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SWORD OF VENGEANCE

A Warhammer Heroes novel

By Chris Wraight

These are lands divided by bitter strife and deadly conflict, where nations and races wage countless wars upon each other. In such a world, the balance of power depends upon the acts of individuals – upon the deeds of heroes.

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 Fantasy, Warhammer 40K 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
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THE IRON TOWER was not the only building being raised in Averheim, but it was by far the largest. A whole district of the poor quarter had been scoured to allow its creation. Some of the demolished houses and streets had dated back to the time of the first Emperors, before the city had grown large enough to reach over the river and absorb the villages along the western bank. They were gone now, mere whispers in the long march of Imperial history.

The building work had taken place quickly. So quickly that men marvelled at it as far afield as Streissen and Nuln. Though the Leitdorfs and the Alptrauts between them had erected plenty of follies in their long years of rule, each had taken years to complete. In a matter of weeks, the Iron Tower's foundations had been laid and the skeleton metal frame had shot up into the sky.

Despite the wonders of engineering, the Tower was not popular. Soon after work had started, ordinary folk of the poor quarter had learned to give it a wide berth. Few willingly walked under the shadow of the great iron spurs that marked out its future outline. Any who had to pass close by scratched the sign of the comet on their chests. It had an evil rumour, and in private many started to call it Grosslich's Folly.

No one knew for certain why the Tower was so hated. After all, the new elector was wildly popular. Order had been restored to the city, and the gold was flowing again through the merchants' coffers. It was even hissed in quiet corners that joyroot could be found again, though its trade had been heavily curtailed.

Still, the stories kept coming. A baby had been born in sight of the Tower with three arms and no eyes. Milk curdled across the city when the foundation stone had been laid. No birds would fly within a mile of it, they said, turning Averheim silent at dawn and dusk. All fanciful tales, no doubt. All unreliable, plucked from the gossipy lips of old wives with nothing better to do.

But the world was a strange place, and old wives weren't always wrong. What no one could deny was that, from time to time, attractive youths were still going missing. Not many – just one or two, here and there – but enough to attract attention. That had been going on even before the days of the Tower, and folk had put it down to the evil times with no elector. Grosslich had even issued an edict on the matter, promising death for any found engaged in the grisly removal of Averland's next generation.

It didn't stop the disappearances. Like the slow drip of a tap, they carried on. It was worse around the Tower, some said. Many believed the rumours, even though there was no proof. It was all hearsay, conjecture and idle talk.

Heinz-Mark Grosslich, still dressed in the robes he'd worn to receive the Imperial messenger, found himself enjoying the irony of it all as he headed towards the Tower. The foolish, the ignorant and the savage were quite capable of seeing what was going on under their

noses. Only the wise were blind to the horror that lurked around them. Blind, that is, until it was far too late.

Night had fallen. The Tower building site was heavily guarded by men of the elector's inner circle, loyal soldiers who'd seen the fight against Leitdorf through from the beginning. As he approached the perimeter of the works, Grosslich saw half a dozen of them leap to attention. They looked surprised to see him walking on his own. They shouldn't have been. He'd been back and forth between the Tower and the Averborg several times a day for the past couple of weeks. When the work was completed it would become the new seat of power in Averland. The Averborg would have to go. The city needed a fresh start, a new way of doing things.

He nodded to the guards as he passed their cordon and entered the site. None of them would ever go further inside – their job was to patrol the fences. That didn't mean the interior was unguarded, just that the guards there were of a more specialised type.

Once past the fences, the building came into view properly. It had the appearance of an upturned claw. Huge iron shafts had been sunk into the earth, on top of which the structure was now being raised. When finished, the Tower would resemble a giant dark needle, soaring up into the high airs and dominating the land around it. There would be a turret at the very pinnacle sending six spikes out over the cityscape, each twenty feet long. At the centre of those spikes would be his sanctum, far above the rolling plains. That would be the heart of it all, the fulcrum about which the realm would be moulded to his will.

There was still so much to do. The lower levels of the Tower were little more than a tangle of naked metal. Piles of beams, trusses, stone blocks, nails, rods and

other paraphernalia littered the churned-up earth. The disarray offended Grosslich's refined senses, and he made a mental note to order the workers to take more care.

As he neared the centre of the works, a door loomed up out of the darkness. It was imposing – over twelve feet tall and nearly as wide – and decorated with friezes of pure, dark iron. Here and there, a face of tortured agony could be made out in the night air, lost in a morass of limbs and torsos. The iron doors themselves were covered in a filigree of sigils and unholy icons, all traced with formidable skill and delicacy. Grosslich had no idea what they all signified, but he knew he would soon. His abilities increased with every passing day.

The wall behind the door was barely started and rose no more than a few feet above the iron frame. Beyond it, the bone-like scaffolding was obvious. It was a door that seemingly led nowhere. And yet, for all that, it was guarded by two heavily-armoured soldiers. They wore strange armour, quite unlike the standard gear his men in the citadel were given. Each was clad in a suit of segmented plates, glossy and polished. The soldiers carried double-bladed halberds, though the steel had been replaced with what looked like polished crystal. Both were short and stocky and stood strangely, as if their legs bent the wrong way and their shoulders had been dragged out of place. Most disconcertingly, their closed-face helmets had long snouts, carved in the shape of snarling dog's muzzles. No unaltered human could have fitted into those helms. These were Natassja's creatures, the product of her endless experimentation.

As he gazed on her progeny, Grosslich felt a surge of love for Natassja bloom up within him. She was everything to him, the one who had taken him from a

minor landowner in the border country with Stirland and turned him into the most powerful man in the province. Her imagination and beauty were beyond those of anyone he had ever met. Particularly her imagination.

‘Open the doors,’ he said. The soldiers complied without speaking, though there was a strained wheezing from their helmets. So many of them died after having the alterations made. That was a shame, but a small price to pay for art.

The iron doors swung inwards, revealing a staircase that plunged down into the foundations of the Tower. The smell of jasmine, Natassja’s smell, rose up from the opening. There were other delights too, such as the pleasing chorus of screams, just on the edge of hearing. Things were so much better now that she had the time and freedom to truly give rein to her inclinations. This was just a foretaste of what was to come. Soon, the screams would be ringing out across all Averland.

Grosslich smiled and descended into the depths of the Tower. Behind him, the doors clanged closed.

LUDWIG SCHWARZHELM FINISHED writing and placed the quill next to the parchment. He sat back in his chair, rolled his massive shoulders to relieve the ache, and looked up from his desk.

The walls of his study in Altdorf looked alien in the candlelight. He’d hardly visited it in the past decade of constant campaigning. Now they were an indictment of him. He’d been ordered to stay in them, to keep out of Imperial affairs for as long as it took the Emperor to forgive him for what had happened. However long that might be.

The rooms were minimally furnished. Most men of his rank would have lived in opulent state chambers,

attended to by scores of servants and surrounded by priceless treasures from across the known world. That had never been his way. His dwellings were close to the Palace, but they were simple. He had a single manservant to keep an eye on the place when he was on campaign and employed the services of an aged charwoman, the mother of one of the many men who'd died serving under his command. They were both devoted to him, but since coming back from Averland he'd found he could hardly look them in the eye. He was diminished, and felt the shame of it keenly.

Night air gusted through the shutters. The fire had burned low in the grate. The rain continued to plague the city, and he could hear the constant drum of it outside. He'd been working for hours, and was not an eloquent scribe. Composing the letter to the Emperor had taken him the best part of the day and all of the evening. Even now he wasn't sure everything was ordered correctly. He found himself wishing Verstohlen was around. He'd have been able to advise. He'd always been able to advise.

Schwarzhelm brushed sand over the parchment and folded it up. He slipped it into an envelope, reached for the candle of sealing wax and tipped a gobbet of it on the join. As the wax hardened he pulled his personal seal from the drawer at his side. That too was hard to look at. The Sword of Justice entwined with the Imperial seal atop the initials L.S. Once it had been a source of pride to him. Now, like everything else, it had been sullied.

He pressed the seal onto the wax, watching as the red fluid solidified, then placed the letter on the desk in front of him. Beside it was the key he'd taken from Heinrich Lassus's house. It had taken a while for him to discover which lock it opened, but he still had friends in the city.

The old traitor had been careful, but not careful enough. He'd trusted in his reputation, and that alone had been sufficient to fool everyone. Even now, only Schwarzhelm himself knew of the man's treachery. The fire had concealed evidence of his transformation, and men assumed that the old general had suffered from a terrible accident. For the time being, that was how Schwarzhelm wanted it. The truth would emerge in good time.

He took up the key and ran it over his fingers. Iron glinted in the candlelight. Even after much time had passed, he still had no idea why Lassus had done it. As far as he knew, the old swordmaster had no connections in Averland and no interest in the succession. He'd never had any concern with matters of rank or promotion. That was precisely why he'd been so admired. I've been granted the grace to retire from the field and see out the rest of my days in peace. That's what he'd told Schwarzhelm, back before he'd ridden to Averheim. Such an effortless, professional lie, so smoothly delivered.

With an effort of will, Schwarzhelm turned his mind back to the present. The longer he lingered on his many failures, the less useful he could be. Deep down, the tidings of Verstohlen nagged away at him. The spy had seen the mark of Chaos in the city, and his reports had been vindicated by the horrific manner of Lassus's death. Schwarzhelm had to assume that Natassja was still alive. Perhaps Rufus Leitdorf was too. In any event, for as long as Verstohlen remained in Averheim, the counsellor was in terrible danger. Schwarzhelm had sent coded messages by secret courier, but had little hope of them getting through. The only course left to him was to return

there himself. Amends had to be made, debts settled, secrets uncovered.

He'd tried to seek an audience with the Emperor to explain his worries, but that had proved impossible. Never before had any request of his to meet Karl Franz been turned down. That hurt him more than anything else that had happened. Perhaps the Emperor was still angry. Perhaps he was trying to protect Schwarzhelm from any further involvement, thinking it best that he recovered from his trials. Or perhaps there was corruption even in the heart of the Palace, blocking his missives from reaching their target.

In any case, it didn't matter now. His mind was made up. He would leave for Averheim as soon as his work in Altdorf was done. There were only three things he needed to do first.

He rose from the table, taking the key and the letter with him and placing them in his jerkin pocket. He took a dark cloak from the hook in the wall beside him and wrapped himself up in it. At his side he felt the cool presence of the Rechtstahl. He hadn't drawn it since returning from Averland, and he dreaded seeing the rune-carved steel again. The spirit of the weapon was sullen and accusatory. Like all

dwarf-forged master swords, it cared about the nature of the blood it spilt.

Schwarzhelm turned to leave the room. Three simple tasks. To leave the letter where the Emperor would find it. To enter Lassus's private archives in the Palace vaults. To retrieve the Sword of Vengeance, ready to return it to its master if he still lived.

Simple to list, difficult to do. With a final look around his study, Schwarzhelm blew out the candles and left to

break in to the most heavily guarded fortress in the Empire.

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