



LUTHOR HUSS

CHRIS WRAIGHT

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LUTHOR HUSS

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Witch hunter Lukas Eichmann investigates a series of bizarre murders, which ultimately lead him into the haunted depths of the Empire at the head of an army of fanatical warriors. In the Drakwald Forest, Luthor Huss, warrior priest of Sigmar, battles to free the denizens of the forest from a plague of the walking dead. As their fates entwine, the two warriors confront a threat that will decide their future, while Huss must face a secret from his past if he is to survive and embrace his destiny as the Hammer of Sigmar.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is a writer of fantasy and science fiction, whose first novel was published in 2008. Since then, he's published books set in the Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000 and Stargate: Atlantis universes. He doesn't own a cat, dog, or augmented hamster (which technically disqualifies him from writing for Black Library), but would quite like to own a tortoise one day. He's based in a leafy bit of south-west England, and when not struggling to meet deadlines enjoys running through scenic parts of it. Read more about his upcoming projects at www.chriswraight.wordpress.com

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'STAND BACK,' WHISPERED Eichmann, making a few final adjustments to the device in his palm. 'This is new. I'm not sure how well it works.'

'Could we not, say, test these things before we use them?' asked Udo.

'No. This one is worth more than your annual stipend.'

'I don't explode in your face.'

'I've always been glad of it.'

Eichmann finished his adjustments and withdrew from the device, stepping backwards carefully through the slime.

It was small, about the size of a man's fist, roughly spherical, bound with copper bands and studded with rivets. Eichmann had lodged it in some loose brickwork in the sewer wall. As he edged away, he unravelled a long line of twisted fuse-twine.

'Right, then,' he said, settling into position. 'Now we just—'

There was a fizzing pop, then the wall exploded.

Eichmann was hurled back against the far side of the drain. Broken bricks sailed through the air, crashing into pillars and splashing into the pool of stinking sewage. One of them slammed into the stonework just by his head, blinding him for a moment with a cloud of dust.

Udo waded out of the shadows, shaking his head mournfully.

'What did I say?' he muttered, making for the ragged hole in the sewer wall Eichmann's device had opened up, maul in hand.

'A minor defect with the detonator,' said Eichmann, hauling himself to his feet and pulling a flintlock from its holster. His vision was a little blurry, not helped by the loss of his lantern, but he managed to cock the pistol's hammer smoothly enough. 'In all important respects, though, very satisfactory.'

Light poured from the breach in the sewer wall. The gaping hole opened out into a small chamber beyond, lit by smoking torches. The explosion had blown most of the rubble inwards, and a fine mist of brick-dust swam lazily upwards.

'It did get things started,' admitted Udo, clambering through the breach.

Groaning broke out from the floor of the chamber. Men, their outlines hazy in the clouds of dust, were slowly swaying back to their feet. One of them reeled straight into Udo. A swift, expert jab with the maul floored him again, and the man dropped like a stone.

'Careful,' said Eichmann, following his henchman into the chamber and calmly sweeping his pistol over the interior. 'I want him able to talk.'

The room stank nearly as badly as the sewer. A long table ran down most of its length, covered in pelts and animal skulls. More skulls had been hung on the walls. Torches burned between them, staining the walls and ceiling with a skin of black soot.

Six men were inside, all dressed in the shabby hose and jerkin of Middenheim's minor merchant class. Beside the man Udo had downed, one other lay face-down on the stone floor in a gently expanding puddle of blood. That left four, all in various stages of recovery from the explosion.

One of them, young-looking and wide-eyed, made a bolt for the narrow stairs at the rear of the chamber. Eichmann drew up his pistol, closed one eye, and fired. The man's right knee blew open and he collapsed in a heap, screaming wildly.

Another, as brave as he was foolish, grabbed something from the table and rushed at Udo.

The henchman waited for him to get in close. He swayed out of the way of what looked like an erratically thrust kitchen knife before punching the maul heavily into the man's face.

The man spun backwards. His face had been driven in, and his strangled cries only rang out for a few seconds before choking off in a fit of bloody gurgling.

'Udo, did you hear me?' asked Eichmann irritably, reaching for his second pistol.

'Unavoidable, sir,' replied Udo, though his voice gave away his satisfaction. 'Self-defence.'

The henchman strode up to another half-stunned figure, a balding man with a sagging paunch and terrified eyes. The man made a half-hearted effort to scramble away, but Udo caught him by the collar and swung him hard into the wall. He followed that up with a single, heavy punch to the man's face, crunching his nose into a bloody pulp. The man, his body limp and eyes glassy, slid down the bricks.

Eichmann approached the lone standing occupant, a bearded man with a moth-eaten goatskin shawl draped over scrawny shoulders. His thin, toothy face was tight with shock and confusion.

'Name,' Eichmann demanded, pointing the pistol barrel directly at the man's forehead.

The man looked shakily at the gun as if he didn't know what it was. Then Udo lumbered into his eyeline, blunt and monstrous, and he seemed to muster up some clarity.

'B-Bohfels,' he stammered. 'Karl Bohfels. Sirs, this was just—'

Eichmann silenced him with a backhanded swipe from the gun-hand. Bohfels staggered away from the blow, tottering a few steps before collapsing.

Udo cracked his knuckles in approval.

'Easy enough,' he said, gazing around at the damage they'd done. 'What now?'

Eichmann looked at the table. Feathers and bones were strewn across it, interspersed with vials of dark liquid and a few grubby rolls of cheap parchment.

'We'll take Bohfels in,' he said grimly. 'And I want samples of those... whatever they are.'

Udo picked up a bird's skull covered in red stains.

'I'm sure he'll be happy to tell us,' he said, turning it between his leather-clad fingers.

A ragged gasp of pain broke out from the rear of the chamber. Eichmann and Udo both turned towards it. The man with the shot knee had started moving again. He'd managed to crawl two steps closer to the closed door at the top of the stairwell and was trying to get further.

Eichmann gave him a pitying look.

'A poor effort,' he said.

Udo smiled wolfishly.

'So what about these other ones?' he asked. 'What are we going to do with them?'

Eichmann re-holstered his pistol. He felt deflated, and the stink of the sewer was getting to him at last. Udo's dog-like enthusiasm for such work was always wearying.

What is it doing to me, spending so much time with such human filth?

'The usual,' said Eichmann, drawing out his rapier with a smooth hiss. 'But stop grinning about it, for the love of Sigmar, and let's make it quick.'

MILA HADN'T STOPPED screaming inside, but her parched throat could utter nothing but broken gasps.

She'd stayed on her feet, hammering away with Pieter's sword, holding back ranks of living dead. She'd broken their bones and prised their fingers from her limbs, but still they'd kept coming. She'd crushed their fragile skulls and disembowelled them with heavy, twisting lunges of the blade, but still, endlessly and with neither fear nor weariness, they'd kept coming.

She'd made it back to the site of the bonfire, right in the centre of the village, just in time to see Margrit dragged down to the earth by a gang of claw-handed assailants. The girl had

fought on for a while, throwing a few of them off her, lashing out and screaming the whole time. Margrit was like all daughters of Helgag – tough as tanned hide and strong from the grind of endless labour – and hadn't gone down easily.

But they'd got her in the end. Once she'd lost her footing, they could go for her throat. Mila had watched, still a dozen yards away, as they'd got their gaping jaws in place and had bit down.

Then they'd come for her.

No one else was left. Ever since she'd hacked and shoved her way back to the bonfire, Mila had known she was alone.

There she stood, her back to the fire, watching the space before her fill with more of the undead. They jabbered at her, and their eyes glowed.

I don't want to die. Not yet, not like this.

The undead hung back, chattering in near-silent, deathly voices. Mila stood before them, panting heavily, holding the sword as straight as she could manage, waiting for the first one to move.

'Come for me, then,' she growled, speaking out to stop her mind locking in panic. 'Who's first?'

They didn't respond. The chattering whispers grew a little louder.

'Come on!' roared Mila, swinging the sword back and forth. 'Come and—'

She never finished. The horde of undead warriors suddenly broke, folding in on itself as if something huge had impacted on it. Their whispers became thin howls of rage. The skeletons and corpses turned away from her, consumed by something far more pressing within their ranks.

For a moment, Mila couldn't make anything out. The dull red of the fire was dying fast, staining the walls of the hovels in shadow. She stayed where she was, looking around her in a kind of stupor, unsure what to do.

Could she make use of this? Could she get out of Helgag? Or should she stay close to the light? She felt her own breathing, hot and deep, and the sweat on the palms of her hands making the sword-grip sticky.

Then, finally, she saw him.

For the first time, alone in Helgag, half-deranged with fear and fatigue, she saw him.

Days later, when the last of the fires had finished burning and the ashes had cooled, she would remember many things about that moment. She would recall the way the flames glinted from the curved plates of his armour like cascades of rubies. She would remember his eerie silence in battle, more complete and more unnerving than the undead themselves. She would remember how his mournful face reared up out of the dark, fixed in an expression of frigid disdain, his bare forehead bound with rolls of scripture and shining with sweat.

At the time, though, still locked in a vice of her exhaustion, she was only struck by one thing. The way he moved.

He carried a huge warhammer, golden-headed, spiked and heavy. It swung in perfect arcs, cleaving chests, bursting open skulls, crunching through skittering thickets of stick-thin limbs. Mighty arms, each the girth of a lesser man's thigh, propelled the weapon with efficient, murderous grace. A long red cloak swirled in his wake, wrapping him in a skirling halo of crimson.

Everything was in motion. He was like a whirlwind of steel and gold, spinning and striking his way through the heart of the horde. It was all so perfectly, so flawlessly balanced. Every blow found its mark, driving apart the knots of screaming horrors and fracturing their eerie unity. He was like a reaper in high summer, raging and circling, and they broke against him in futile fury.

Mila, her own struggles forgotten for an instant, watched it all unfold, her jaw slack and her hands loose.

They no longer looked invincible. In the face of that man's onslaught, the walking dead looked suddenly fragile. The armoured figure waded through their midst, smiting down any that got close enough to feel the bite of the warhammer.

His expression remained downcast. His thin mouth remained fixed in an unbending snarl of disapproval. He uttered no war-cry, though it looked like he was constantly whispering something to himself.

His dark eyes snapped up, just for a moment, from the slaughter, and he saw her. He fought over to her position, throwing corpses in either direction as he hacked a path through the horde.

'Daughter, are you alone?' he asked, knocking aside the grasping arms of dogged pursuers before coming alongside her and whirling around to face the rest.

Mila knew that, in the respect that he intended, she was entirely alone – all the others in Helgag must surely have died or long since fled.

But, for all that, she couldn't answer his question in the way he'd expected. Her fear seemed to have shrunk away from her, to be replaced by a strange, burning sensation in her breast.

Her sword felt light in her hands and she brandished it eagerly, looking for more targets. Her face rose, no longer disfigured by screaming, but calm and purposeful.

Hope, that most dangerous of emotions, had returned.

'Not any more,' she said, and took up the fight again.