

DEATH'S MESSENGER

A Warhammer novel by Sandy Mitchell

RUDI'S SIMPLE LIFE in the village of Kohlstadt is thrown into turmoil after he befriends Hanna, daughter of the local wise woman. Dark creatures are stirring in the forests of the Empire and when a witch hunter burns Hanna's mother as a heretic, Rudi and Hanna must flee for their lives. They are forced to embark on a journey through the twisted landscape of the Old World, searching for a place where they can make a new life. But nowhere is safe in the Chaos-ravaged countryside: the servants of evil lurk in every shadow, and the fanatical zealots of the Empire would as soon burn you as save you.



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 in both personae, 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 MESSENGER

RUDI WALDER HESITATED before stepping out from the deep shadows beneath the canopy of overlapping branches. There was nothing overtly threatening about the forest clearing, but something didn't feel right. Instinctively he took a step backwards, melting into the contours of a nearby beech tree the way his father had taught him, standing close enough and still enough that a casual eye would miss his presence in the general panorama of broken outlines.

Not that the trick always worked: some animals could detect a hidden hunter by smell alone. Then there were the stories of lurking beastmen, goblins, and worse, which the young forester had more reason than most to believe. Everyone knew they were only biding their time before launching another raid on some luckless outpost of civilisation. Thus far Kohlstadt had been spared their depredations, but everyone in the Reikland knew better than to relax their vigilance. Complacency was the handmaiden of destruction according to Father Antrobus, the local priest of Sigmar, and although Rudi had only the sketchiest idea of what a handmaiden was his very presence in the village was a constant reminder to everyone of the threat they faced.

He strained his ears, hoping to catch again the faint echo on the wind that had warned him of something amiss. He couldn't be sure, but for a moment he thought he heard the murmuring of voices. His apprehension increased. None of the villagers would be this far inside the tree line. They confined their forays for firewood to brief, nervy incursions, preferably in large groups, and they never strayed out of sight of the

perimeter and the comforting open spaces beyond. That narrowed the possibilities alarmingly.

A high, feminine laugh confirmed his worst fears. His jaw tightened. Goblins or beastmen might almost have been preferable, he thought irritably. A moment later the echoes of the laugh were joined by their source, and Rudi froze even more, willing the girl to pass on without noticing him.

Hanna Reifenstal entered the clearing as though she owned it, plainly unconcerned by the idea that something inimical might be lurking among the trees. In this at least the two youngsters had something in common, although Rudi would have bitterly resented anyone tactless enough to point out the fact. In his case his confidence came from a lifetime of living on the fringes of the woodland and the tutelage of his adoptive father, who for as far back as the lad could remember had passed on the lore of the forest, and who earned a reasonable living collecting the bounty on the pelts of any wolves incautious enough to stray close to the ramshackle palisade marking the nominal boundaries of Kohlstadt. Since childhood Rudi had considered the winding maze of paths between the trees a comfortable home, well-stocked with edible flora and fauna, so that even in the long intervals between wolf hunts he and Gunther Walder lived tolerably well. Better, truth to tell, than most of their fellow villagers, who broke their backs from dawn to dusk in the unforgiving fields.

Hanna, on the other hand, was at home in the forest because she seemed to take it for granted that nothing would dare to accost her, the same way she kept the lads of the village at arm's length by the aura of vague contempt she exuded whenever one would pluck up the courage to try and engage her in conversation. This didn't stop them trying, of course. They had done so more frequently of late as she approached her seventeenth birthday, because there was no doubt about it she was quite good-looking if you liked that sort of thing, which Rudi told himself with rather too much emphasis that he most certainly didn't. True she had shoulder-length hair of a striking blonde hue, which framed her heart-shaped face quite fetchingly, and a figure her tightly-laced

blouse emphasised in a vaguely distracting manner, but she was patronising, arrogant, and it was well-known around the village that you didn't want to annoy her because if you did something seriously unpleasant was likely to happen to you. Not that anything actually had, at least to anyone that Rudi had ever heard about, but no one seemed terribly keen to be the first. So for the most part she got her own way about everything without having to try too hard.

'Hello, Rudi.' She waved right at him, and he felt his face flush with embarrassed resentment. She thought she was so clever. 'Were you hiding?'

'No,' he responded curtly, stepping forward into the patch of sunlight that filled the clearing. It felt warm on his skin; a pleasant contrast to the cool shadows beneath the trees, and the turf was springy underfoot. The faint scent of crushed clover rose from beneath his boots. 'Why would I be doing that?' Even as the words left his mouth he knew they were a mistake. Hanna's wide mouth curved into a grin, her green eyes sparkling with mischief.

'How would I know? I never know why you do anything,' she shrugged, not needing to articulate. 'Or care.'

'I thought witches knew everything.' It was a reflex response, and quite the wrong one. Her eyes hardened.

'Then you thought wrong, didn't you? And I'm not... what you said.'

'If you say so,' he said, unsure of what to say next that wouldn't make things worse. Hanna's face flushed.

'I'm an apprentice healer. And I didn't hear you flinging accusations of witchcraft around when my mother set your dad's arm for him!'

'You're right. We were grateful.' Rudi shuffled his feet, resentment at his own embarrassment rising within him. It was true they owed the Reifentals a considerable debt of gratitude. Gunther had come off worst in a confrontation with a wild boar, and been badly hurt before he could drive it off. Fortunately the fracture had been a clean one, and he'd recovered quickly thanks to the treatment he'd received from Greta Reifental, Hanna's mother. The two of them lived in a small

cottage on the outskirts of the village, conveniently close to the foresters' hut. They were the closest neighbours Rudi and his father had. Guiltily aware that he'd hurt her feelings, and wanting to make amends, Rudi plucked one of the rabbits he'd collected from the snares that morning from the small cluster of little mammals hanging from his belt and held it out to her. 'Would you like this? For your mother.'

Hanna stared at it, her face still a mask of resentment. The coney's head lolled drunkenly on its broken neck, a trickle of blood matting the fur beneath its nose. She backed off a step.

'Give it to her yourself,' she said, turning away.

'Fine.' Rudi wasn't sure what else he might have said then, but he was saved from having to try to leave the glade with some vestige of his dignity intact by another cheery greeting.

'Good morning, young man.' Greta appeared around the curve in the forest path, and smiled at him with what appeared to be genuine warmth. She employed the same mode of address to everyone, regardless of age; she even called Grandma Ostwald 'young woman' despite having less than half the nonagenarian's years on her back. Gunther said it was something to do with her healing arts, a way of putting people at their ease by seeming more worldly-wise than they were, but his friend Magnus said she was just bad at remembering names, and Rudi suspected he was right. 'How's your father?'

'Fine, thank you.' Relieved at having an excuse to turn his attention away from Hanna, Rudi took a few steps towards the older woman. She resembled her daughter in many ways, but her build was stockier, and there were patches of grey in her hair, which belied the vitality she otherwise exuded. 'He's recovered completely now.'

Which wasn't entirely true, there was a persistent rash around the scar tissue where the boar's tusk had torn the flesh, but Gunther claimed it didn't itch and his arm was as strong as it had ever been, if not more so, so there wasn't anything to worry about. Certainly nothing worth running to the healer with, like one of the effete villagers who went snivelling to Greta's cottage every time they so much as got a blister on their thumb. Rudi wasn't so sure, the discoloured skin seemed

to him to be spreading slowly up the limb towards the shoulder, but he knew his father too well to waste his breath trying to change the man's mind. He'd do something about it if he saw the necessity, and until he did so he simply wouldn't listen to anything his son might have to say on the subject.

'I'm glad to hear it.' Greta smiled, her open friendliness in marked contrast to Hanna's sullen demeanour. The girl was on the other side of the clearing now, carefully plucking some dimly-glimpsed plants from the grass and transferring them to the pouch hanging from her belt. 'We'd all notice the difference without his bow arm to keep the wolves at bay.'

Rudi flushed again, despite himself. The point was a sore one, although he couldn't really blame the healer for bringing it up. Gunther was known as an exceptional marksman, not just in Kohlstadt but for some distance around, and Rudi knew that his own ineptitude with a bow was a continual disappointment to his father. He practised assiduously, but despite Gunther's patient tutelage he was a poor shot and he knew it.

'You're thinking too much,' Gunther would say, as yet another arrow missed the tree and hung mockingly from a thicket of thorn bushes. 'Don't hold on the aiming point for too long. Just draw and loose.' But the more he tried to relax the more tense he became, so the arrows which had been fairly close to the mark to begin with flew further and further from their target. In the end he'd given up even bothering to carry the old bow Gunther had handed down to him. He dreaded the next winter's organised wolf hunt, when everyone in the village would set off under the nominal guidance of the local militia, and his shortcomings would be plain for all to see. Perhaps if he practised really hard over the coming months...

'Give him my regards, won't you?' Greta smiled, and tucked a stray lock of hair back behind the headscarf which failed to restrain most of it. Rudi nodded again, conscious of having missed part of the conversation while he was lost in his own thoughts, and hoping he'd managed to cover his inattention; but knowing Greta's reputation for astuteness, and aware of

the faint smile quirking at the corner of her mouth, he somehow doubted it.

'I will.' He became aware of the dead rabbit dangling from his hand, and held it out. 'Would you like this? We've got plenty.' That much was true; his complete ineptitude with a bow hadn't extended to all the skills Gunther had tried to teach him, and the snares he set generally yielded a good harvest of garrotted coney. Today he'd collected half a dozen, and they could easily spare a couple. Greta's smile stretched.

'Thank you Rudi.' So she had remembered his name after all. 'That's very kind of you.' She held the tiny corpse up, and called to her daughter. 'Look what Rudi's just given us. Wasn't that nice?'

'I suppose so. Thanks.' Hanna glanced up grudgingly for a moment, then resumed her hunt for herbs with studied concentration. For some reason her mother seemed to find this amusing.

After a few more pleasantries Rudi broke away, relieved to re-enter the shelter of the trees. He strode rapidly down the familiar forest paths as fast as he could, heedless of any noise he might make which would startle the game. For some reason he found himself reliving the conversation with Hanna, imagining all the clever and scathing things he should have said at the time which would surely have put her in her place and paid her back for her rudeness with interest. Next time, he told himself, he wouldn't just stand there gawping, he'd give as good as he got. That'd show her, stuck-up little madam...

'Dreck!' The swearword escaped his lips unbidden, as his boot-heel sank into something squishy and foul-smelling. He slipped, all but losing his balance, and windmilled his arms for a moment before regaining his footing. From habit he glanced down at his soiled footwear, confident of being able to identify the creature whose droppings he had unceremoniously trodden in. Then the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise.

Absorbed in his angry thoughts he'd gone deeper into the woods than he'd intended. The glade he found himself in was familiar of course, but pretty much on the limits of the terri-

tory through which he and his father habitually foraged. Now it was littered with fumets like the one fouling his boots, which stank in a fashion far worse than the droppings of the creatures he was used to. They were larger, too, and the hunting lore he'd gleaned from his father suggested that they must have come from creatures the size of a man, if not greater.

Intrigued, he wiped his boot on a nearby tussock of grass and bent down to examine the befouled ground in greater detail. The droppings were scattered in sufficient number to indicate that a full pack or herd of whatever beasts had left them had passed this way quite recently, and he looked for a patch of bare ground where their tracks might be easier to read.

There! A patch of mud, churned up by what looked like hooves, and a large area of leaf mould beneath the overhanging trees where the imprints stood out clearly. Rudi cocked his head, looking at them from several different angles. They were too large for deer, that much was certain. If anything they most resembled cattle, but that was ridiculous; who would be herding livestock this deep into the woodlands?

A deep sense of unease began to grow within him. The obvious answer would be bandits, driving stolen animals back to some hideout deep within the bowels of the wood. And outlaws weren't likely to be too happy if they discovered an interloper poking into their business.

Assuming they were human at all, of course. His scalp tingling, Rudi began to look for anything which might resemble goblin tracks. He had no idea what such things might look like, but assumed they'd be somehow similar to human prints...

A thrill of pure horror stopped his breath for a moment. Now he was thinking in terms other than human, it was obvious from the weight distribution that the hoof prints had been left by bipeds, creatures that walked like men, but weren't.

Beastmen! Less than a league from Kohlstadt! Drawing the knife at his belt with trembling hands, and aware of how pitifully inadequate it was likely to prove against the monsters his father had described, Rudi turned and ran until his lungs burned and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest.

Behind him, as he left, he was sure he could hear rustling in the undergrowth, although whether that was the creatures he feared or merely the wind in the trees he had no intention of waiting to find out.

***Strange creatures in the woods are just the start
of Rudi's worries – but are the the most dangerous
enemies beast or human?***

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