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THANQUOL'S DOOM C. L. Werner

Upon his return to the Old World, the ambitious Grey Seer Thanquol is coerced into leading an army against the dwarfs of Karak Angkul. Renowned for its engineer clans, this city will not fall easily, but the true object of Thanquol's fascination is a secret artefact of incredible power which he believes will assure his ascension to the Council of Thirteen. His efforts are thrown into disarray when the infamous skaven Ikit Claw usurps control of the army for his own nefarious schemes, and so Thanquol must act quickly before the warlock can unleash his ultimate weapon – the Doomsphere.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. L. Werner was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story in *Inferno!* magazine. His Black Library credits include the Chaos Wastes books *Palace of the Plague Lord* and *Blood for the Blood God, Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter, Runefang* and the *Brunner the Bounty Hunter* trilogy. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer World.

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IF THERE WAS a comfortable spot in the Under-Empire, the warren of Skabreach was as far from it as it was possible to get. A filthy network of half-empty tunnels burrowing beneath the blazing heat of the Estalian sun, Skabreach was the sort of two-mouse flea-hole that any right-minded skaven did his utmost to escape from. It was a no-place in the middle of nowhere, a pathetic slum of fungus-farmers and chow-rat breeders. The air stank of poverty and weakness, the miserable inhabitants scurrying about with their heads cringing low against their chests and their tails dragging in the dirt. One could almost watch the piebald fur of the ratkin falling out as anxiety and malnourishment wreaked havoc on their wasted bodies.

Grey Seer Thanquol stalked among the tunnels of Skabreach with such contemptuous arrogance that he might have been the Horned One himself. The debased skaven of the colony prostrated themselves before him, cowering against the squalor of the tunnels until his imperious presence had passed. Sometimes Thanquol amused himself by trampling one of the abased ratmen, other times he vented his anger by lashing out with his staff against a skaven skull or knocking a few fangs down a farmer's throat with a sharp kick.

Lately even these violent distractions had failed to improve the grey seer's mood. After three weeks his supply of warp-snuff was perilously low and even the lowest cut-throats of Skabreach's pathetic black market had been unable to scrounge up any more. The abominable smell of the warren was growing noxious to him: a vile mixture of fear musk and starvation. He was growing sick of eating mushrooms and chow-rat, finding the taste equally tedious despite the thousands of ways his hosts found to prepare it. He found himself almost longing for the salty taste of rat-ogre. There had been a lot of meat on old Boneripper. Had he known what to expect when he returned to skavendom, he might have rationed the flesh of his late bodyguard a bit more judiciously.

Thanquol's eyes glistened with spite as he reflected upon his latest misfortunes and the events that had led him to such a pass. Coerced into an insane scheme by Nightlord Sneek to help Clan Eshin murder the reptilian Xiuhcoatl, Prophet of Sotek the Snake-devil. Of course, the small matter of having to go to Xiuhcoatl's temple in Lustria hadn't bothered Sneek – the skulking old backstabber wasn't going!

If Thanquol lived to be forty winters, he would never set one paw on a ship again! First the crossing of the Great Ocean on a stolen man-thing pirate ship. Then to be cast alone in a little dinghy with his injured rat-ogre, abandoned to the doubtful mercies of tide and tempest.

And between those two terrifying ordeals at sea! Thanquol ground his teeth together as he remembered the green hell of Lustria, a stagnant morass of swamps so overgrown they were like jungles and jungles so damp they might as well have been swamps. How he hated those jungles! Alive with insects and reptiles and huge hunting cats! Everything in the thricecursed jungles had been devoted to one purpose: killing and eating ratmen! Even the plants were lethal, a riotous array of poisonous foliage even a skaven couldn't choke down and a menagerie of ghoulish growths that supplemented their diets by dragging shrieking ratkin into their slobbering maws.

Lizardmen, snakes, zombies, even the treacherous blades of his underlings from Clan Eshin had all been poised to thwart his mission! But Thanquol had prevailed! Like one of the triumphant Grey Lords of old, he had manipulated all of his enemies into destroying each other. The zombies had settled the murderous Chang Fang. His own masterful exploitation of the human Adalwolf had spelled Xiuhcoatl's doom. Given the choice of killing the grey seer or saving his breeder-woman from the skink's knife, Adalwolf had acted precisely as Thanquol knew he would. The human had been his instrument of death. It was a stratagem that would make even Nightlord Sneek bow to his cunning and subtlety.

Thanquol tugged nervously at his whiskers, remembering his horrifying encounter with the bloated toad-priest of the lizardmen. He had once stood over the Black Ark, that most sacred of skaven artefacts, and he could safely say that the magical energies he had sensed emanating from the slann had been greater. For a sorcerer, it was a chilling prospect to consider that such power could exist within a living being. His glands clenched at the mere idea of facing a creature like that again. It would be a cold day in Kweethul's larder before Thanquol set a paw in Lustria again!

Shaking his horned head, the robed ratman smacked a prostrate farmer across the backside with his staff, evoking a squeak of frightened pain. The pathetic maggots of Skabreach lacked even the spleen to bare their fangs when they were struck. Not that Thanquol could entirely blame them. After all, it wasn't every day one was abused by the mightiest hero in the Under-Empire.

The narrow earthen tunnels pressed close against the grey seer as he made his way through the wretched warren. Sometimes he was forced to turn sideways to make any progress, the passage so tight that his whiskers brushed against both sides at once. The Estalian sun baked the ground into something approximating the toughness of concrete, making the excavation of even the smallest burrow a gruelling ordeal.

A more prosperous community might have bought one of the warpstone-powered digging machines crafted by Clan Skryre or hired the use of one of the gigantic moles bred by the beast-masters of Clan Moulder. But Skabreach was far from such developments. Its only recourse towards expansion was to send gangs of skaven into the tunnels with shovels and picks. As a result, everything in the settlement was close and confined, even by the standards of the underfolk.

Thanquol could not leave the warren behind him soon enough. When his boat had washed ashore on the Estalian coast, the grey seer had spent several frantic days searching for a hole that would lead him back into the tunnels of the Under-Empire. A hint of skaven-scent in the air had at last drawn him to one of the pit-vents leading down into Skabreach. There had been a moment of anxiety on his part when he discovered where he was. As an outpost of Clan Skab, Thanquol had every reason to suspect a violent reception. A warlord clan whose power he had played a part in diminishing through his hand in both the assassination of Warlord Vermek Skab and the near-eradication of Skab's holdings beneath the human city of Nuln during the Battle of Nuln, the ratmen of Clan Skab weren't likely to forget him anytime soon. Only a subtle mix of bribery and blackmail had enabled Griznekt Mancarver, Clanlord of Skab, to retain his seat on the Council of Thirteen. It made Thanquol's tail twitch to think there was somebody among the Lords of Decay with more reason to want him dead than Arch-Plaguelord Nurglitch.

His momentary fear, in hindsight, had been absurd. Probably a result of eating the much too-salty flesh of his late and unlamented bodyguard for so many nights at sea. There wasn't a rat in all Skabreach with the spleen to look at him, much less think of lifting a claw against him. Even the ruling warlord, a blight-eyed fawning rodent named Ibkikk Snatchclaw, had proven himself to be a grovelling lick-spittle. From almost the first moment, Thanquol had the warlord kissing his feet and falling over himself to keep the fearsome grey seer appeased.

It would have been a pleasant experience, but for the annoyance that the best Skabreach had to offer was almost as bad as being back in the jungle. What the warren could produce on its own was barely enough for subsistence and the cringing ratmen were so terrified of the human knights who patrolled the surface that they wouldn't so much as poke their noses above ground, much less scavenge for supplies. All in all, Thanquol was so disgusted he would recommend the place be demolished when he got back to Skavenblight. He was pretty certain he'd heard Ibkikk muttering seditious talk that was both heretical and blasphemous. Or at least certain he could make Seerlord Kritislik believe he had.

Thanquol kicked another cowering ratman from his path and hastened his pace. There was a dank, musty stink on the air now, meaning he was getting close to his objective. Soon, the tunnel began to widen, the walls becoming jagged and smooth, unmarred by the tools of miners and the claws of slaves. His whiskers twitched in amusement. It was the smell of the river! The subterranean waterway that linked this forsaken outpost to the rest of the Under-Empire.

As the tunnel widened, so did the press of skaven filling it. The grovelling wretches abased themselves as they caught the grey seer's scent, but in doing so they only placed themselves more directly in his path. Ordinarily, he would have bludgeoned and kicked the cringing vermin until they got out of his way, but the smell of the river made Thanquol anxious to escape the narrow tunnel. Callously, he scurried over the bent backs of the other skaven, indifferent to the squeaks of pain rising from the living carpet beneath his paws.

Soon the tunnel broadened into a cavern. Ramshackle huts built from bone and tanned rathide littered almost every corner of the cramped cave, some of them suspended like the nests of bats from the ceiling. The steady rumble of the river pulsed below the clamour of hundreds of skaven chittering and squealing as they scurried about the settlement. Thanquol's lip curled back in contempt as he noted the crude lanterns that illuminated the squalor. Skabreach was so poor it couldn't even afford proper warp-lanterns. Instead of the comforting green glow of smouldering warpstone, the hovels were lit by the flickering orange light of ratskin lanterns, the pungent stink of burning dung clinging to the black smoke billowing away from each light.

To be quit of this place, Thanquol was ready to brave anything. Even the thought that a slum like Skabreach might be too lowly to draw the attention of Nightlord Sneek and the assassins of Clan Eshin wasn't comforting enough to make him embrace the flea-infested warren as a refuge.

Thanquol hurried through the crowded runs between the rathide shacks, kicking and clawing his way through the press of scabby skaven bodies. His eyes were fixed upon his goal: the massive pier and warehouse maintained by Skabreach's small clutch of water-rats from Clan Skurvy. Among the few skaven with an affinity for water and the lunatic capacity for braving the subterranean rivers of the Under-Empire, Clan Skurvy was a powerful force within the skaven economy; its clanlord, the self-appointed Fleetmaster Viskit Ironscratch, enjoyed a position upon the Council of Thirteen. Ironscratch held tremendous power through the indispensable services of his armada of barges and scows. Without clans like Skurvy and Sleekit, valuable cargoes of food and slaves would rot before they reached the markets of Skavenblight. The iron hook which served the Fleetmaster for a left paw was poised against the belly of every ratman in Skavenblight and the Council knew it. Grudgingly, they had allowed Clan Skurvy to increase its reach until even a forgotten slum like Skabreach was not beyond its influence.

The warehouse had been cobbled together from old planks and timbers scavenged by Clan Skurvy from wrecked man-thing ships and barges. The rickety structure had been assembled in a crude, haphazard fashion, with extra storage rooms and slave pens slapped on seemingly at random, many of them sagging out over the black water of the river.

A great press of skaven surrounded the warehouse, clustering about the pier in a shoving, shouting mob of verminous flesh. Thanquol could see a long, flat-bottomed barge moored at the end of the pier. It did not take any deductive genius to figure out the reason for all the ratmen clamouring for attention. Like himself, they were trying to get out of Skabreach by means of the river, desperately waiting for even the worst scow to put in a rare appearance at the pier.

Perched atop an upended barrel, the outlandish colours of his vest and breeches making a stark contrast to the drabness of the mob, Weezil Gutgnaw, potentate of the local water-rats,

was auctioning spots on the barge to the highest bidders. A pair of glowering black skaven who looked as though they'd been sired by rat-ogres flanked the flamboyant Weezil, while another gang of black-furred killers, each armed with a curved cutlass, guarded the narrow entrance to the pier.

'No-no!' Weezil was snarling at a grotesque-looking brown ratman. 'Sick-smell,' he added with a tap to his nose. 'No sick-smell on board!' Weezil kicked the miserable skaven away, at the same time slipping the paltry bribe of warp-tokens he had been offered beneath the bright red sash that girdled his waist.

The grotesque skaven lunged at Weezil, intending to recover his money. In mid-leap, the wretch was cut down by a guard's cutlass. Black blood sprayed across the mob. An excited squeal rose from the throng, dozens of skaven rushing at the corpse and scrabbling among its clothing for any wealth the dead ratman might have hidden. By the time a pair of piebald scavengers armed with flesh-hooks pushed their way through to drag the body away, the mob's frenzy had reduced the corpse to an unrecognisable mess of naked meat.

Thanquol watched the gory mass being dragged away, then pushed his way towards Weezil's barrel. He felt a great wave of satisfaction when he saw the wharf-rat wince at his approach.

'You were supposed to say-tell when a ship came in,' Thanquol hissed through clenched fangs, his red eyes glaring into Weezil's frightened yellow ones. The grey seer cocked his horned head to one side, a fierce grin splitting his face. 'Perhaps you-you mistake-forget?'

The menace in the grey seer's voice silenced the throng gathered about the pier. Nervously, the skaven fell back, clearing the space around Thanquol and Weezil. Even the black-furred body-guards drew away, distancing themselves from their patron and the infamous sorcerer.

Weezil licked his fangs and tugged anxiously at the warpstone earring he wore. 'G-great and g-glorious Thanquol, mightiest of g-grey seers,' Weezil stammered. 'I... I. was just-soon to send-fetch...' Weezil tugged even more fiercely at his earring, casting an angry look at his body-guards. The black skaven ignored his signal, finding more interesting things to look at on the cavern ceiling.

'I told-ordered you to find-fetch me a ship!' Thanquol growled. He gestured furiously at the barge tied to the pier. 'What-what do you think-see that is!'

Weezil turned and squinted at the barge where skaven sailors were making fast the meagre cargo Skabreach had provided them. 'Oh! But that is too poor-poor a vessel to carry-take Mighty Thanquol!' the wharf-rat tried to explain.

The lame excuse only provoked Thanquol's anger. With callous brutality, he brought the heavy metal head of his staff smacking into Weezil's leg. The wharf-rat spilled from his perch atop the barrel, smashing into the bloody ground in a tangle of curses and flailing limbs.

'I'd sail-scurry from this dung-hole in the hollowed carcass of a cave beetle!' Thanquol raged. He jabbed the end of his staff into Weezil's chin, splintering some of the ratman's fangs. 'Now listen-hear, tick-sucking tail-sniffer! Tell-say the captain-chief of that wormy scow I am leaving this filthy midden-mound!'

Weezil pressed his nose into the mud, cowering before the grey seer's wrath. 'Calamitous lord! Please... listen-hear... it-it not my fault! Warlord Ibkikk say-order make-keep you here-here!'

The wharf-rat's words came in a frightened squeal, whistling through his broken fangs, but they were enough to arouse a twinge of fear along Thanquol's spine. Was it possible that cringing, pathetic warlord would actually have the gall to detain someone of his power and importance? Certainly the lick-spittle had made a few fawning requests for his help in ridding the area of the knights who so plagued Skabreach. But certainly the maggot wasn't so deranged as to think such an enterprise was worth Thanquol's time?

'You-you stay-stay!' a savage voice growled from behind Thanquol. There was such a note of ferocity and such a lack of deference in the voice, that the grey seer didn't at once connect it with Ibkikk. Only the warlord's scent convinced him that his ears weren't playing tricks on him.

Thanquol turned slowly. At the mouth of one of the runs he could see Ibkikk, his bulk now encased in a rough suit of armour crafted from human shields laced into a vest of mail. The warlord's lips were curled back from a mouth of gleaming fangs. Around him, a score of armoured clanrats stood with bared weapons.

'I ask-speak before,' Ibkikk snarled. 'Now I say-tell! Thanquol will-will use his magic-power against steel-men! Thanquol will-will fight-kill for Skabreach!'

The grey seer listened to the warlord's tirade, but found his attention constantly shifting back to the barge. The crew had erupted into a positive frenzy of activity. It wasn't difficult to guess their intentions. They were making ready to debark as fast as they could.

'Mighty Grey Seer Thanquol!' Ibkikk scoffed, spitting a blob of phlegm into the mud. 'We-we feed-treat you for many day-night! Now you-you return-pay! You kill-slay steel-men! Or I gut-stab you and let-leave rats to eat-feast!'

As he hissed the threat, Ibkikk drew his notched sword from his ratskin belt. The warlord ran one of his fingers along the blade, drawing a thin bead of blood from his finger.

Sight of the gesture sent a spasm of terror coursing through Thanquol's body. The image of a homicidal ginger-furred dwarf-thing running his thumb along the edge of his enormous axe flared through the grey seer's mind.

Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, Thanquol tongued the last bit of warpstone he had hidden in his cheek-pouch and crushed the tiny pebble between his teeth. A pulse of raw magical energy rippled through his body, burning away his fear and enflaming his mind with visions of destruction and havoc.

Ibkikk squirted the musk of fear as he saw Thanquol's eyes suddenly erupt with a green glow. The same magical light gathered about the head of the grey seer's staff. The warlord had just enough time to drop his sword and turn to flee before his enemy raised one of his paws and pointed a claw at him.

'Burn-rot!' Thanquol snapped. As he spat the words, a stream of crackling green lightning leapt from his finger to strike Ibkikk squarely in the back. The warlord shrieked as the magical energy scorched a hole clean through his body, shrivelling his flesh and blackening his bones. The charred husk smashed to the floor, burned bones scattering across the narrow street.

The sight of their leader's instant destruction killed any enthusiasm his warriors had for confronting the sorcerer-seer. They glanced anxiously at one another, each waiting for one of the other clanrats to make the first move.

Thanquol glared contemptuously at the cringing vermin. It would be so easy to burn them all down where they stood. He started to raise his paw to do just that when simple practicality quenched the warpstone-fuelled impulse. This scum was nothing to him. All that mattered now was getting to the barge.

Thanquol brought his staff smashing down, obliterating the charred skull of Ibkikk which had bounced across the ground to land nearly at his feet. 'I think-say Skabreach need-wants a new warlord,' he growled, letting his menacing gaze linger on the cowering clanrats before turning and marching down the pier towards the barge.

The black-furred guards of Clan Skurvy didn't even dare to look at him as he stormed past them.

'A good-safe journey, dread Thanquol!' Weezil's whistling voice called out from behind the barrel.

Briefly, the grey seer considered turning back and attending to the double-dealing wharf-rat.