

# Death's City

A Warhammer novel by Sandy Mitchell

RUDI AND HANNA have escaped from their village into the dark and dangerous wilds. Desperate to uncover the truth behind his father's involvement in a Chaos cult, they head to the city port of Marienburg. But their road is not without danger and they are soon tracked down by a witch hunter, who is convinced that they are members of the same diabolical cult. Fate is rarely kind in the Warhammer world and their lives hang in the balance...



*Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been working as a freelance writer for the last couple of decades. He has written science fiction and fantasy, as well as television scripts, magazine articles, comics, and gaming material. His television credits include the high tech espionage series Bugs.*

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### *from DEATH'S CITY*

ESCAPE WAS CLEARLY impossible. Surrounded by horsemen, the trio of fugitives had nowhere to go. Rudi felt the bitter bile of defeat rising up in him as he caught a glimpse of the woodland beyond the shifting barrier of horseflesh and cursed the impulse which had taken them away from its shelter out onto the open moor. Beneath the trees they would have been safe from pursuit, but since he'd discovered the unmistakable tracks of beastmen in one of the clearings the risk of remaining there had seemed far too great. Had he known the witch hunter was so close, with a troop of mounted soldiers to back him up, he would have taken his chances with the mutants.

'You killed my mother!' Fritz bellowed, thrusting his spear at the man in black. Gerhard leaned easily back in his saddle, seizing the shaft behind the metal point, which gleamed like silver as it reflected the moonlight and twisted it. Somehow, the simple motion broke the muscular youth's grip on the wood. Gerhard snatched the weapon out of his hands completely and swatted him on the side of the head with the blunt end. Fritz fell to his knees, stunned, and before he realised what he was doing, Rudi found himself taking a step forward to stand between the witch hunter and his old enemy from Kohlstadt.

'You were harbouring a mutant,' Gerhard pointed out, his tone as mild and conversational as ever. 'She could have been tainted by your actions.'

'He was protecting his brother,' Rudi said. Hans Katzenjammer had been warped by the blood of a beastman,

which had entered his body through the minor scratches left by a tainted thorn bush. Despite the enmity he'd always displayed towards Rudi, he had saved the young forester's life twice since his transformation, something which had only added to the welter of questions which buzzed around the inside of his head like tormenting flies.

Magnus knew the answers to some of them at least, his adoptive father's dying words had told him that much, but the merchant had been missing since the fateful night in the forest which had forced him and Hanna to flee for their lives. Rudi had hoped to find him in Marienburg, but right now his chances of reaching the city seemed remote to say the least. 'You can't blame him for that.'

'Of course I can,' Gerhard said, an edge of asperity entering his voice. 'Harbouring a mutant is an act of heresy. If he really wanted to help his brother he should have reported him at once, so at least his soul could have been saved.'

'Is that why you burned my mother?' Hanna asked, her voice slurred by loathing and hatred. 'You thought you were saving her soul?' She glared at the witch hunter, an expression of barely contained fury on her face. Rudi shuddered. He'd only seen her like this once before, when the powers she barely understood and could hardly control had erupted from her body under the impetus of fear and manifested in a ball of blazing death which had incinerated the skaven attacking her.

'It was far too late for that,' Gerhard said, shaking his head regretfully. 'It was claimed by the dark powers long ago.'

'So you say.' Hanna glared up at him, the silver light of Mannslieb transforming her blonde hair into a nimbus of rippling light. Morrslieb, the ill-favoured moon, was close to the horizon now. Its pale, greenish glow was all but extinguished, yet somehow it managed to cast deep shadows across her face, transforming it into something almost bestial. 'Why don't you go and find out?'

Rudi flinched, seeing the flicker of reddish flames flare into existence in the air in front of her. Another heartbeat and they would burst forth in ravening fury, consuming everything in their path. Fritz, who so far had only seen the girl lighting campfires and conjuring up phantom candle flames, and been abjectly terrified on every occasion, whimpered and hunkered down on the ground reciting the blessing of Sigmar. The soldiers surrounding them seemed scarcely less afraid, clinging grimly to their mounts as they pawed the ground, bucking and rearing in panic. Only Gerhard seemed sanguine, he and his sable steed remaining still.

‘More powerful witches than you have tried,’ he replied evenly. ‘And I’m still here. Sigmar protects His faithful servants.’ He raised his hand, in which something caught the moonlight, flashing too brightly for Rudi to make out what it was. Hanna staggered as though she’d been struck, the ball of flame winking out of existence. Rudi put out an arm to support her and she clung to him, trembling violently.

‘Hanna, are you all right?’ He raised his voice, addressing Gerhard directly. ‘What did you do to her?’

‘Nothing.’ The witch hunter shrugged and looked impatiently at the soldiers, who were beginning to get their mounts under control. ‘I just let her do it to herself.’

‘Push magic too hard and it pushes you back,’ Hanna said, rubbing her temples and looking slightly dazed. ‘Isn’t that what Alwyn said?’ Rudi wasn’t so sure it was as simple as that, but Gerhard nodded.

‘Magic can’t prevail against righteous faith,’ he said, returning the tiny object to the recesses of his cloak. He gestured to the soldiers. ‘She’s harmless, you idiots. At least for now. Bring them in.’

The armed men were evidently more afraid of the witch hunter than anything the fledgling sorceress might do. Most of them dismounted at once, only a few remaining in the saddle to point heavy pistols at the

fugitives. Before he could react, Rudi found himself seized by rough hands, the sword and knife at his belt torn away and Hanna wrenched from his grasp.

'If any of them resist, kill the girl and the simpleton,' Gerhard added. Rudi felt a chill strike deep in his heart. There could be only one reason the witch hunter wanted him kept alive and he quailed inwardly at the prospect.

'Why not me too?' he asked, masking his feelings with a display of anger more convincing than he would have believed possible under the circumstances. To his surprise the witch hunter looked uneasy for a moment.

'There are things I need to know.' The conversational tone was back in his voice now, his habitual composure settling around him like a cloak. 'But this is hardly the time or the place.' To Rudi's surprise he held out a hand, leaning down from the saddle of his horse. 'Get up behind me.'

His head reeling, Rudi complied. He'd never been on horseback before, but Gerhard's grip was firm and he found himself being hoisted aboard with little difficulty. The back of the saddle was distinctly uncomfortable to sit on, but he wasn't going to give the witch hunter any satisfaction by complaining about it. He put his arms round the man's torso, feeling strangely uneasy at the sensation of close physical contact with so mortal an enemy.

'I'm surprised you trust me so close,' he said.

'I don't. But I trust your concern for your friends.' Gerhard's companions were obviously less sanguine about their captives' good behaviour. Hanna and Fritz were swiftly manacled and thrown across a pair of horses in front of their riders like sacks of grain. Fritz still seemed groggy from the blow to the head, but Hanna kept up a tirade of abuse for most of the journey, which seemed to shock and amuse the troopers in roughly equal measure.

Shortly after she fell silent, having finally run out of synonyms for illegitimate birth and deviant sexual practices to attribute to the soldier escorting her, Rudi noticed a faint

orange glow in the sky ahead of them. It was far too early for sunrise, and that would surely have appeared more to the east in any case. A flicker of apprehension shot through him.

'Something's burning,' he said. Vivid memories of Greta Reifenstahl's cottage rose in his mind, flames leaping from the thatch, while Hanna tried frantically to get inside and rescue her mother. His jaw tightened.

'Not yet,' the soldier guarding Fritz said, snorting with amusement at his own wit.

As the horses crested the next rise in the moorland, Rudi could see where the light was coming from. A chain of watch fires crowned a hill slightly larger than those surrounding it, spaced along a ditch and an embankment of earth, which seemed to run right around the crest. Inside it were tents, more than he could accurately count, and even at this hour of the night there seemed to be a lot of activity.

The hooves beneath him began to clatter on a plank bridge and he realised they were crossing the ditch. The ridge of earth beyond it was roughly the height of a man and looked raw and new in the light from a brazier standing next to a gap in the earthworks just wide enough for two horses to pass abreast. Firelight gleamed on levelled halberds.

'Halt.' The voice was firm and resolute. 'Who goes there?'

Gerhard reined in and Rudi became aware of a group of men standing on top of the embankment. They were all dressed in identical livery and were levelling gently smoking matchlocks at the party on the bridge. A strange scent, like burning pepper, drifted towards him from the smouldering tapers.

'Luther Gerhard and Hochmeyer's troop,' the witch hunter replied. The leader of the halberdiers stepped forward, a torch flaring in his hand, bringing the light further out.

'Advance and be recognised.' At the invitation, Gerhard spurred the horse into gentle motion, moving fully into the circle of illumination. The sergeant looked up at him, taking in Rudi's presence. 'Who's this?'

'A good question,' Gerhard said, clearly not inclined to answer it. The sergeant nodded once and stepped aside.

'Clear the way,' he said. The halberdiers stood aside hastily and the hand gunners on the earthworks melted away with equal alacrity.

Rudi turned as the horse began to walk into the compound, trying to keep the entrance in sight. There was no gate to bar it, but a wagon stood nearby, clearly intended to plug the gap in the event of an attack. He kept twisting his head as the group of horsemen penetrated deeper into the encampment, trying to memorise the route back to the entrance. Despite his best efforts, it was futile. The place was a maze, marked out by tents, parked wagons, piles of baggage and equipment he could barely begin to fathom the purpose of. And it was crowded, even at this hour of the night, with purposeful figures scurrying to and fro, many of them armed.

The troop of horsemen came to a sudden halt in a cleared area he estimated must be almost at the centre of the canvas village. It occurred to him that there must have been almost as many people camped there as there had been living in Kohlstadt. A banner stood, flaring in the wind, in front of a tent larger than most of the others he'd seen, and a pair of soldiers stood guard before the entrance. The coat of arms on the flag meant nothing to him, although the implication was obvious; these were the quarters of someone important, perhaps the captain Alwyn had mentioned speaking to when she'd arrived back at the mercenaries' camp earlier that evening.

Gerhard reined in his own horse, swung himself easily from the saddle, and disappeared inside the pavilion without

a word or a backward glance. Rudi dropped to the ground too and stretched gratefully, trying to seem relaxed. Making a run for it would be impossible, he thought. Too many watchful eyes followed his every move. He would be brought down within a handful of steps. Even if he wasn't, he couldn't leave Hanna and Fritz. He knew Gerhard too well to believe that his threat had been an idle one and attempting to escape would simply mean the deaths of his companions.

'How about letting us down too?' Hanna asked, squirming round to glare at the soldier behind her.

He grinned. 'I wouldn't be so impatient to get started with that gentleman if I were you.' The grin widened. 'Besides, I like the view as it is.' He slapped her lightly on the rump to emphasise the point, eliciting an outraged squeal from the girl and a bellow of raucous laughter from his comrades.

'Verber.' Gerhard's quiet voice somehow managed to cut through the noise as though it were wrapped in silence. 'I thought I made my views on the mistreatment of prisoners quite clear.'

'Sorry, sir.' The soldier's face and voice both seemed drained of colour. 'It was just a bit of fun. No harm meant.'

'I doubt that the young lady would agree.' Gerhard strolled over to the horse, slipped an arm around Hanna's waist and lifted her off. She fell hard on her back, only partially cushioned by the witch hunter's support, the breath driven from her body by the impact. Before she could recover, Gerhard knelt, a knee on either shoulder pinning her down, her head immobilised between his thighs.

'Leave her alone!' Rudi started forward, his fists balling, then stumbled and fell as a halberd shaft crashed into the back of his knees. Before he could rise, a couple of soldiers had seized his arms, pinning him to the ground. He twisted his head, frantically trying to see what the witch hunter was doing to the girl.

'This won't take a moment,' Gerhard said, as though they were merely passing the time of day. A soldier standing



next to him passed down a flickering candle and a small stick of something Rudi couldn't identify. 'But I'm afraid you might find it a little uncomfortable.' His hands moved, apparently over her face, and Hanna screamed, more in shock and surprise than from pain, Rudi thought. 'There. That's better.' He stood and glanced across at Rudi. 'It's all right. Let him up.'

The soldiers restraining him slackened their grip a little and Rudi got to his feet, shaking with anger.

'What did you do to her?'

Hanna was struggling awkwardly to her feet, finding it hard to balance on the mud with her hands still shackled behind her. She looked unharmed, apart from the thin coating of grime she'd acquired from the ground. As she turned her head to look at him, an expression of cold fury on her face, his breath caught. A wax seal, like the ones he used to see on the letters he'd once delivered around Kohlstadt, had been pressed into the centre of her forehead. As he looked closer at it, he could make out the familiar twin-tailed comet symbol of Sigmar embossed into the surface.

'A simple precaution,' Gerhard said. His meaning was obvious. Somehow the seal would prevent her from using her powers.

'What about this one?' A new voice said. The speaker was more opulently dressed than the common soldiers, but his livery was the same and he carried a sword at his belt. Rudi assumed he was the captain in charge of the camp. He strolled over to Fritz, still hanging limply over the neck of the horse he'd been brought in on.

'I've no further need of that one,' Gerhard said. 'Execute him at dawn.'

'What?' Fritz positively howled in bewildered outrage. 'No, you can't...' His voice choked off as he was dragged unceremoniously to the ground, the breath driven out of him by the impact.

'Be careful!' Hanna said. 'He has an injured arm.'

'Not for much longer.' The captain gestured to a couple of nearby soldiers. 'Take him away.' Each man took hold of an arm, hoisted the heavysset youth between them and strode off between the tents, leaving a faint double rut in the ground where Fritz's feet dragged. He must have recovered his breath after a moment, as his progress was marked by a gradually diminishing wail, which was finally lost among the other noises of the camp.

'I thought you wanted to interrogate him?' the captain asked.

'I did.' Gerhard nodded. 'I hoped he might lead me to these two. But now I have them, he's of no further use.'

'I see.' The captain eyed Rudi and Hanna sceptically. 'I'm sure you have your reasons. But it seems like a lot of trouble to go to just for a couple of peasant brats.'

'Believe me, captain, I sincerely hope your cynicism is justified. But if I'm right, at least one of these peasant brats is potentially more dangerous than the entire beastman warband you're hunting.'

'Well, you're the expert.' The captain shrugged. 'Anything else I can do for you?'

'I'd appreciate the loan of your tent,' Gerhard said mildly. 'If that wouldn't be too much trouble.'

The captain nodded. 'Fine by me. I won't be needing it now, I've a hanging to organise.'

'Hanging?' Gerhard shook his head in mild reproof. 'I think not. The boy's a proven heretic. He should be burned.'

'Not a problem. I'm sure the cooks have enough kindling for a good bonfire.' The captain shrugged again and melted away into the shadows. Rudi and Hanna's eyes locked, each mirroring the horror the other felt. Gerhard cleared his throat and gestured towards the tent.

'If you would,' he said. 'I think it's time we talked.'

*More Warhammer from Sandy Mitchell*

**DEATH'S MESSENGER**

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