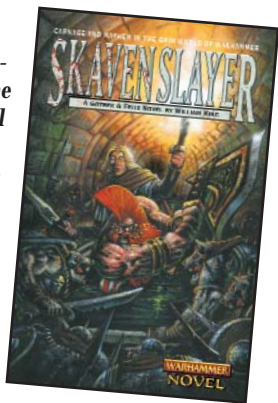


SKAVENSLAYER

A Gotrek & Felix novel by William King

THE MIGHTY CITY of Nuln is under threat from skaven – twisted Chaos rat-men – who are seeking to undermine the very fabric of the Empire with their foul plots and arcane warp-sorcery. Led by Grey Seer Thanquol, the servants of the Horned Rat are determined to overthrow this bastion of humanity. Against such forces, what possible threat can our two hard-bitten adventurers pose?

WILLIAM KING's popular Gotrek & Felix saga now stretches to six books. He is also the author of the ongoing Space Wolf series, and is currently developing an entirely new series from his home in Prague.



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FELIX JAEGER DUCKED the drunken mercenary's punch. The brass-knuckled fist hurtled by his ear and hit the doorjamb, sending splinters of wood flying. Felix jabbed forward with his knee, catching the mercenary in the groin. The man moaned in pain and bent over, Felix caught him around the neck and tugged him towards the swing doors. The drunk barely resisted. He was too busy throwing up stale wine. Felix booted the door open then pushed the mercenary out, propelling him on his way with a hard kick to the backside. The mercenary rolled in the dirt of Commerce Street, clutching his groin, tears dribbling from his eyes, his mouth open in a rictus of pain.

Felix rubbed his hands together ostentatiously before turning to go back into the bar. He was all too aware of the eyes watching him from beyond every pool of torchlight. At this time of night, Commerce Street was full of bravos, street-girls and hired muscle. Keeping up his reputation for toughness was plain common sense. It reduced his chances of taking a knife in the back when he wandered the streets at night.

What a life, he thought. If anybody had told him a year ago that he would be working as a bouncer in the roughest bar in Nuln, he would have laughed at them. He would have said he was a scholar, a poet and a gentleman, not some barroom brawler. He would have almost preferred being back in the Sewer Watch to this.

Things change, he told himself, pushing his way back into the crowded bar. Things certainly change.

The stink of stale sweat and cheap perfume slapped him in the face. His squinted as his vision adjusted to the gloomy, lantern-lit interior of the Blind Pig. For a moment he was aware that all the eyes in the place were on him. He scowled, in what he hoped was a fearsome manner, glaring around in exactly the fashion Gotrek did. From behind the bar, big Heinz, the tavern

owner, gave a wink of approval for the way in which Felix had dealt with the drunk, then returned to working the pumps.

Felix liked Heinz. He was grateful to him as well. The big man was a former comrade from Gotrek's mercenary days. He was the only man in Nuln who had offered them a job after they had been dishonourably discharged from the Sewer Watch.

Now that was a new low, Felix thought. He and Gotrek were the only two warriors ever to be kicked out of the Sewer Watch in all its long and sordid history. In fact they had been lucky to escape a stretch in the Iron Tower, Countess Emmanuelle's infamous prison. Gotrek had called the watch captain a corrupt, incompetent snotling fonder when the man had refused to take their report of skaven in the sewers seriously. To make matters worse, the dwarf had broken the man's jaw when he had ordered the pair of them horsewhipped.

Felix winced. He still had some half-faded bruises from the ensuing brawl. They had fought against half of the watch station before being bludgeoned unconscious. He remembered waking up in the squalid cell the morning after. It was just as well his brother Otto had got them out, wishing to hush up any possible scandal that might blacken the Jaeger family name.

Otto had wanted the pair of them to leave town but Gotrek insisted that they stay. He was not going to be run out of town like some common criminal, particularly not when a skaven wizard was still at large and doubtless plotting some terrible crime. The Trollslayer sensed an opportunity to confront the forces of darkness in all their evil splendour and he was not going to be robbed of his chance of a mighty death in battle against them. And bound by his old oath, Felix had to remain with the dwarf and record that doom for posterity.

Some mighty death, Felix thought sourly. He could see Gotrek now, huddled in a corner with a group of dwarfish warriors, waiting to start his shift. His enormous crest of dyed orange hair rose over the crowd. His enormously muscular figure hunched forward over the table. The dwarfs slugged back their beer from huge tankards, growling and tugging at their beards, and muttering something in their harsh, flinty tongue. Doubtless they were remembering some old slight to their people or working through the long list of the grudges they had to avenge. Or maybe they were just remembering the good old days when

beer was a copper piece a flagon, and men showed the Elder Races proper respect.

Felix shook his head. Whatever the conversation was about, the Trollslayer was thoroughly engrossed. He had not even noticed the fight. That in itself was unusual, for the dwarf lived to fight as other folk lived to eat or sleep.

Felix continued his circuit of the tavern, taking in every table with a casual sidelong glance. The long, low hall was packed. Every beer-stained table was crowded. On one, a semi-naked Estalian dancing girl whirled and pranced while a group of drunken halberdiers threw silver and encouraged her to remove the rest of her clothes. Street-girls led staggering soldiers to dark alcoves in the far wall. The commotion from the bar drowned out the gasps and moans and the clink of gold changing hands.

One whole long table was taken up by a group of Kislevite horse archers, guards for some incoming caravan from the north. They roared out drinking songs concerning nothing but horses and women, and sometimes an obscene combination of both, while downing huge quantities of Heinz's home-distilled potato vodka.

There was something about them that made Felix uneasy. The Kislevites were men apart, bred under a colder sun in a harsher land, born only to ride and fight. When one of them rose from the table to go to the privy, his rolling, bow-legged walk told Felix that here was a horseman born. The warrior kept his hand near his long-bladed knife - for at no time was a man more vulnerable than when standing outside in the dim moonlight, relieving himself of half a pint of potato vodka.

Felix grimaced. Half of the thieves, bravos and muscle boys in Nuln congregated in the Blind Pig. They came to mingle with newly arrived caravan guards and mercenaries. He knew more than half of them by name; Heinz had pointed them out to him on his first night here.

At the corner table sat Murdo Mac Laghan, the Burglar King who claimed to be an exiled prince of Albion. He wore the tartan britches and long moustaches of one of that distant, almost mythical island's hill-warriors. His muscular arms were tattooed in wood elf patterns. He sat surrounded by a bevy of adoring women, regaling them with tales of his beautiful mountainous homeland. Felix knew that Murdo's real name was Heinrich Schmidt and he had never left Nuln in all his life.

Two tall hook-nosed men of Araby, Tarik and Hakim, sat at their permanently reserved table. Gold rings glittered on their fingers. Gold earrings shone in their earlobes. Their black leather jerkins glistened in the torchlight. Long curved swords hung over the back of their chairs. Every now and again, strangers - sometimes street urchins, sometimes nobles - would come in and take a seat. Haggling would start, money would change hands and just as suddenly and mysteriously the visitors would up and leave. A day later someone would be found floating face down in the Reik. Rumour had it that the two were the best assassins in Nuln.

Over by the roaring fire at a table all by himself sat Franz Beckenhof, who some said was a necromancer and who others claimed was a charlatan. No one had ever found the courage to sit next to the skull-faced man and ask, despite the fact that there were always seats free at his table. He sat there every night, with a leather bound book in front of him, husbanding his single glass of wine. Old Heinz never asked him to move along either, even though he took up space that other, more free-spending customers might use. It never pays to upset a magician was Heinz's motto.

Here and there, as out of place as peacocks in a rookery sat gilded, slumming nobles, their laughter loud and uneasy. They were easy to spot by their beautiful clothing and their firm, soft flesh; upper-class fops out to see their city's dark underbelly. Their bodyguards - generally large, quiet, watchful men with well-used weapons - were there to see that their masters came to no harm during their nocturnal adventures. As Heinz always said, no sense in antagonising the nobs. They could have his tavern shut and his staff inside the Iron Tower with a whisper in the right ear. Best to toady to them, look out for them and to put up with their obnoxious ways.

By the fire, near to the supposed necromancer, was the decadent Bretonnian poet, Armand le Fevre, son of the famous admiral and heir to the le Fevre fortune. He sat alone, drinking absinthe, his eyes fixed at some point in the mid-distance, a slight trickle of drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. Every night, at midnight, he would lurch to his feet and announce that the end of the world was coming, then two hooded and cloaked servants would enter and carry him to his waiting palanquin and then home to compose one

of his blasphemous poems. Felix shuddered, for there was something about the young man which reminded him of Manfred von Diehl, another sinister writer of Felix's acquaintance, and one which he would rather forget.

As well as the exotic and the debauched, there were the usual raucous youths from the student fraternities, who had come here to the roughest part of town to prove their manhood to themselves and to their friends. They were always the worst troublemakers, spoiled, rich young men who had to show how tough they were for all to see. They hunted in packs and were as capable of drunken viciousness as the lowest dockside cut-throat. Maybe they were worse, for they considered themselves above the law and their victims less than vermin.

From where he stood, Felix could see a bunch of jaded young dandies tugging at the dress of a struggling serving-wench. They were demanding a kiss. The girl, a pretty newcomer called Elissa, fresh from the country and unused to this sort of behaviour, was resisting hard. Her struggles just seemed to encourage the rowdies. Two of them had got to their feet and began to drag the struggling girl towards the alcoves. One had clamped a hand over her mouth so that her shrieks would not be heard. Another brandished a huge blutwurst sausage obscenely.

Felix moved to interpose himself between the young men and the alcoves.

'No need for that,' he said quietly.

The older of the two youths grinned nastily. Before speaking he took a huge bite of the blutwurst and swallowed it. His face was flushed and sweat glistened on his brow and cheeks. 'She's a feisty wench - maybe she'd enjoy a taste of a prime Nuln sausage.'

The dandies laughed uproariously at this fine jest. Encouraged he waved the sausage in the air like a general rallying his troops.

'I don't think so,' Felix said, trying hard to keep his temper. He hated these spoiled young aristocrats with a passion, had done ever since his time at the University of Altdorf where he had been surrounded by their sort.

'Our friend here thinks he's tough, Dieter,' said the younger of the two, a crop-headed giant larger than Felix. He sported the scarred face of a student duellist, one who fought to gain scars and so enhance his prestige.

Felix looked around for some help. The other bouncers were trying to calm down a brawl between the Kislevites and the halberdiers. Felix could see Gotrek's crest of dyed hair rising above the scrum. No help from that quarter, then.

Felix shrugged. Better make the best of a bad situation, he thought. He looked straight into the duellist's eye.

'Just let the girl be,' he said with exaggerated mildness - then some devil lurking at the back of his mind prompted him to add, 'and I promise not to hurt you.'

'You promise not to hurt us?' The duellist seemed a little confused. Felix could see that he was trying to work out whether this lowly bouncer could possibly be mocking him. The student's friends were starting to gather around, keen to start some trouble.

'I think we should teach this scumbag a lesson, Rupert,' Dieter said. 'I think we should show him he's not as tough as he thinks he is.'

Elissa chose this moment to bite Dieter's hand. He shrieked with pain and cuffed the girl almost casually. Elissa dropped as if pole-axed. 'Bitch took a chunk out of my hand!'

Suddenly Felix had just plain had enough. He had travelled hundreds of leagues, fought against beasts, monsters and men. He had seen the dead rise from their graves and slain evil cultists on Geheimnisnacht. He had killed the city of Nuln's own chief of secret police for being in league with the wretched skaven. He didn't have to take cheek from these spoiled whelps, and he certainly didn't need to watch them beat up an innocent girl.

Felix grabbed Rupert by the lapels and swung his forehead forward, butting the duellist on the nose. There was a sickening crunch and the big youth toppled backward, clutching his face. Felix grabbed Dieter by the throat and slapped him a couple of times just for show, then slammed the student's face into the heavy tabletop. There was another crunch. Steins toppled.

The spectators pushed their chairs backwards to avoid being soaked. Felix kicked Dieter's legs out from under him and then, after he hit the ground, kicked him in the head a couple of times. There was nothing pretty or elegant about it, but Felix was not in the mood to put up with these people any more. Suddenly they sickened him and he was glad of the chance to vent his anger.

As Dieter's friends surged forward, Felix ripped his sword from its scabbard. The razor-sharp blade glittered in the torchlight. The angry students froze as if they had heard the hissing of a deadly serpent.

Suddenly it was all deathly quiet. Felix put the blade down against the side of Dieter's head. 'One more step and I'll take his ear off. Then I'll make the rest of you eat it.'

'He means it,' one of the students muttered. Suddenly they did not look so very threatening any more, just a scared and drunken bunch of young idiots who had bought into much more trouble than they had bargained for. Felix twisted the blade so that it bit into Dieter's ear, drawing blood. The young man groaned and squirmed under Felix's boot.

Rupert whimpered and clutched his nose with one meaty hand. A river of red streamed over his fingers. 'You broke my nose,' he said in a tone of piteous accusation.

He sounded like he couldn't believe anyone would do anything so horribly cruel.

'One more word out of you and I'll break your fingers too,' Felix said. He hoped nobody tried to work out how he was going to do that. He wasn't quite sure himself, but he needn't have worried. Everybody took him absolutely seriously. 'The rest of you pick your friends up and get out of here, before I really lose my temper.'

He stepped away from Dieter's recumbent form, keeping his blade between himself and the students. They hurried forward, helped their injured friends to their feet, and hurried towards the door. A few kept terrified eyes on Felix as they went.

He walked over to Elissa and helped her to her feet.

'You all right?' he asked.

'Fine enough. Thanks,' she said. She looked up at him gratefully. Not for the first time Felix noticed how pretty she was. She smiled up at him. Her tight black ringlets framed her round face. Her lips pouted. He reached down and tucked one of her jet-black curls behind her ear.

'Best go and have a word with Heinz. Tell him what happened.'

The girl hurried off.

'You're learning, manling,' the Trollslayer's voice said from behind him.

Felix looked around and was surprised to see Gotrek grinning

malevolently up at him. 'I suppose so,' he said, although right at this moment he felt a little shaky. It was time for a drink.

GREY SEER THANQUOL perched on the three-legged bone stool in front of the Farsqueaker and bit his tail. He was angry, as angry as he could ever remember being. He doubted he had been so angry even on the day he had made his first kill, and then he had been very, very angry indeed. He dug his canines into his tail until the sensation made his pink eyes water. Then he let go. He was sick of inflicting pain on himself. He felt like making someone else suffer.

'Hurry-fast! Scuttle-quick or I will the flesh flay from your most unworthy bones,' he shrieked, lashing out with the whip he carried for just such occasions as this.

The skaven slaves squeaked in dismay and scuttled faster on the lurching treadmill attached to the huge mechanisms of the Farsqueaker. As they did so, the powerglobes began to glow slightly. Their flickering light illumined the long musty chamber. The shadows of the warp engineers of Clan Skryre danced across the walls as they made adjustments to the delicate machine by banging it lightly with sledgehammers. A faint tang of warpstone and ozone became perceptible in the air.

'Quick! Quick! Or I will feed you to the rat-ogres.'

A chance would be a fine thing, Thanquol thought. If only he had a rat-ogre to feed these slaves too. What a disappointment Boneripper had proved to be - that cursed dwarf had slain him as easily as Thanquol would slaughter a blind puppy. Just the thought of that hairless dwarf upstart made Thanquol want to squirt the musk of fear. At the same time, hatred bit at Thanquol's bowels and stayed there, gnawing as fiercely as a newly born runt chomping on a bone.

By the Horned Rat's fetid breath, he wanted revenge on the Trollslayer and his henchman! Not only had they slain Boneripper and cost Thanquol a lot of precious warptokens, they had also killed von Halstadt and thus disrupted the Grey Seer's master plan for throwing Nuln and the Empire into chaos.

True, Thanquol had other agents on the surface but none so highly placed or so malleable as the former head of Nuln's secret police. Thanquol wasn't looking forward to reporting the failure of this part of the scheme to his masters back in

Skavenblight. In fact, he had put off making his report for as long as he decently could. Now he had no option but to talk to the Seerlord and report how things stood. Warily he looked up at the huge mirror on top of the Farsqueaker, as he waited for a vision of his master to take form.

The skaven slaves scuttled faster now. The light in the warp-globes became brighter. Thanquol felt his fur lift and a shiver run down his spine to the tip of his tail as sparks leapt from the globes at either end of the treadmill, flickering upwards towards the huge mirror at the top of the apparatus. One of the warp engineers rushed over to the control panel and wrenched down two massive copper switches. Forked lightning flickered between the warp-globes. The viewing mirror began to glow with a greenish light. Little flywheels began to buzz. Huge pistons rose and fell impressively.

Briefly Thanquol felt a surge of pride at this awesome triumph of skaven engineering, a device which made communication over all the long leagues between Nuln and Skavenblight not only possible but instantaneous.

Truly, no other race could match the inventive genius of the skaven. This machine was just one more proof, if any was needed, of skaven superiority to all other so-called sentient races. The skaven deserved to rule the world - which was doubtless why the Horned Rat had given it into their keeping.

A picture took shape in the mirror. A towering figure glared down at him. Thanquol shivered again, this time with uncontrollable fear. He knew he was looking on the features of one of the Council of Thirteen in distant Skavenblight. In truth, he could not tell which, since the picture was a little fuzzy. Maybe it was not even Seerlord Tisqueek. Swirls and patterns of interference danced across the mirror's shimmering surface. Perhaps, Thanquol should suggest that the engineers of Clan Skryre should make a few adjustments to their device. Now, however, hardly seemed the time.

'What have... to... report... Seer Thanq...' The majestic voice of the Council member emerged from the machine's squeaking trumpet as a high-pitched buzzing. Thanquol had to strain to make out the words. With his outstretched paw he snatched up the mouthpiece, carved from human thighbone and connected to the machine by a cable of purest copper. He struggled hard to avoid gabbling his words.

'Great triumphs, lordly one, and some minor setbacks,' Thanquol squeaked. His musk glands felt tight. He fought to keep from baring his teeth nervously.

'Spea... up... Grey... I... hardly hear you... and...'

Thanquol decided there were definitely a few problems with the farsqueaking machine. Many of the Seerlord's words were being lost, and doubtless his superior was only catching a few of Thanquol's own words in return. Perhaps, thought the Grey Seer, this could be made to work to his advantage. He must consider his options.

'Many triumphs, lordly one, and a few minor setbacks!' Thanquol bellowed as loud as he could. His roaring startled the slaves and they stopped running. As the treadmill slowed, the picture started to flicker and fade. The long tongues of lightning dimmed. 'Faster, you fools! Don't stop!'

Thanquol encouraged the slaves with a flick of his lash. Slowly the picture returned until the dim outline of the gigantic skaven lord was visible once more. A cloud of foul-smelling smoke was starting to emerge from the Farsqueaker. It smelled like something within the machine was burning. Two warp engineers stood by with buckets of foul water drawn directly from the nearby sewers.

'...setbacks, Grey ...eer Thanquol?'

If ever there was time for the machine's slight irregularities to prove useful, now was that time, thought Thanquol. 'Yes, master. Many triumphs! Even as we speak our warriors scout beneath the man-city. Soon we will have all information we need for our inevitable triumph!'

'I said... setbacks... Seer Thanquol.'

'It would not wise be to send them back, great one. We need every able-bodied skaven warrior to map the city.'

The Council member leaned forward and fiddled with a knob. The picture flickered and became slightly clearer. Thanquol could now see that the speaker's head was obscured by a great cowl which hid his features. The members of the Council of Thirteen often did that. It made them seem more mysterious and threatening. Thanquol could see that he was turning and saying something to someone just out of sight. The Grey Seer assumed his superior was berating one of the engineers of Clan Skryre.

'...and how is... agent von Halstadt...'

'Indisposed,' Thanquol replied, a little too hastily for his own liking. Somehow it sounded better than saying he was dead. He decided to change the subject quickly. He knew that he had better do something to save the situation and fast.

No matter how cunningly he stalled his masters on the Farsqueaker, he knew that word of von Halstadt's death would get back to them eventually.

Every skaven force was full of spies and snitches. It was only a matter of time before the news of his scheme's failure reached Skavenblight. By then Thanquol knew he had better have some concrete successes to report.

'We have news... change of plans... we send army to Nuln... when ready... ttack city...' The Seerlord's words made Thanquol ears rise with pleasure. If an army was being dispatched to Nuln, he would command it. Taking the city would increase his status immeasurably.

'Warlord Vermek Skab will command... render him all... sible assistance...'

Thanquol bared his teeth with disappointment. He was being replaced in command of this army. He sniffed as he considered the matter. Maybe not. Vermek Skab might have an accident. Then Grey Seer Thanquol could rise majestically to claim his full and rightful share of the glory!

Thanquol's nose twitched. The billowing cloud of smoke from the machine almost filled the chamber now, and Thanquol was pretty sure that the device was not supposed to be emitting great showers of sparks like that. The fact that two of the warp engineers were running for the door wasn't a good sign either. He considered following them.

'I have foreseen the presence... ill-omened elements in your future, Than... I predict disaster for you unless... do something about them.'

Suddenly Thanquol was rooted to the spot, torn between his desire to flee and his desire to hear more. He almost squirted the musk of fear. If the Seerlord prophesied something then it had almost as good as happened. Unless, of course, his superior was lying to him for purposes of his own. That happened all too often, as Thanquol knew only too well.

'Disaster, lordly one?'

'Yes... see a dwarf and a human... destinies are intertwined with yours... you do not slay them then...'

There was a very loud and final bang. Thanquol threw himself off his stool and cowered on the floor. An acrid taste filled his mouth. Slowly the smoke cleared and he saw the fused and melted remains of the farsqueaking machine. Several dead skavenslaves lay in its midst, their fur all charred and their whiskers burned away. In one corner a Warp Engineer lay curled up in a ball, mewling and writhing in a state of shock. Thanquol was unconcerned about their fate. The Seerlord's words filled him with a great fear. He wished he had been able to speak with his superior a little longer but alas he had not that option. He raised his little bronze bell and tinkled it.

Slowly members of his bodyguard entered the chamber. Clawleader Gazat looked almost disappointed to see him alive, Thanquol thought. Briefly the idea that the warrior might have sabotaged the Farsqueaker crossed Thanquol's mind. He dismissed it - Gazat did not have the imagination. Anyway, the Grey Seer had more important things to worry about.

'Summon the gutter runners!' Thanquol squeaked in his most authoritative tone. 'I have work for them.'

For a moment silence fell over the chamber. A foul smell made Thanquol's whiskers twitch. Just the mere mention of the dreaded assassins of Clan Eshin had caused Clawleader Gazat to squirt the musk of fear.

'Quick! Quick!' Thanquol added.

'Instantly, master,' Gazat said sadly and scuttled off into the labyrinth of sewers.

Thanquol rubbed his paws in glee. The gutter runners would not fail, of that he was assured.

FELIX UNLOCKED THE door of his chamber and entered his room. He yawned widely. He wanted for nothing more than to lie down on his pallet and sleep. He had been working for more than twelve hours. He put the lantern down beside the straw-filled mattress and unlaced his jerkin. He tried to give his surroundings as little attention as was possible, but it was difficult to ignore the loud moans of passion coming from the next room and the singing of the drinkers downstairs.

The chamber wasn't good enough for paying guests but it suited him well enough. He had occupied better, but this one had the great virtue of being free. It came with the job. Like a minority of old Heinz's staff, Felix chose to live on the premises.

Felix's little pile of possessions stood in one corner, under the barred window. There was his chainmail jerkin and a little rucksack which contained a few odds and ends such as his fire-making kit.

Felix threw himself down on the bed and pulled his old, tattered woollen cloak over himself. He made sure his sword was within easy reach. His hard life on the road had made him wary even in seemingly safe places, and the thought that the skaven they had recently encountered might still be about filled him with dread.

He recalled only too well the huge corpse of the slain rat-ogre lying at the foot of the stairs in von Halstadt's mansion. It had not been a reassuring sight. Somehow he was unsurprised that he had heard nothing at all about the fire at von Halstadt's mansion. Perhaps the authorities had not found the skaven bodies, or perhaps there was a cover-up. Right now, Felix didn't even want to consider it.

Felix wondered how men could ignore the tales of the skaven. Even as a student he had come across scholarly tomes proving that they didn't exist, or that if they had ever existed they were now extinct. He had come across a few references to them in connection with the Great Plague of 1111 and of course the Emperor of that period was known as Mandred Skavenslayer. Yet that was all. There were innumerable books written about elves and dwarfs and orcs, yet knowledge of the rat-men was rare. He could almost have suspected an organised conspiracy to cloak them in secrecy but that thought was too disturbing, so he pushed it aside.

There was a soft knock at the door. Felix lay still and tried to ignore. Probably just one of the drunken patrons lost and looking for his room again, he told himself.

The knock came again, more urgently and insistently this time. Felix rose from the bed and snatched up his sword.

A man could never be too careful in these dark times. Perhaps some bravo lurked out there, and thought a sleep-fuddled Felix would prove easy prey. Only two months ago Heinz had found a murdered couple lying on bloodstained sheets a mere three doors away. The man had been a prominent wine merchant, the girl his teenage mistress. Heinz suspected that the merchant had been slain by assassins on order of his harridan of a wife, but claimed also that it was none of his business. Felix had got his

new tunic all covered in blood when he dumped the bodies in the river. He hadn't been too thrilled about having to use the secret route through the sewers either.

The knocking came a third time, and he heard a woman's voice whisper, 'Felix.'

Felix eased his blade from its scabbard. Just because he heard a girl's voice didn't mean that there was only a girl waiting for him out there. She might have brought a few burly friends who would set about him as soon as he opened the door.

Briefly he considered not opening the door at all, of simply waiting till the girl and her friends tried to batter the door down then he realised quite how paranoid he had become. He shrugged. Since the deaths of Hef and Spider and the rest of the Sewer Watch he had every reason to be paranoid. Still, was he going to wait here all night? He slipped the bolts and opened the door. Elissa was waiting there.

She looked up at him nervously, brushing a curl from her forehead. She was very short but really very pretty indeed, Felix decided.

'I... I wanted to thank you for helping me earlier,' she said eventually.

Felix thought that it was a bit late for that. Couldn't she have waited till the morning? Slowly, though, realisation dawned on him. 'It was nothing,' he muttered, feeling his face flush.

Elissa glanced quickly left and right down the corridor. 'Aren't you going to invite me in, I wanted to thank you properly.'

She had to stand on her tiptoes to kiss his lips. He stood there dumbfounded for a second then pulled her into the room and slammed the door, slipping the lock into place.

AS HIS HENCHLING Queg reached twelve in his muttered count, Chang Squik of Clan Eshin twitched his nose and sampled the smells of the night.

Strange, he thought; so like the stinks of the man-cities of Far Cathay and yet so unlike. Here he could smell beef and turnip and roast pig. In the east it would have been pickled cabbage and rice and chicken. The food smelled different but everything else was the same. There was the same scent of overflowing sewers, of many humans living in close proximity, of incense and perfume.

He opened his ears as his master had trained him as well. He heard temple bells tolling and the rattle of carriage wheels on

cobbles. He heard the singing of drunks and the call of the night watchmen as they shouted the hour. It did not trouble him. He could not be distracted. He could, if he so wished, tune out all extraneous sound and pick out one voice in a crowd.

The skaven squinted out into the darkness. His night-vision was keen. Down there were the shadowy shapes of men and women leaving the taverns arm in arm, heading for brief liaisons in back alleys and squalid rooming houses. Chang did not care about them at all. His two targets were in the building that humans called a tavern.

He did not know why the honourable Grey Seer had selected these two, out of all the inferior souls in this city, for inevitable death. He merely knew it was his task to ease the passing of their souls into the maw of the Horned Rat. He had already offered up two sticks of narcotic incense and pledged their immortal essence for his dark god's feast. He could almost, but not quite, feel sorry for the doomed ones.

They were there in that tavern, under the sign of the Blind Pig, and they did not know that certain doom approached. Nor would they, for Chang Squik had trained for years in the delivery of silent death. Long before he had left the warm jungles of his eastern homeland to serve the Council in these cold western climes, he had been schooled to perfection in his clan's ancient art of stealthy assassination. While still a runt, he had been made to run bare-pawed through beds of white hot coals, and snatch coins from the bowls of blind beggars in human cities. Even at that early age he had learned that the beggars were often far from blind, and often viciously proficient in the martial arts.

By the time of his initiation he had become proficient in all forms of unarmed combat. He was a third degree adept in the way of the Crimson Talon and held a black belt in the Path of the Deadly Paw. He had spent twelve long months being trained in silent infiltration in the jungles, and a month in fasting and meditation high atop Mount Yellowfang with only his own droppings for food.

Since that time he had killed and killed again in the name of the Council of Thirteen. He had slain Lord Khijaw of Clan Gulcher when that mighty warlord had plotted the downfall of Throt the Unclean. He had served as personal assistant to Snikch when the great assassin had killed Frederick Hasselhoffen and his entire household, and he had been

rewarded with one-on-one instruction by the Deathmaster himself.

Chang Quik's list of triumphs was long, and tonight he would add another to it. It was his task to slay the dwarf, Gotrek Gurnisson, and his human henchling, Felix Jaeger. He did not see how he could fail.

What chance had a one-eyed dwarf and his stupid human friend against a mighty skaven trained in every art of death-dealing? Chang Squik felt confident that he could take the pair himself. He had been almost insulted by Grey Seer Thanquol's insistence that he take his full pack of gutter runners.

Surely the dire rumours of this dwarf were exaggerated. The Trollslayer could not possibly have slaughtered a unit of stormvermin single-handed. And it seemed well nigh unbelievable that he could have slain the rat-ogre Boneripper without the aid of an entire company of mercenaries. And, of course, it was impossible that this could be the same dwarf who five years ago had slain Warlord Makrik of Clan Gowjyer at the battle of the Third Door.

Chang exhaled in one long controlled breath. Perhaps the Grey Seer was right. He had often proved to be so in the past. It was simple prudence to assign the task of slaying the dwarf to Slitha. Chang would slay the human, and if there were any difficulties he would race to the assistance of his henchling's squad. Not that there would be any difficulties.

Queg stopped counting at one hundred and tapped his superior on the arm. Chang lashed his tail once to show that he understood. Slitha and his team, with the clockwork precision which characterised all skaven operations, would be in position at the secret entrance to the tavern by now. It was time to proceed.

He loosened his swords in their scabbards, checked to make sure that his blowpipe and throwing stars were ready at paw, and whistled the signal to advance.

Like a dark wave, the pack of gutter runners surged forward over the rooftop. Their blackened weapons were visible only as shadowy outlines in the moons' light. Not a weapon clinked. Not an outline was visible; well, almost.

HEINZ MADE HIS last rounds of the night, checking the doors and windows of the lower floor to make sure they were securely

barred. It was amazing how often thieves tried to break in to the Blind Pig and steal from its cellars. Not even the reputation for ferocity of Heinz's bouncers could keep the desperately poor and alcoholic denizens of the New Quarter from making the attempt. It was quite pathetic really.

He made his way down into the cellars, shining his light into the dark corners between the great ale barrels, and wine racks. He could have sworn he heard a strange scuttling noise down here.

Just his imagination, he told himself.

He was getting old, starting to hear things. Even so, he went over and checked the secret door that led down into the sewers. It was hard to tell in this light but it looked undisturbed. He doubted anybody had used it since he and Felix had dumped those bodies two months back and saved everybody quite a scandal. Yes, he was just getting old, that was all.

He turned and limped back to the stairwell. His bad leg was playing up tonight. It always did when there was going to be rain. Heinz smiled grimly, remembering how he'd got the old war wound. It had been stamped on by a Bretonnian charger at the battle of Red Orc Pass. Clean break. He remembered lying there in the bloody dirt and thinking it was probably a just pay-back for spiking the horse's owner on his halberd. That had been a bad time, one of the worst he had faced in all his years of soldiering. He'd learned a lot about pain that day. Still there had been good times as well as bad during his career as a mercenary, he was forced to admit that.

There were occasions when Heinz wondered whether he had made the right decision, giving up the free-spirited life of the mercenary companies for the life of a tavern keeper. On nights like this he missed the camaraderie of his old unit, the drinking round the campfires, the swapping of stories and recounting of tales of heroism.

Heinz had spent ten years as a halberdier, and had seen service on half the battlefields of the Empire, first as a lowly trooper and later as a sergeant. He had risen to captain during Emperor Karl-Franz's campaigns against the Orc hordes in the East. During the last Bretonnian scrap he had made enough in plunder to buy the Blind Pig. He had finally given in to old Lotte's promptings to settle down and make a life for the two of them. His old comrades had laughed when he had actually married a camp follower. They had insisted she would run off

with all his money. Instead the two of them had been blissfully happy for five years before old Lotte had to spoil it all by going and dying of the Wasting Sickness. He still missed her. He wondered if there was anything to stay here in Nuln for now. His family were all dead. Lotte was gone.

As he reached the head of the stair, Heinz thought he heard the scuttling sound again. There was definitely something moving down there.

Briefly he considered calling Gotrek or some of the other lads, and getting them to investigate, then he spread his huge hands wide in a gesture of disgust. He really was getting old if he would let the noise of some rats scabbling round in his cellar upset him. He could just imagine what the others would say if he told them he was scared to go down there himself. They would laugh like drains.

He drew the thick cosh from his waistband and turned to go back down. Now he really was uneasy. He would never have drawn the weapon normally. He was too calm and easy tempered. Something definitely did have him spooked. His old soldier's instincts were aroused, and they had saved him on more than one occasion.

He could still remember that night along the Kislevite border when he had somehow been unable to get to sleep, filled with a terrible sense of foreboding. He had risen from his bed and gone to replace the sentry, only to find the man dead at his post. He had only just roused the camp before the foul beastmen attacked. He had a similar feeling in the pit of his stomach now. He hesitated at the top of the stair.

Best go get Gotrek, he thought. Only the real hardcore drinkers were still in the tavern by now. The rest were asleep, under the tables, in the alcoves, in the private rooms, or else gone home.

There it was again, that skittering sound, like the soft scabble of padded claws on the stone stairs. Heinz was definitely worried now. He pulled the door closed and turned, almost running down the corridor until he came out in the main bar area. A handful of the bouncers chattered idly with a few of the barmaids.

'Where's Gotrek?' Heinz asked. A burly lad, Helmut, jerked his thumb in the direction of the privies.

SLITHA REACHED THE head of the staircase and flung the door open. So far, so good. All was going like a typically well-oiled Clan Skryre machine. Everything according to plan. They had entered the tavern undetected; now it was simply a case of searching the place until they came upon the dwarf and killed him. And furthermore killed anything else that got in their way, of course.

Slitha felt a little irritated. It was typical of his superior to take the easy task. They had already found out where the human Jaeger slept, and their leader had taken the task of killing him for himself. Surely that was the only explanation. It could not be that the great Chang Squik was afraid of an encounter with the Trollslayer. Not that Slitha cared. When he dispatched the feared dwarf it would simply reflect all the more to his credit. He gestured for his fellows to go in first.

'Quick! Quick!' he chittered. 'All night we haven't got!' The gutter runners moved quickly into the corridor.

FELIX AND ELISSA lay on his palette, kissing deeply, when suddenly Felix shifted uneasily. He thought he heard the faintest of scrabbling sounds from outside the window.

He gently untangled Elissa's arms from around him, and was suddenly aware of the area of heat and sweat where their bodies met. He looked down on the serving girl's face. Her face was a little puffed on the left side from where the student had hit her but she really was very pretty.

'What is it?' she asked, looking up at him with wide, trusting eyes. He listened for a moment and heard nothing.

'Nothing,' he said and began kissing her again.

SLITHA BOUNDED DOWN the corridor. He smelled dwarf. He followed the scent, whistling commands to his fellows in the fore. Surprised by skaven stealth, speed and savagery their weak foe would swiftly be dragged down. What chance would a mere dwarf have against the deadliest warriors of the master race? Slitha almost felt sorry that he was in the rear, the traditional position of honour any skaven leader adopted whenever possible. He would have liked a chance to be the first to sink his blade into the dwarf and offer up his soul to the Horned Rat.

They reached the end of the corridor. The stench of dwarf intensified. He must be very close now. Slitha's heart rate

accelerated dramatically. Blood raced through his veins. His tail stiffened and lashed. The claws in his feet extruded instinctively. As he made ready for combat, he bared his fangs in a snarl. The scent was very strong: they must be almost on top of the Trollslayer. His warriors lashed their tails proudly, ready to overwhelm their opponent with their numbers and savagery.

Suddenly a red mist filled Slitha's eyes. It looked as if a huge axe had cut Klisqueek in half but that could not be. They could not have been detected. It was impossible that a mere dwarf would have the cunning to ambush a pack of skaven gutter runners.

Yet suddenly Hrishak was squeaking in pain and terror. A huge fist had caught him by the throat. The butt of a monstrous axe cracked his skull. The thick, cloying scent of the musk of fear filled the air now. Klisqueek's body had already started to dissolve into a puddle of black slime, as the Clan Eshin decomposition spells took effect.

Slitha looked out into a swirling melee where half a dozen of his finest gutter runners were attempting to swarm over a massive dwarfish form. His pale hairless flesh was emphasised by the black of the skaven's cloaks. Slitha saw the huge axe swing around in a deadly arc. He heard bones crunch and brains splatter.

'Try and sneak up on me, would you,' muttered the dwarf in Reikspiel. He added a guttural curse in Dwarfish as he clove a path of red ruin through the skaven assassins. The dwarf belled and chanted a strange war-cry as he fought.

Slitha shuddered. The noise was enough to awaken the dead, or at least any sleeping human guards. He felt the advantage of stealth and surprise slipping away. His eyes widened with terror as he watched the dwarf complete his bloody work, cutting down Snikkit and Blodge with one stroke. Suddenly Slitha realised that he was alone, facing one very angry and very dangerous dwarf.

It was impossible to believe but the dwarf had killed most of his brethren in a matter of seconds. Nothing in all the world, not even an assassin of Clan Eshin, could conceivably be so deadly. Slitha turned to flee but a hob-nailed boot descended on his tail pinning him in place. Tears of pain filled Slitha's eyes. The musk of fear voided from his glands.

The last thing he heard was the whoosh of a huge axe coming closer.

DESPITE HIMSELF, FELIX untangled himself from Elissa again and looked around. What was that noise? It sounded like fighting downstairs. He was sure he could recognise Gotrek's deep-throated battle-cry. The girl was looking up at him, puzzled, wondering why he had stopped kissing her. She opened her mouth to speak. Felix placed a hand gently over her lips. He leaned forward until his mouth was over her ear.

'Be very quiet,' he whispered. A cold trickle of fear ran through him. He could definitely hear a strange scrabbling sound coming from over by the window. Felix lifted himself off the recumbent girl and reached for his dragon-hilted sword. He slipped backwards off the straw pallet and fell into a half crouch.

Placing one finger against his lips to indicate she should be quiet, he gestured for the woman to get up off the bed. She stared at him uncertainly then followed his gaze over to the window.

That was when she screamed.

CHANG SQUIK WATCHED as Noi swung down on the rope. He felt almost proud of his pupil. Noi had fixed the grapnel in the guttering perfectly then abseiled down the side of the tavern like a great spider. He had sprayed the metal bars covering the window with acid, then filed through the weakened iron like a master burglar.

He reached up and gestured to the rest of the squad on the tavern roof. They fixed their ropes in position and made ready to follow Noi. Chang would be last in, as befitted the glorious strike leader. Noi kicked himself back from the wall, swinging out into space, gaining momentum to crash through the window.

THE WINDOW CAVED in and a black-clad skaven crashed through it. Fighting crouch, tail lashing, a long curved blade glinting evilly in each claw. Felix didn't wait for it to get time to orientate itself. He lashed forward with his own blade, almost catching the thing by surprise. Sparks flashed as the creature parried, deflecting Felix's blade so that it only seared along its cheek.

'Run, Elissa!' Felix shouted. 'Get out!'

For a moment, he thought the girl was too shocked to move. She lay on the straw pallet, her eyes wide with horror, then suddenly she sprang up. The distraction almost killed Felix. The moment he took to look at her was a moment he did not look at his opponent. Only the deadly whine of the skaven's blade as it darted towards his skull warned him. He ducked his head, and the sword passed over him, coming close enough to shave a lock off his hair. Felix lashed back instinctively. The skaven sprang away.

'Felix!' Elissa shouted.

'Run! Get help!' Over the skaven's shoulder, he could see other feral forms crowding round the window. They seemed to be struggling to force a way in, each getting in the other's way. The window was packed with mangy scarred skaven faces. Things did not look good.

'Die! Die! Foolish man-thing,' the skaven chittered, bounding forward. It feinted a stroke with its right blade, then lashed out with its left. Felix caught its hand just above the wrist and immobilised it. The thing's tail snaked obscenely round his leg and tried to trip him. Felix brought the pommel of his sword down behind the skaven's ear. It fell forward but even as it did so it struck with its blade, forcing Felix to jump away. He bounded back across the room and skewered the skaven as it started to rise. Blood frothed from the foul thing's lips as it died. A strange reeking stink filled the air. The skaven's flesh started to bubble and rot.

Felix heard Elissa throw the door bolts. He risked a glance at her. She had turned and was looking at him in a mixture of horror and confusion, as if she did not know whether to leave him or to stay.

'Go!' he shouted. 'Get help. There's nothing you can do here.'

She vanished through the doorway leaving Felix feeling obscurely relieved. At least now he wasn't responsible for her safety. As he turned to look back he saw that the skaven he had killed was gone. It had left behind only a pool of black slime and its rotting clothing. Felix wondered what deadly sorcery was at work.

A hiss of displaced air warned him of another threat. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of several glittering objects hurtling towards him. He dived forward, aiming for the bed, hoping it would break his fall. His mouth filled with straw from

the mattress as he landed. He fumbled with his left hand for his old red cloak and pulled its wadded mass up in his left fist. He was just in time. More shining objects spun through the air towards him. He brought the cloak up and they impacted in the roll of thick wool. Something sharp penetrated the cloth just between his fingers. Felix looked down. He saw a throwing star, smeared with some foul reddish substance, doubtless poison.

Two more skaven had extricated themselves from the mass outside the window and dropped into the room. They scuttled towards him with eye-blinding speed, evil shadows of man-sized rats, their yellow fangs glistening in the lantern-light. He knew better now than to even glance at the doorway. There was no way he could reach it without taking a blade in his back.

Why me, he asked himself? Why am I standing here half-naked and alone, facing a pack of skaven assassins? Why do these things always happen to me? This sort of thing never happened to Sigmar in the legends!

He threw the cloak over the head of the oncoming skaven. It writhed in the tangle of woollen folds. Felix ran his blade through it. His razor-sharp sword cut through flesh like butter. Black blood soiled the garment. Felix struggled to pull the blade free. The second rat-thing took advantage of his preoccupation and sprang forward, both blades held high, swinging downwards like butcher's cleavers. Felix threw himself backwards; the blade came free with an awful sucking sound. He landed flat on his back, his sword clutched in his hand. He raised its point and the flying skaven impaled itself on it. As it fell, its weight pulled the blade free from Felix's grasp.

Damn, he thought, rising to his feet. Weaponless. The point of his blade was visible, protruding from the skaven's back. He was reluctant to touch the foul beast with his naked flesh but he had no choice if he wanted the blade. His cloak was already starting to flatten as the skaven decomposed with terrifying rapidity.

Too late! More skaven leapt in through the window. There was no time for any qualms. He picked up the skaven sword and charged. The sheer fury of his rush took the skaven by surprise. He cleaved one's skull before it could react and disembowelled another with his return stroke. It fell, trying to hold in its ropy guts with one claw, even as it attempted to strike Felix with the other.

Felix hacked at it again, severing the limb. He cut around him in blind fury, feeling the terrible shock of impact run up his arm from every blow. Slowly, though, more and more skaven pressed into the room, and remorselessly, defending himself as best he could every step of the way, he was pressed back towards the wall.

HEINZ LOOKED UP in surprise as Gotrek stomped into the bar. In one hand he held his blood-smeared axe. His other huge fist clutched a dead skaven by the scruff of the neck. The thing was decomposing at a frightening rate, seemingly undergoing weeks of decomposition in moments.

Gotrek glared around at the surprised bouncers with his one good eye and dropped the body. It squelched and formed a puddle at his feet.

'Bloody skaven,' he muttered. 'Whole bunch of them lurking just outside the privy. Too stupid to know dwarfs have good ears.'

Heinz moved over to stand by the Trollslayer. He looked down at the pool of rot with a peculiar mixture of fascination and distaste written on his features.

'That's a skaven alright.'

Gotrek looked up at him in surprise. 'Of course, it was a bloody skaven! I've killed enough of them in my time to know what they look like by now.'

Heinz shrugged apologetically. Then he swivelled on his heels as a scream emerged from the top of the stairwell. Heinz looked up in surprise as the partially clad form of Elissa appearing at the head of the stairs. The girl looked pale with terror.

'Felix!' she shouted.

'What has Felix done, girl?' he asked soothingly. She threw herself at him. He enfolded her shivering form with his brawny arms.

'No. They're trying to kill him. Monsters are trying to kill Felix. They're in his room!'

'Has that girl been taking weirdroot?' a bouncer asked placidly.

Heinz looked over at Gotrek and the rest of the bouncers. All his earlier forebodings returned. He remembered the scrabbling in the cellars. He could see that the dwarf was having the same thought as he was.

‘What are we doing standing here?’ Heinz roared. ‘Follow me, lads!’

This was better. This was more like the old days.

FELIX KNEW THAT he was doomed. There was no way he could fight all these skaven. There were too many of them and they were too fast. If he had been wearing his chainmail shirt perhaps he would have some chance of surviving all those stabbing blades. But he wasn’t.

His foes sensed victory and advanced. Felix danced in the centre of a whirlwind of stabbing blades. Somehow he managed to survive with only a few nicks and scratches. He found himself standing beside his bed. Thinking quickly, he kicked the lantern over. Oil spilled out onto the straw and lit it. In an instant, a wall of flame separated him from the rat-men. He reached out and grabbed the nearest one, hurling it into the flames. The skaven shrieked in agony as its fur caught fire. It began to roll around on the floor, howling and squeaking. Its fellows leapt back to avoid its blazing form.

Felix knew he had bought himself only a moment’s breathing space. He knew now there was only once chance. Doing what the skaven least expected, he dived directly through the flames. Heat scorched his flesh. He smelled the stink of his own singed hair. He saw a gap in the skaven line near the door and dived through it, almost slamming into the corridor wall. Heart pounding, breath rasping in his lungs, blood pouring from a dozen nicks, he raced for the head of the stairs, as if all the hounds of Chaos were at his heels.

A head poked out from the room next door. He recognised the bald pate and lambchop whiskers of Baron Josef Mann, one of the Blind Pig’s most dedicated customers.

‘What the hell is going on out there?’ the old nobleman shouted. ‘Sounds like you’re performing unnatural acts with animals.’

‘Something like that,’ Felix retorted as he sprinted past. The old man saw what was following him. His eyes went wide. He clutched his chest and fell.

CHANG SQUIK GLANCED out round the doorway and gnawed the tip of his tail in frustration. It was all going wrong. It had all started going wrong from the moment that fool Noi had swung

in through the window. In their enthusiasm to be part of the kill, the rest of the pack had all tried to get in behind him at once, all eager to claim their share of the glory. Of course their lines had become entangled, and they had all ended up clutching the window sill and each other and frantically trying to scuttle into the room. Several of the idiots had fallen to their deaths on the hard ground below. Serves the fools right too.

It was ever the fate of great skaven captains to be let down by incompetent underlings, he thought philosophically. Not even the most brilliant plan could survive being executed by witless cretins. It was starting to look like his entire command consisted of those. They could not even kill a single feeble manling, even with all the advantages of surprise, numbers and superior skaven armament. It made him want to spit with frustration. Personally he suspected treachery. Perhaps rivals in the clan had sent him a bunch of ill-trained louts in order to discredit him. All in all, that seemed the most likely explanation.

Briefly Chang considered taking a hand in the fray himself but only briefly. It was glaringly obvious to his superior intellect what was going to happen next. The entire tavern would be roused and his underlings would soon encounter stiff, and very likely fatal, resistance.

Let them get on with it, Chang thought. They deserve whatever fate befalls them.

He slid back into the room, petulantly threw some of the manling's clothing on the fire to add to the blaze, and then leapt out the window. He caught the climbing line easily in one hand and swarmed up the side of the building to safety.

Already he was considering what would be the best way to report this minor setback to Grey Seer Thanquol.

HEINZ GRUNTED AS something slammed into him. He almost toppled backwards as the weight hit him.

'Sorry,' said a polite voice that Heinz recognised as belonging to Felix. 'I was having a little trouble back there.'

Throwing stars whizzed past Heinz's ear. The smell of burning filled his nostrils. He looked down a corridor crowded with scurrying rat-men. A cold fury filled him. Those cursed skaven were trying to burn down the Blind Pig and rob him of his livelihood! He pulled out his cosh and made to rush forward. He need not have bothered. Gotrek pushed him to one side and

charged headlong into the throng. The rest of the bouncers advanced cautiously behind him. From the far end of the corridor, various nobles and their bodyguards emerged and slammed into the skaven from the rear. Terrible carnage began.

It was all over very soon.

FELIX SAT IN front of the fire, wrapped in a blanket and shivering. He looked across at Elissa. The girl smiled back at him wanly. All around, the bouncers hurried upstairs with buckets of water, making sure that the fire did not spread from Felix's room.

'I thought you were very brave,' Elissa said. There was a look of complete dotting admiration in her eye. 'Just like a hero in one of those Detlef Sierck dramas.'

Felix shrugged. He was tired. He was riddled with dozens of cuts and bruises. And he knew now that the skaven were definitely trying to kill him. He didn't feel very heroic. Still, he thought, things could be worse. He reached out and put an arm around Elissa's shoulder and drew her to him. She snuggled in close.

'Thank you,' he said, and for a moment the girl's smile made things feel more worthwhile.

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