



## A Warhammer novel by James Wallis

**HEROIC ARMY OFFICER *Karl Hoche* finds his life inexorably changed after foiling an insidious ring of Chaos worshippers in the ranks of the Reiksguard. Hoche's actions soon attract the attention of the *Untersuchung* – a clandestine group dedicated to fighting the dark forces of Chaos in all of its guises. Betrayal and corruption are not far away and when Hoche becomes the very thing he has sworn to destroy, his mortal soul is torn between salvation and eternal damnation.**

# MARK OF DAMNATION

**James Wallis** started his first magazine at fourteen. Since then he has been a TV presenter, world-record holder, games designer, political firebrand, auctioneer, convention organiser and internet commentator, and has written for publications from the *Sunday Times* to the *Fortean Times*. He launched the magazines *Bizarre* and *Crazynet*, and his books have been translated into eight languages. His proudest moment is being called 'sick' by the *News of the World*. He lives in London, has no cats, hears everything and does not sleep.



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### *from MARK OF DAMNATION*

THE QUEEN OF wands fell on the king of swords, and the prince of coins on the queen of wands. Ten of cups on the prince, followed by a sequence of low-numbered sword cards. There was nothing there that he could use, and only a handful of cards still face-down. The pattern was blocked, the reds and the blacks balanced, a stalemate in the making.

It was hard to read the cards. Outside, beyond the open door of the tent, the night was hot and still and the rest of the sleeping army camp was bathed in the pale silver-green light of the full moon, but only a little filtered through to reach the spread of cards on the floor near the back, where Karl Hoche was sat cross-legged, a glass of Kislevite kvas to his side, contemplating and listening to the silence. Nobody glancing into the tent could see he was awake, passing the night by playing cards, and waiting.

Behind him Rudolf Schulze, his orderly, grunted in his sleep and twitched a leg. Hoche waited until he had settled again, then flipped a card from the deck he held in one hand. He frowned. It was the Wise Fool, the wild card that could work for any of the four suits. But that would be in a normal game, with opponents you could see. This game was played by different rules, and the Fool didn't fit them. It shouldn't have been in the deck, should have been removed from play before the game started. He put it down beside his glass, drew another card, and froze. He could hear horses.

He sat absolutely still, listening. Five, maybe six horses moving through the camp, led by people on foot. If they were wearing tack then it was muffled: no bridles clinked, no saddle-leather squeaked. The soft footfalls walked down the path between the tents and he heard the animals' breath as they were

led past the open flaps of his tent. It was past midnight, the third watch, and these people were taking trouble not to be heard.

The figures moved on and Hoche let out his breath silently. He had been right. Since the army had set up its summer camp here, every night that one of the two moons had been full he had heard horses and people moving in the late hours. This was the third time, but the first since he had vowed to discover the reason. Now the time had come.

He put down the deck of cards, took a sip of kvas and moved towards Schulze's bed, then paused for a second and flipped over the card that had been under the Fool. He grimaced. It was the two of hearts, an insignificant card, only useful at the start of the game. He could see no fortune or omen in it.

Hoche leaned over Schulze's sleeping form and put his hand gently over the man's moustached face. 'Shh, Schulze,' he whispered. 'They're about. Time to move.'

Schulze's eyes were instantly open and alert, and he nodded his understanding. Hoche smiled for a moment. Schulze always claimed that he'd been a farm-labourer before he joined the Empire's armies three years ago, but Hoche knew he had the knowledge and instincts of an expert hunter. It was one of the reasons he'd chosen the man to be his orderly.

Hoche picked up his sword from next to the field of cards, then crept to the tent door and peered out. To the west, directly under the full moon, lay the camp's stables. He could see shapes moving there, and hear low murmurs of conversation. Behind him Schulze moved, and there was a *tink* as he knocked over the glass of kvas. Hoche held up a hand. 'Stay,' he said. 'The last thing we need is for them to know someone's following.'

He watched as the figures paused for a moment, then they moved off toward the centre of the camp. He counted six, but it was impossible to tell who they were or which regiment they belonged to. Long minutes passed. Clouds moved across the sky, west to east. Hoche watched them go, then he gestured to Schulze. Together, the two men stepped out into the moonlight and walked towards the stables, Schulze at Hoche's right hand and a half-pace behind.

The stables were at the corner of the camp, a fenced-in area with long tents on either side for cover and for the grooms' quarters. Hoche walked to the entrance of the first of them, where the group had stood a handful of minutes earlier. Inside, a fig-

ure lay on its back on a straw mattress, snoring gently. Hoche observed it.

'You're not asleep,' he said.

The figure sat up slowly. 'No, sir, but I'm giving it my best try,' it replied. 'Not helped by you.'

'Nor by the men who brought their horses here a few minutes ago,' Hoche said. 'Who were they?'

The groom came to the mouth of the tent. Hoche recognised him but didn't know his name: a man in his thirties with a Talabheim accent, a Tilean nose and the scars of smallpox across his face. His tunic was stained with soup and there was straw in his hair. The groom looked him up and down, registering Hoche's white Reikland uniform with the ornate red tassels that marked him as a lieutenant. He said nothing.

'You can tell me now,' said Hoche, 'or you can tell the duke's men in the morning.'

The man looked from Hoche to the shorter figure of Schulze beside him. 'No offence meant, masters,' he said, 'but my mind is slow at night. They were officers of the Knights Panther, back from some hunting by moonlight. A good time for deer, it is, a night like this.'

Hoche stared at him, not sure if the man believed his own story or not. 'Show us the horses,' he said.

'Sir?'

'I want to see their horses.'

The groom frowned. 'With respect sir,' he said, 'you Reiklanders are infantrymen. What are you wanting with the Knights Panthers' horses? They'll not be pleased when they hear.'

Hoche bent towards him, using his advantage in height to stare down at the man, his face inches from the groom's. 'When an officer gives you an order, you obey, immediately and without thinking. You do not take word of it to anyone else. You are a disgrace to your uniform, which is also a disgrace. Smarten up, or you'll be on a charge the moment the sun rises. Have you got that?'

'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.' The groom dropped his head, unwilling to meet Hoche's eyes, and silently led the two men into the stable. A single lantern lit the area, casting long shadows across the stalls, piles of straw and racks of equipment. Close to the entrance, six fine warhorses were tethered, each with a grey blanket across its back. Hoche walked over to the first.

'Hunting, you say?' he asked.

'Aye.'

Hoche ran a hand across the flank of one of the huge beasts. Its coat was warm but not damp. 'These horses haven't been ridden hard. There's no heat or sweat to them,' he said.

'I rubbed them down, sir.'

'All six, in the last few minutes? Don't cover for your officers. They could be up to anything, and you know as well as I do that whatever they were doing tonight, it wasn't chasing deer.' Hoche nodded to Schulze. Together they left the stable-tent, walking towards the camp gate.

'Think he'll go to the Knights Panther?' asked Schulze.

'Of course,' Hoche said. 'The question is how quickly. If he's privy to their plans then he'll inform them immediately that people have been asking questions, but the Knights Panther are too elite, too well-bred, too...'

'Snobbish?'

'Exactly. Too snobbish to involve lower ranks in their secrets. Whatever those might be. I think he'll wait until morning.' Hoche paused and leaned against the side of a supply-cart that bracketed one end of a row of tents. 'Schulze, do you feel like a walk?'

'Where, sir?'

'To learn what six Knights Panther do outside the camp, long past midnight, every full moon.'

Schulze yawned. 'In truth I'd prefer my sleep, sir, but if it's an order—'

'It's not. This isn't official business, but there's a mystery here and I'd welcome your help in solving it. I trust your skills, your sword and your discretion. Will you come?'

Schulze looked up and grinned. Hoche smiled back.

'Good man. I knew I could depend on you. Good evening, gentlemen, a fine quiet night.' They had reached the gate and the sentries acknowledged Hoche's greeting with a nod as he and Schulze left the camp. Hoche walked down the hard earth track that led away from the gate, stopped and looked back at the camp's fortifications: its dry ditch, low earth ramparts and palisade of sharpened stakes hiding the rows of tents, carts and fires within. Beside him, Schulze moved to the side of the track, leaned against a lone tree and dabbed the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief. The air was still and hot, filled with the heavy dry-grass scent of late summer nights.

'See anything?' Hoche asked.

'What am I supposed to see, sir?'

Hoche grimaced. 'I'm not some master-sleuth like Zavant Konniger prancing through some penny-dreadful tale of deduction, Schulze. You're the expert. It rained this afternoon and those horses should have left fresh tracks. Can you find them in this light?'

Schulze looked at him, and Hoche knew he was considering what he saw: the young officer, fresh-faced and newly promoted, who had dragged him out of bed because he'd heard horses. But he knew Schulze was also seeing the man who had led his company of Reiklander pikemen at the Battle of Wissendorf last summer, the only company that had stood against the Bretonnian charge, the action that had turned the tide of the fight but had left the young officer close to death, his scalp ripped open by a Bretonnian lance.

Hoche hoped Schulze trusted him as he hoped all his men trusted him: implicitly, no matter how seemingly foolish or foolhardy the job. Then Schulze smiled, and Hoche knew his hopes were justified.

'I spotted them as we left the gate, sir,' Schulze said. 'The tracks head straight out down the road. They come back in along the bank of the stream over there.' He pointed.

'We'll follow those ones, the return track,' Hoche said. 'They may have taken a detour away from the camp to shake off followers.'

Schulze looked at him askance. 'On foot, sir? They could have ridden for miles.'

'That,' said Hoche, 'is what we have to find out.'

THE TRACKS OF the horses followed the stream, and the stream followed the undulations of the heathland as it rose slowly towards the foothills of the Grey Mountains, their shapes visible on the horizon as dark masses against the star-filled sky. Schulze led the way, sure-footed through the half-seen scrub grass and heather. Small creatures scurried out of their path. From time to time they heard the screech of a hunting owl, and once sensed the shadowed form of a larger predator as it silently padded into sight ahead of them, sprang across the stream and loped away into the night. It did not bother them, and they did not bother it.

'Wolf?' asked Hoche. Schulze shook his head.

'Mountain cat,' he said, 'but away from home. Maybe something's driven it from its territory, fire or a lack of food. Could be the orc army moving north.'

'I don't believe the orc army exists,' Hoche said.

'You don't?'

'No. There are warbands and we've tangled with some of them, but the greenskins are still regrouping from the pounding they got from the dwarfs last winter. They lost two or three leaders, and it'll take a while for the new ones to get their forces together. I think the reports of early raidings were exaggerated and we're wasting our time scouring the hills for an army that isn't there.'

'Hope you're right, sir. I could do with being home in time for the harvest.'

'I wouldn't mind some leave myself,' said Hoche. His thoughts went to Grünburg where he had grown up, his family – his father in his black Sigmarite robes, leading the great services at the temple, his grey-haired mother boiling apples – and Marie, always Marie, the dark-haired angel from the house across the stream. Sloe-eyed Marie who had smiled at him for twenty years, kissed him in secret for five, and would marry him within the next. 'Home,' he said wistfully.

Schulze looked back at him, moonlight leaving half his face in shadow. 'So you're bored, sir? Is that why we're tramping across moorland tonight?'

Hoche chuckled and shook his head. 'I'm not bored, but I think some of our fellow soldiers may be. I want to see what they've found to fill their time.'

'Deer hunting?'

'Not likely. You, Schulze, I know you'd have a fine time stalking and poaching deer out here on foot with a crossbow. But only a lunatic would gallop a horse across ground like this by night. And even I can read these tracks and tell these horses weren't chasing anything.'

There was a silence. Schulze broke it. 'Truth be told, sir, I used to use a longbow. Takes a touch more skill, but the range and penetration are better.'

Hoche laughed.

They walked another half-mile. The outlines of clouds moved silently across the sky. To the north, the half-crescent shape of Mannslieb, the second moon, was sinking below the horizon, but Morrslieb still poured its sickly light over the landscape. The



stream curved away to the right, towards the woodlands that covered the nearer hills. Schulze stopped and studied the ground, then pointed left. Hoche stared up the side of the shallow valley to where his orderly was pointing. A copse of trees stood against the sky.

'What is that place?' he asked

'An old ruin,' Schulze said. 'The locals avoid it.'

As they drew close to it, Hoche could see that the copse was a wall of trees surrounding an open, overgrown area within. He'd seen similar things elsewhere: this was a fortified manor house or farm, abandoned for a couple of centuries and fallen into dilapidation, its protective boundary of elms and poplars now reaching high to the heavens. In this lonely place, so close to the Grey Mountains, he could guess what had happened: overrun by greenskins, its inhabitants butchered, its shell used as a camp until the beasts' own filth drove them from it and its walls were reclaimed by Taal, god of the wild places. If not greenskins then mutants or beastmen. The races changed but their methods were depressingly predictable.

He could see the outlines of the buildings now, between the trees. One wall still stood but the rest were rubble, overgrown with brambles and young trees, ash and sycamore. He could make out the plan of the building; its stone floor had probably survived. Against the one remaining wall was a large rectangular block, probably the remains of a stone oven. Shapes moved around it, low and grey, sinuous in the moonlight. One raised its head towards them and bared gleaming, growling teeth.

'Now those,' said Schulze in a low voice, 'are wolves.'

'What do we do?' Hoche asked.

'Back off but don't look away. Meet their eyes, stare back like you're a predator too. If there's only the three of them we'll be safe. Scavengers, wolves are. They'll only attack live prey if they have the weight of numbers.'

'What are they scavenging?' Hoche said. His answer was a growl from behind them and he whirled, drawing his sword. Two more were there.

'Oh, Sigmar,' Schulze said.

'Stand back to back,' Hoche said urgently. 'If they-' and the first wolf sprang at him. He slashed at it, cutting the air in front of its jaws, and it paced away, out of range, watching him with dark eyes. Behind him he heard a snarl, a slash, and Schulze's oath. The next one was on him, biting at his arm as another

leaped, and he was parrying, cutting, dodging, swinging for his life. No amount of sword practice or warring against the Bretonnians had prepared him for this. This wasn't a battle, it was a brute animal struggle.

A wolf came in from his left, snapping at his leg. He side-stepped and swept his sword at it, but the blade struck at an angle and glanced off. Hoche swore. It was the wrong weapon for this fight; a thrusting weapon, designed to pierce armour, its flat blade shaped for parrying, not cutting through thick fur and skin. At his rear he could tell Schulze was having a worse time of it: the man's blows were frenzied, panicked, lacking in structure or strategy. Then two wolves closed in on him and he was lost in his own fight, ducking right as one lunged at him, slashing at its sleek form and swinging through to block the other's run, smashing the edge of his blade into its face.

The two backed away and the pack followed. Hoche hoped for an instant that they had had enough of this prey that fought back. Instead they waited, circling, their eyes hard and greedy. Hoche watched them. One was limping badly, one had dark streaks of blood in its fur from a long cut along its back and a third was wounded across the face, blinded in one eye. But they were still five against two men.

Hoche studied the shapes of the predators, trying to identify the pack leader. There: larger than the rest, and darker too; perhaps only three summers old. A young leader, its movements confident, assured. The great wolf raised its head and stared back at him down its sharp muzzle. Hoche met its gaze, unblinking.

'How are you faring, Schulze?' he asked.

'Not well, sir.' Schulze's voice was shaky. 'What are we going to do?'

'If we defend, we die,' Hoche said and launched himself across the open space, his sword point low. The pack scattered but the dark leader stood firm, legs wide, its teeth bared in a snarl to receive his attack. Hoche swung the blade in a low arc and the wolf jerked its head up, leaping high at him to avoid the blade. Hoche had anticipated the leap, turned his arm and his swing became a straight thrust backed with all the weight of his charge. The sword met the wolf's leap, pierced its throat and ran deep into its body. The animal fell, wrenching the sword hilt from Hoche's grip as thick blood gushed from the open wound. The

wolf convulsed. It tried to rise, tried to snarl, bared its teeth and died.

Hoche whirled, his arms raised to defend himself against another wolf's teeth, but the pack had scattered into the night. He bent to the dead leader and pulled his sword from its body. It had been an excellent thrust, fifteen inches deep: the steel had slipped in above its ribcage and must have hit heart and lungs on its way. Hoche nodded, satisfied with his work, and picked a handful of grass to clean the blade.

'That seems to have dealt with that, eh, Schulze?' he said.

Schulze didn't reply, and as Hoche turned he saw why. The soldier was clutching his left arm, his tunic sleeve ripped to tatters and soaked with blood. Claws had raked across his face, tearing open one cheek. Schulze looked at him in speechless pain, and sank to his knees.

'By Shallya,' Hoche muttered, pulling off his own tunic and shirt, tearing the linen into strips for bandages. Schulze's arm was a mess, the flesh torn where sharp fangs had ripped across the muscles. The cuts on his face were not as bad as they had first appeared, but they would leave scars. Schulze winced as Hoche swabbed the wound on his arm with a cloth soaked in kvas from his flask.

Hoche grinned. 'You'll live, old soldier. Come on, I need to know what those wolves were here to scavenge.'

The moat of the farmhouse was dry and overgrown with brambles, but there was an earth bridge across it. Schulze walked slowly up to it and studied the ground. 'They tethered their horses to the trees over there,' he said. 'Quite a few men, and one – no, two of them barefoot. The wolves must have come later.'

Hoche stared across the rubble at the end of the bridge to the dirt-deep stone floor of the old house, and knew why. Two shapes lay in broad moonlight where they had been tugged and torn by the scavenging wolves. Limbs lolled, spines contorted, heads twisted. There were dark holes in their naked bodies. Once, quite recently, they had been human.

Hoche stepped down from the rubble towards them. After a moment he realised that Schulze was staying back, wary of entering this place.

Hoche didn't blame him. There was something about the ruin, a sense of taint, of pollution. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

'Schulze, they're only bodies,' he said. 'You've seen plenty – you've created enough among the Bretonnians.' The older man scrambled, still clutching his bandaged arm, to stand at Hoche's side as the young officer put the toe of his boot to the first body's shoulder and pushed. It rolled over and lay flat on its back, staring sightlessly up at the stars that banded the heavens. The wolves had torn much of its flesh away, but the face was still whole and young. Hoche crouched down beside the body.

'I know this one,' Schulze said. 'He's one of the Bögenhafen boys that deserted last week.'

Hoche didn't look up. 'Deserted?'

'Always the same on a long campaign, men drifting away all the time. But these two – no word to their friends, and most of their equipment left behind.'

'I don't think they deserted,' said Hoche, 'though we were meant to believe so. This one's flesh is still loose; no stink, no maggots, no putrefaction. He's been dead no more than a few hours. Why desert to hide out for a week in a wood three miles from the camp you've left? It makes no sense.' He stared at the corpse's face. The soldier couldn't have been more than seventeen: his skin was clear, his torso hairless. A pit in his chest gaped wide, the ends of ribs showing. Whatever end the boy had met, it had been violent and not caused by wolves. But there wasn't enough blood around to explain an ungentle death like this.

Hoche reached out towards him and closed his cold eyes. He hoped it would make the boy's face look more at peace, but it didn't; it made him look like a blind man in hell.

Schulze was standing over the second corpse. 'There's some marks on this one, sir. Come and see.' The body lay about twenty feet away, sprawled and twisted, face-down. A pattern of intersecting lines had been cut deep into the flesh of its back: a rectangle with horns that branched out over the man's shoulder-blades. The wound was puffy and dribbles of blood had run from it over the skin. Hoche recognised the crossed bars and flinched. Sweat pricked against his skin.

'It's a weird thing,' Schulze said, and knelt to touch the body.

'Don't!' Hoche shouted. Schulze's outstretched arm froze.

'What is it, sir?'

'It's the mark of the being some call Khorne, the Blood God. These men weren't killed by wolves and didn't die in a fight – they were sacrificed. This place is unclean.' Hoche could feel a

slight tremor in his voice and a rising tension in his mind, and fought it down. Orcs and wolves were one thing, but worshippers of the Dark Gods were in another, much more powerful league.

He had seen marks like these before, years ago, when his father had been called to cleanse a secret temple discovered in an abandoned warehouse by the town watch. He wished his father was here now; for his knowledge as a priest of Sigmar, and for the sense of support and moral certainty that only a father can give. He felt afraid in a way he had never known before, not of the two corpses before him but of what they meant.

'The Knights Panther...?' said Schulze, giving a name to the fear.

'I don't know,' Hoche said. 'I don't know. Sigmar! This is very bad.'

'What do we do?'

'Let's cover them up.' Hoche glanced around. A dark red cloth had been spread over the stone block he had noticed earlier. It had been used as an altar, he realised. 'Get that cloth, bring it here.' He studied the marks. There could be no doubt: it was Khorne's symbol, carved deep with a dagger. Here too, there seemed to be less blood than there should be.

Schulze cried out, and Hoche whirled. His orderly was standing by the altar, one hand extended and shaking. 'The cloth, sir, it's—' and Hoche suddenly knew what had happened to the men's blood. He didn't want to see it or even think about it, but he knew he must.

The cloth was soaked in blood. It dripped from the edges, congealing in strings that hung down to the ground and pooled there, crusting. It stank of death. Through the thickening, tar-like contours of the awful liquid, Hoche could make out the seams and patches of embroidery on the fabric below, forming a pattern he knew well. It was the crest of the Emperor, the banner of the Empire, the army's battle-standard. Drenched in the blood of the Empire's soldiers.

At the centre of the cloth lay two objects, bulbous and fleshy, strange and glistening. Hoche knew with a sickening revulsion what they were. The crushed ribcages, the holes in the men's chests – these were their hearts.

Two hearts.

There was a long silence filled with Hoche's horrified thoughts. It was broken by Schulze staggering to a bush and

being noisily sick. Hoche shook himself, and tried to regain the cool composure, the self-assurance with which he had started the evening.

'Right,' he said. 'One of us needs to get back to the camp and rouse the duke. The other needs to wait here under cover in case whoever did this comes back. We don't know for sure it was the Knights Panther, and even if it was, we don't know which of them are involved. Schulze, you're wounded, and besides the duke is more likely to listen to me. Find yourself some cover and don't move from it.'

Schulze spat a string of bile onto the ground and coughed. 'What if the wolves come back?' he asked.

'It's not likely but if they do then climb a tree.'

'With this arm?'

Hoche looked at him. 'I give you an order, it's up to you to obey it. If I don't return in four hours, make your own way back to the camp.' Schulze grunted something about sleep and Hoche put a hand on his shoulder. 'Look, if we can unearth a nest of Chaos worshippers, there's a good chance of promotion for both of us. That's worth a night's sleep.' He laughed. The sound had a high, shrill edge, and he wished he hadn't.

Hoche turned and began the long jog back towards the camp. Faint light lifted in the eastern sky and the landscape began to take on the day's colours, grey fading into greens and browns. A new dawn was coming.

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