off or slain, so the

people of the city bent their heads and piled skulls outside their shops and homes, praying that the vengeful shadow of the temple executioners would pass them by. At the sound of tramping feet they hunched their shoulders and lowered their gaze to the bloody stones, fearful of attracting the attention of the temple executioners, or worse, the hungry gaze of Khaine's bloodthirsty brides.

Thus, when the heavy tread of a nauglir and the dull clatter of armour echoed down the narrow streets the people of Har Ganeth hid their eyes and paid no heed to the highborn rider – or the black-hilted blade buckled at his side. Only the city's ravens took notice of his passage, raising gore-stained beaks from their bloated meals and flapping great, glossy wings. 'Blood and souls!' they croaked exultantly, regarding Malus Darkblade with lantern-yellow eyes. 'Scourge! Scourge!'

Damned nuisances, Malus thought, his scowl deepening the hollows of his sunken cheeks and drawing dark lines around his thin lips. Spite, sensing its master's irritation, tossed its blocky head and snapped at the capering ravens, scattering venomous drool from its toothy maw. The highborn settled the cold one with an expert tug on the reins and guided the warbeast around the burnt wreckage of an overturned wagon. More black shapes circled overhead, floating like shadows in his wake. The ravens were sacred to Khaine, he'd learned. Is it the sword that stirs them so, he thought, or is it me?

Something cold and hard slithered serpentine around Malus's heart. A voice hissed like molten lead along his bones, setting his teeth on edge. A meaningless distinction, Tz'arkan sneered. You and the burning blade are now one and the same.

The highborn jerked upright in his saddle, armoured fists clenching the thick reins hard enough to make the leather creak as a wave of freezing pressure swelled behind his eyes. He bit back a savage curse, blinking at the black spots that drifted like ashes across his vision. His pulse throbbed turgidly in his temples, veins thick with oily, black ice.

Tz'arkan's hold over him was nearly complete.

It was the daemon's damnable curse that had brought him to Har Ganeth in the first place, seeking one of the five arcane relics that

would free Tz'arkan from his crystal prison in the Chaos Wastes – and allow Malus to reclaim his stolen soul. The Warpsword of Khaine was one such relic, but in the millennia since the daemon's imprisonment the weapon had found its way into the possession of the Temple of Khaine, where it was kept in anticipation of the day when the Lord of Murder's chosen one would claim it and usher in the cataclysmic Time of Blood. According to the elders of the temple, that chosen one was none other than Malekith himself, the merciless Witch King of Naggaroth, but Malus knew that to be a convenient fiction, a lie told in the pursuit of temporal wealth and power.

The truth, as it often happened in the Land of Chill, was rather murkier than that.

Malus managed a bitter chuckle. 'Could it be that the great daemon has wound himself up in his own webs of deceit?' he growled. 'Are you sorry now for making me your catspaw? It was your own machinations that put the blade into my hands, after all. My fate, as you so gleefully put it.'

He'd learned a lot about fate in the ten months since he'd entered Tz'arkan's chamber in the far north. Fate was the word that puppets used to describe the tugging of invisible strings. It hadn't been fate that had drawn Malus to the north in search of power and wealth; he had been pointed at Tz'arkan's temple and loosed like an arrow, manipulated into undertaking the expedition by his half-sister Nagaira. Yet she herself was being manipulated in turn by Malus's own mother, the sorceress Eldire. Eldire had known of the daemon and its ages-old schemes somehow. She had learned of the prophecy and the Time of Blood, and had spent untold years shaping people and events to bring about their fruition. Not to serve Tz'arkan, but to usurp the daemon's machinations for her own secret purposes. It was an act of towering ambition and ruthlessness that culminated in the birth of her son, Malus. She had shaped him to be the lever that would set the daemon's inscrutable designs into motion.

But prophecies, by their very nature, were slippery, treacherous things.

Others had tried to bend him to their will, or claim the mantle of prophecy for their own. Nagaira had tried to bend him through deception and sorcery, seeking to turn the daemon to her own purposes. Worse still, his twisted half-brother Urial, poisoned in the womb by Eldire herself and given to the temple as a sacrifice, had survived the Cauldron of Blood and been initiated into the mysteries of Khaine's cult. Dissident members of the cult who refused to accept Malekith as Khaine's Swordbearer believed that Urial was the chosen one, and the circumstances of the prophecy fit well enough. He was secretly groomed to claim the sword when the time was right, and after his beloved half-sister Yasmir was revealed as a living saint of the Bloody-Handed God he betrayed Malus and fled to Har Ganeth, where he summoned the temple zealots to cast down the heretical elders of the cult.

For a week the City of Executioners tore itself apart as the zealots led its citizens in a bloody uprising. Urial had come very close indeed to achieving his aims. Too close for comfort, Malus admitted to himself, absently raising a hand to his breastplate where Urial's sword had slipped between his ribs. But for the daemon's power, he would have died.

Tz'arkan had sunk its talons deep into his body, spreading its corruption a little more each time Malus had drawn upon its infernal strength. Even now, his skin felt like ice, his muscles shrivelled and weak, aching for another taste of daemonic power. He had only a few months left to claim the last of the daemon's five artefacts and return them to the temple in the north or his soul would be forever lost, but Malus couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't already too late. Had he fought for the last ten months to reclaim his soul only to become a daemonhost once Tz'arkan was free?

Malus had good reason to believe that had been the daemon's plan all along.

Foolish druchii, the daemon spat, The warpsword was not meant to be wielded by the likes of you. You see it as nothing more than a sharp blade, but it is a talisman of supernal power. As ever, you trifle with forces beyond your ability to contemplate.

The highborn caught Spite sniffing at the bloated corpse of a dead horse, still trapped in the overturned wagon's traces. Malus put his spurs to the warbeast's flanks and startled the nauglir back into a heavy-footed trot. 'Oh, but you are mistaken,' he replied. 'I see it as a fine weapon and a talisman of great power – one I have every intention of using as I see fit. What do you care, so long as I am doing your damned bidding?'

In truth, Malus suspected he knew the source of the daemon's concern. The warpsword radiated power like a burning brand – even now he could feel its heat, seeping from its scabbard and sinking into his bones. Power enough to supplant the daemon's icy gifts and resist Tz'arkan's will, or so he hoped.

You imagine that you carry a mere blade on your hip? No. That is Khaine's own hunger given form, the daemon hissed.

'Then I will see that it is kept well-fed,' Malus replied.

Of course you will, Tz'arkan said mockingly. You have no choice. The sword has claimed you, and like all those who wielded it before you it will one day turn in your hand when you fail to give its due.

Something in the daemon's voice gave Malus pause. He glanced down at the warpsword's black hilt and felt a sudden chill.

It's just another lie, he told himself. Malus laid a hand on the sword's black pommel and savoured its warmth. It's the only chance you have against Tz'arkan, and the daemon knows it. 'Best for you then if we part ways before the blade gets the better of me,' the highborn said.

The daemon's laughter etched itself like acid into Malus's bones. No, best for you, Darkblade. Bad enough that your allotted time is running out – now you trifle with an eldritch artefact that hungers for your life's blood. Don't you understand? Your doom is sealed! The best you can hope for now is to find the Amulet of Vaurog and return to my temple in the north before you are undone. Otherwise your soul will belong to me until the end of time.

With the daemon's mirth echoing jaggedly in his head Malus kicked Spite into a canter, no longer caring what the cold one caught between its snapping jaws or crushed to paste underfoot. His

thoughts roiled like the murderous brew in Khaine's own cauldron as he contemplated his next move.

The farther down the wide hill Malus went the worse the devastation became. The highborn districts around the temple fortress near the summit had been largely untouched; each home was like a small citadel unto itself, ideally designed to fend off all but the most determined assaults. The lowborn districts further down the slope had suffered far more, first at the hands of the temple warriors and then the successive riots that had raged across Har Ganeth for days on end. Many of the stone structures had been blackened by fire and several had collapsed completely, spilling their charred contents onto the streets.

But it was the merchants' quarter and the warehouse districts at the base of the hill that had suffered worst of all. Many shopkeepers had shut their doors and hoped to weather the storm, but as the riots gave way to open warfare between the zealots and the temple loyalists the quarter became a no-man's land caught between the warring factions. Shops were pillaged or burned in the riots, then had their bones picked clean by scavengers as the fighting wore on.

Beyond the merchants' quarter the slave market and the warehouse district were in ruins. It was here that the fighting raged hottest, once Urial and his zealots seized the temple and trapped the loyalists out on the streets. Large warbands of blood witches and executioners had been isolated by mobs of frenzied citizens and forced to take refuge in slavekeepers' stables or shipping houses. Fires touched off by the vicious street fighting had raged unchecked for days, and the air around the wreckage was thick with tendrils of turgid, stinking smoke. When the wind shifted Malus could catch glimpses of the city walls, rising untouched above the devastation. If anything the walls had only served to hem in the carnage, turning Har Ganeth's rage back upon itself as the city tore itself apart.

He was still within the warehouse district, less than half a mile from the city gate when he heard the first stirrings of the mob. Their bloodthirsty roar shook him from his bitter reverie, their cries of 'Blood for the Blood God!' echoing weirdly along the ruined streets. The sounds seemed to be coming from just up ahead, though he

couldn't be certain of anything in the shifting smoke. For a fleeting moment he contemplated altering his course, but with a flash of irritation he pushed the thought aside. He could guess what the mob was after, and it didn't include the likes of him. The highborn spurred his mount on through the smoke, the nauglir's broad feet crunching cinders and scorched bones with every step.

The sounds of the mob ebbed and flowed, muffled by the wreckage and the shifting wind as he continued down the rubble-strewn avenue, until Malus began to believe that the druchii were heading away from him, moving off to the west. The cries tapered off, and after he'd ridden on in relative silence for a few minutes he finally allowed himself to relax. Just at that moment, as though stirred by the laugh of a capricious god, a gust of wind banished the concealing smoke that surrounded the highborn and the mob erupted in a bloodthirsty cheer less than a dozen yards to Malus's left.

There were thirty or forty of them, filling a broad side street next to the wreckage of a long, single-storey warehouse. Most of them were lowborn citizens in soot-stained robes, clutching swords or axes in their grimy hands, but the ringleaders of the band were a pair of young blood witches and a handful of temple executioners. The servants of the temple were standing on a broad pile of fallen stones to give the crowd a better view of their efforts. The white stones beneath them were stained in patterns of red: striations of vivid crimson bled into a dull brick red, then to a dark reddish-brown where the congealing gore had settled into crevices and cracks among the stones. Headless bodies sprawled down the rockslides, spilling their contents onto the gritty cobblestones.

Several druchii squirmed and hissed in the grip of the mob, awaiting their turn before the drachms of the executioners. They had made the mistake of siding with the zealots during the revolt and had lacked the wit to switch sides again once the uprising had failed. Or perhaps they had simply been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time; one of them, Malus noted, looked more like a trader from Karond Kar, with his indigo-hued kheitan and a set of slaver's chains hanging from his hip.

For the moment, the hapless prisoners had been granted a short reprieve. The servants of the temple had far sweeter offerings to occupy their attentions.

Two druchii swayed atop the stone pile, held upright in the iron grips of the executioners. They had been stripped to the waist, but Malus noted the filthy white robes and torn sleeves that were bunched around their hips. Their muscular chests and arms were severely bruised and blackened; looking at them the highborn could well believe they'd been hauled from the rubble of one of the buildings nearby. Tellingly, neither man bore the mark of sword nor axe on their bodies, despite the days of hard fighting that had raged across the city.

They were zealots, members of the renegade splinter cult that worshipped Khaine's true faith. Killers without peer, they wore no armour in battle and clothed themselves in white to better show the red favours of their god. Hundreds of them had flocked to Har Ganeth at Urial's call and had taken a fearful toll of the temple warriors during the uprising. Once it had become clear that the uprising had failed, most of the survivors had scattered back into the countryside – which made zealot prisoners all the more enticing to the vengeful blood witches. These two would suffer for weeks under the witches' expert hands before their remains were given to the Cauldron of Blood. It was the worst fate possible for the true believers, who prayed to Khaine daily for a glorious death in battle.

Malus eyed the doomed men coldly and thanked the Dark Mother for the distraction. Better you than me, he thought, then frowned irritably as Spite slowed to a near stop as it caught the scent of fresh blood. The highborn glared at his scaly mount and made to spur the beast back into a canter when suddenly an anguished cry rang out from the rock pile.

'Deliver us, holy one!' the zealot cried to Malus. 'Draw your sword and slay us, in the Blessed Murderer's name!'

Heads turned. Malus felt the predatory stares of the blood witches against his skin and felt his hair stand on end. All at once the air seemed charged with pent-up tension, crackling with furious

energies like the moments before a summer storm. Spite sensed the change, too, and rumbled threateningly at the crowd.

Of all the damnable luck, the highborn cursed. He didn't recognize either of the zealots' pleading faces. Malus had fallen in with the true believers by accident when he'd first made his way into the city, looking for his own secret path into the temple fortress. He had even taken a hand in stirring up the early riots, hoping to distract the temple elders further, and had wound up with far more trouble than he'd bargained for.

The mob eyed Malus like a pack of feral dogs. In his worn robes and scarred plate armour, he had the look of a landless knight or an exiled noble rather than a wild-eyed heretic. The highborn's face was gaunt, emphasizing his sharp cheekbones and pointed chin. Eyes the colour of brass shone from sunken eye sockets, marking him as one of Khaine's chosen. More forbidding still was the grey pallor of his face, like a druchii in the grip of a terrible sickness.

'No one is going to save you from your sins, heretic,' Malus spat, wrenching at Spite's reins. 'Khaine has no cold mercies for the likes of you.'

The nauglir shook its massive head and sidestepped, unwilling to turn away from the mob. It clashed its massive jaws and growled menacingly, and the mob hissed in reply.

One of the temple witches levelled her sword at Malus. Lines and loops of fresh blood glistened on her muscular arms and her long, bare legs. 'You are not a temple priest,' she said in a throaty voice, like cold air rising up from a tomb.

'I have never claimed to be,' Malus said tightly, trying to get the cold one under control. Spite circled and stamped, pacing away and then angling back towards the crowd like iron drawn to a lodestone. The tension in the air continued to build, setting the highborn's teeth on edge. What in the name of the Dark Mother was going on?

'Coward! Apostate!' the zealot screamed, surging against the grip of the executioners.

'Seize him,' the witch said coldly.

The mob erupted into lusty shouts, brandishing their weapons as they rushed at the highborn, and Spite lunged at them with an answering roar, nearly jerking Malus out of the saddle.

He could feel the pent-up tension burst in a rush that crackled through the air and sizzled across his bare skin. It was like the seething flare of an open flame or a lash of summer lightning. Malus cried out in bewilderment and anger, struggling to stay upright as Spite tore into the mob. Bones crunched and blood sprayed in the air as the cold one caught a man by the shoulder and bit off his right arm. The druchii's anguished scream set Malus's nerves on fire.

Spite roared and lunged at another man running past the cold one's flank, catching the druchii by the hip and flinging him into the air. Malus cursed and pounded the beast's flanks with his spurs, but the nauglir had gone berserk, tearing at its foes with reckless abandon.

The mob surged hungrily around the snapping beast. A sword blade rang off Malus's breastplate. Pale, blood-streaked faces glared up at him, their dark eyes burning with battle-lust. Bare hands seized his mail fauld and his right leg, trying to pull him out of the saddle. Snarling like a wolf, Malus pulled his leg free and planted his heel in a man's upturned face, but more hands closed about his ankle and dragged him downwards.

He felt himself sliding inexorably from his seat. Rage and desperation seethed through his veins. Without thinking, Malus reached for the warpsword. Its hilt was hot to the touch, and the long, eldritch blade seemed to leap from its scabbard with an ominous hiss.

Roaring blasphemies, Malus raised the ebon blade to the stormy sky. Above the cacophonous shouts of the mob, the highborn heard a horrified shriek from one of the temple witches, then he swept the sword in a vicious arc through the arms and heads of the grasping crowd. Flesh blackened and withered as the sword drank deep of hot blood and mortal pain.

Roars of bloodlust turned to screams of terror and despair. The mob reeled back from the smoking corpses of their brethren, crying

out Khaine's name. Malus leapt after them, his face set in a mask of berserk rage.

Overhead, the croaking laughter of ravens echoed across the stormy sky.

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