

A MASSACRE IN MARIENBURG

A Warhammer novel

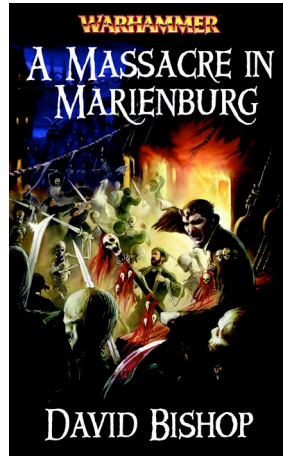
By David Bishop

Guarding the mouth of the River Reik, the exotic port city of Marienburg stands at constant alert against its enemies.

Watch Captain Kurt Schnell and his men have their work cut out when a plague of unnatural events drives the citizens to a state of despair and madness.

But these merely herald the arrival of the real enemy – a necromancer and his army of shambling corpses. Can Kurt rally the city's defenders before

Marienburg is turned into a realm of the living dead?



About the Author

David Bishop was born in New Zealand, becoming a newspaper journalist at the age of eighteen. He emigrated to Britain in 1990, and worked as the editor of 2000AD before becoming a freelance writer. A prolific author, he also writes radio plays, tie-in fiction, articles, audio dramas, comics and has been a creative consultant for a number of video games.

• IN THE SAME SERIES •

A Murder in Marienburg

The following is an excerpt from *A Massacre in Marienburg* by David Bishop.

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IT WAS DAWN when the skull wept blood. The Keeper had slumbered through the night, his dreams unblemished by fear or anguish. But that first glimpse of red trickles seeping from the empty, staring eye sockets sent an icy dagger of dread deep into the Keeper's heart. He scribbled a frenzied, fearful message on a scrap of papyrus and pushed it up through the narrow gap on one side of the heavy oak trapdoor. He was rewarded with a curse from above, and the sound of heavy footfalls as the guard outside ran to summon the sentinels, the servants of Solkan, the Knights of Purity. Once he could no longer hear the guard's running, the Keeper turned back to his home these past thirty years.

The chamber was an oubliette, a dungeon accessible only from a single entrance above the Keeper's head. He had volunteered to be locked away in this space for life, entombed like a hermit or monk. Most would have thought his appointed task a living purgatory, sacrificing their existence to maintain a faithful watch over the objects stored within the oubliette. Of course, none but a handful among the Knights even knew of the dungeon's presence, let alone the secrets contained inside it. Besides, the Keeper considered his post an honour. What greater prayer could a worshipper of Solkan offer than to give up their life in service to the god of vengeance? What greater blessing than to stand guardian to the treasures of Solkan, his most precious artefacts?

Greatest among them all was the skull. It sat atop a stone pedestal, nothing within two arms' span of the ancient relic. The rest

of the artefacts were packed into the walls of the oubliette, mere trifles in comparison to the importance of the skull. If you believed the credo – as the Keeper did – the skull had been placed there for safekeeping by Solkan himself. It was said the inanimate skull would remain exactly the same – without skin or flesh or sinew or sign of life – until the day Marienburg faced its greatest peril. When the Keeper saw the blood dripping from those black, pitiless sockets, he knew his own life would soon be forfeit. But he did not care, did not weep at the prospect of facing eternity.

‘I have been a good servant to my god,’ he whispered, dropping to his knees on the cold stone floor. The Keeper clasped his hands together in supplication, bowing his balding pate before the infamous relic. ‘I shall stand at his side when he returns to bring the gift of vengeance to all the unbelievers, all the servants of Chaos. So be it.’

EVIL. THAT WAS the only word Captain Haaland could think of to describe the fog. Three days it had been behind Haaland’s vessel, a greasy yellow mist that swirled and crept across the water. Just looking back at the eerie cloud perturbed the captain. He had spent all his adult life as a sailor, more years than Haaland cared to remember at sea, yet he couldn’t recall ever seeing a fog so dense, so foreboding or forbidding. It gathered like a shroud on the horizon, a queasy pall of gathering gloom.

They had changed course several times in an effort to shake off this sinister mist, without success. No matter how much they turned and twisted on the sea, how close they went to the shoreline or how far the vessel lurched out into deeper water, the fog was always there. Waiting, lurking, grim and relentless. It was one of the crewmen who noticed no sea bird dared go near the mist. A vessel like the *Altena* churned up the waters as it passed, attracting a constant entourage of gulls and other scavengers, diving into the ocean to feast on fish foolish enough to venture near the surface. But the fog had driven away the sea birds, leaving naught but an unnerving silence in their place.

At first the captain had dismissed the fog as a freakish yet natural phenomenon, but his crew of nine refused to believe such reassurances. By the second day Haaland no longer believed himself, the hollow words mocking him as they slipped from his lips. By the third day, he found himself writing a new will and testament below deck, just in case. At the best of times Haaland's handwriting resembled the crazed skitterings of a plague-stricken spider that had climbed out of an inkwell. But this was not the best of times, and the last words he would ever write were all but illegible.

It was the captain's faithful first mate Frode who summoned Haaland back above deck. They had been at sea together nigh on twenty winters, surviving tempest and torments alike, but this voyage had always been planned as their last. Haaland was due to resign as captain come Geheimnstag, Frode replacing him at the helm of the Altena. Haaland had been looking forward to a quiet retirement in Marienburg, perhaps supplementing his meagre savings by piloting ships into port or working the ferries that criss-crossed the Rijksweg on an hourly basis. Now he'd merely be grateful to get home at all after three days of being followed by the queasy, shimmering mist.

Haaland climbed up on deck, heavy of heart. 'What is it, Frode?'

His fair-haired first mate smiled, pointing ahead of them. 'See for yourself.'

Against expectation, they were in sight of the grim fist of rock that served as guardian to the port of Marienburg and as an even grimmer offshore prison for the city's criminals, misfits and political prisoners. 'Sweet Shallya,' the captain muttered under his breath. 'Never thought I'd be grateful to catch a glimpse of Rijker's Isle.'

'You and me both,' the first mate agreed.

'How long until we pass the prison?'

'We've been making good speed all morning, thanks to a friendly breeze.' Frode glanced up at the sails. 'Shouldn't be more than...'

Haaland waited, but his first mate's words did not continue. 'Shouldn't be more than what?'

When Frode still didn't reply, the captain joined him in looking up at the ship's sails. The grimy canvas was stained a deep, dank crimson, though the captain could not imagine how they'd become so. The sails were dead, not a breath of air in them to propel the vessel home. As he peered at the heavy cloth, something dripped from the sail overhead, splashing down his cheek. Haaland wiped the liquid from his face, studied the scarlet moisture that now wet his fingers. It was thick, almost viscous. He raised his fingers to his nose and sniffed. An aroma of warm iron cloyed his senses, bold and primal as the colour on his skin. Haaland licked a corner of the crimson with his tongue, just to get a taste: it was blood. The captain spat it back out, muttering a dark curse under his breath, the strong voice now a terrified whisper of naked fear.

The captain spun round to glare at the fog. Three days it had matched them for direction and speed, always maintaining the same distance. It's as if the mist is following us, Haaland had written in his captain's journal. No, not following – stalking us. Now the fog was accelerating towards them, billowing forwards, tumbling across the water to engulf the Altena. 'That's impossible,' Haaland said, shaking his head. 'The air isn't moving. How can the fog be catching up with us? It's unnatural.'

'There's nothing natural about it,' Frode muttered.

Then the mist was upon them, falling on the ship like a shroud, blotting out the sun in the sky. The screaming came a moment later.

KURT SCHNELL WOKE WITH a start, one name on his lips: 'Sara.' His wife had been dead for years, but he still dreamed of her most nights. At first these visitations perturbed him, the ghost of Sara haunting his sleep like some spectral wraith. But in time Kurt came to accept the nocturnal visions, even welcome them. Sara might be buried back in Altdorf, but so long as he could still dream about her, his wife's memory remained alive for him.

That morning was different. A far more disturbing and unhappy dream had troubled Kurt's slumber. He found himself moving from room to room in the Watch station on Three Penny Bridge, a dull knife fit only for slicing bread clasped in one hand. For reasons Kurt

couldn't understand, he felt impelled to murder everyone he found inside the station. They stood or sat, making no attempt to defend themselves, terrified but frozen. Some dark force at the back of Kurt's mind commanded him to use the knife on his watchmen, slicing it across their eyes.

They wept blood, but still it was not enough to satisfy the murderous urge driving Kurt on. He ground the blade back and forth across the wounded victims, until they were dead. As one fell to the wooden floor, Kurt moved on to another. He wanted to scream at them to run, or beg them to flee, but the twenty victims waited patiently to be slain. By the last few Kurt had no strength left in his arm, and his tunic was bathed in blood. The last victim was a child, a boy with features not unlike Kurt's own. The youth did not speak, but the pleading for mercy was all too evident in his eyes.

In the dream Kurt had forced himself to turn and face whoever or whatever was making him commit these atrocities. 'Please,' he had begged, 'no more.' The thing that commanded his actions was hidden by shadows, but it shifted, about to emerge from the darkness. Kurt had always believed if he could see his enemy, he could defeat them. Now was his chance. In the dream his hand had tightened round the handle of the knife—

That was when he'd woken, Sara's name on his lips. Kurt knew Sara was not the monster in the shadows. He had spoken her name as a reflex, the same way a crippled soldier still felt an itch where they'd lost a leg in some nameless battle years before. Sara was a constant absence in his life, the hole in his soul, though Kurt was not sure he believed in such things any more. Not after all he'd witnessed over the years.

Perhaps I'll ask Jan what he thinks, Kurt mused. Jan can usually find—

A sharp pang of realisation hit him in the gut. Jan was gone too, just like Sara. Another gap in his world, another lost friend. Worse still, today was the first anniversary of Jan's death. Kurt got out of bed. Wallowing in grief did nobody any good, Jan had taught him that not long after Kurt first arrived in Marienburg, first joined the Watch. Don't mourn the dead. Better to celebrate the lives of those

gone. That had always been Sergeant Jan Woxholt's simple but effective philosophy when it came to such matters. Well, they were planning to do a bit of both today, Kurt thought, a rueful smile passing across his face. Hope you understand, Jan – wherever you are.

It was the first anniversary of what people across Suiddock had taken to calling the Battle of Three Penny Bridge. As captain of the bridge's watchmen, Kurt had led his motley band of law enforcers in a valiant defence of the station against hundreds of mercenaries and worse, triumphing against the odds, winning the respect of local citizens and criminals in the process. In truth, they had only prevailed thanks to an intervention by warriors from the House of Silvermoon, one of the noblest dynasties residing in Marienburg's elf enclave, Sith Rionnasc'namishathir.

The watch captain had little patience with those fond of mythologising battles by giving them grand names. In his experience those who fought in such conflicts preferred to bury the memories, not celebrate them. Only the ignorant and the bystanders bestowed titles and valour upon wars and battlefields. For those who gave blood in defence of something important, victory was the greatest reward and survival the best hope. Anything else was irrelevant, be it medals, glory, a place in history or epic songs.

Kurt pulled on his uniform, insignia on the tunic demonstrating his rank, the gravy stains on his trousers evidence of a brawl with a band of drunken halflings the previous night. Unfortunately, the infamy accorded him by the battle a year before also made Kurt a target for any halfwit with enough ale in their bloodstream. Keeping his uniform clean would have been a full-time task, if Kurt cared about such things. He preferred his real job – maintaining law and order in the wild district of Suiddock.

Still, he did make one concession to the occasion, using a cut-throat razor to scrape away stubble from his chiselled jawline and gleaming scalp. Kurt regarded vanity with much the same derision as he did glorifying battles. But he paused by the looking glass over the washbasin, staring at the reflection of his ice-blue eyes. He imagined how it would feel to have a dull, rusted knife scraped

across his own pupils, the pain and the terror it would inflict. His nightmare sat ill with him, an unhappy omen – but of what?

BELLADONNA SPEER REMOVED the hand resting on her left hip. ‘I thought you brought me here to help solve a mystery,’ she sighed.

Captain Ruben Damphoost of the Suddock River Watch smiled. ‘I like to combine business with pleasure.’ His dark, gimlet eyes glinted with mischief.

Belladonna gestured at the two corpses floating in the canal that passed between Stoessel and Luydenhoek. Internal gases had bloated the bodies, stretching taut the blotched yellow and purple skin over bulging faces. ‘Well, if this is your idea of a romantic assignation, you’ll be waiting a long time before you sire any children.’

Damphoost pushed a cord of long, black hair away from his shrewd features. ‘I was wondering why I didn’t have a family yet. Thanks for clearing that up.’

She smiled, despite herself. ‘You’re welcome.’

The captain nodded at the corpses. ‘What do you see?’

‘Bodies aren’t really my thing,’ Belladonna reminded him. ‘You want a priest of Morr, or perhaps an apothecary. They know far more about—’

‘It’s obvious these two drowned,’ Damphoost cut in. ‘I don’t need anyone to tell me that, not after twelve years with the River Watch. But you see things others don’t, notice clues other watchmen miss. Tell me what you see.’

Belladonna let the watchmen comment pass. She was the first female member of the Watch in Marienburg history. A few had followed in her footsteps, but the collective term for Black Caps would probably always be watchmen, regardless of their gender. She concentrated her attention on the water around the corpses, and the bodies themselves.

‘Bloating means they’ve been in the water several days, at least since Marktag. Their garb is expensive – imported cloth, fine stitching. No tears and rips, no obvious signs of a struggle,

suggesting they were already dead or unconscious before being bound. The rope round their wrists was tied with a sailor's knot—

‘Not much of a clue in Marienburg,’ sneered the other occupant of the boat, a sour-faced River Watch sergeant called Grist. ‘Every other person in the city is a sailor or makes their living from the sea!’

A glare from Damphoost silenced his second-in-command.

‘As I was saying,’ Belladonna continued, ‘the rope was tied with a sailor's knot, but whoever did it made a poor job. They tied a heavy weight to the bodies, hoping it would keep them underwater for months, perhaps years. But the knot came undone. No sailor or anyone else who makes their living from the sea would make that mistake.’

Grist grunted and spat over the side of the narrow wooden boat.

Damphoost smiled. ‘Anything else?’

‘Hold on to my belt,’ Belladonna commanded him.

‘I thought I brought you here to study these bodies,’ he said.

‘I don't want to fall overboard. Hold on to my belt. From behind.’

The captain did as he was told, grabbing the thick leather strap that encircled Belladonna's slender waist, his knuckles digging into the small of her back. She leaned out of the boat, stretching close enough to kiss one of the corpses. Belladonna rested one hand on the corpse's chest, gently applying pressure. A sigh escaped the dead man's lips, as if his sleep had been disturbed a moment. Belladonna inhaled.

‘Pull me back on board,’ she hissed. Damphoost dragged her back into the boat.

‘What was that in aid of?’ Grist enquired, a snide tone in his voice.

‘Almonds, I smelled almonds on his breath,’ Belladonna replied.

‘He was poisoned,’ Damphoost realised. ‘That explains the absence of a struggle.’

‘Arsenic,’ Belladonna agreed. ‘It could be a business rival, but arsenic is most often a woman's weapon when it comes to murder. These two men look alike, they're probably brothers. Question both

the wives, see if they'll confess. With any luck the guilt will be playing on their minds. But the women would have needed help to weigh down and dump the bodies – a son, or a brother. Whoever stood to gain from the murder.'

'You got all that from sniffing a corpse?' Grist couldn't keep the disbelief from his voice. 'Never heard such arrant nonsense in all my life.'

'Captain Damphoost!' A young man in a River Watch uniform was standing on the bridge between Luydenhoek and Stoessel, looking down at them. 'There's a woman at the station says she wants to make a confession. Something about a double murder.'

'How does she seem?' the captain asked.

'Guilty. Sure as Sigmar's sausage.'

Belladonna arched an eyebrow at Grist, who was busy muttering under his breath, trying to avoid her eye. Let him sulk, she decided. Damphoost believed in her, even if most of his men placed no stock in what she did. Before Belladonna could speak, a flicker of movement caught the corner of her eye. She looked round, but the corpses remained where they were, bobbing up and down in the water. 'Did you see that?'

'See what?' the captain replied.

Belladonna stared at the bodies. 'I could have sworn...' She shook her head. 'Must have imagined it.' A bell tolled in the distance, its mournful chimes ringing across the water. 'It's getting on. I should have been back at the station by now.'

'Always hurrying home to Captain Schnell,' Damphoost sighed.

'You know the drill,' she said. 'I'm happy to help the River Watch any way I can, but I'm still officially assigned to the watch station at Three Penny Bridge.'

'Apply for a transfer. We'd be grateful to have your expertise full-time.'

'I'll think about it,' Belladonna said. 'But I'm not making any snap decisions. Not until I've had a chance to talk about it with my captain.'

KURT EMERGED FROM a humble house on the northern side of Three Penny Bridge, not bothering to lock the door. There was precious little worth stealing inside. Besides, the house stood directly opposite the station. If the steady flow of Black Caps coming and going from their task of patrolling Suiddock failed to stop thieves from entering the captain's home, a heavy padlock on the oak door would do little to dissuade them.

Kurt had moved into the house out of necessity. The station was all but gutted by the battle for Three Penny Bridge, requiring massive renovation. In truth, Kurt was grateful for a chance to remodel the former tavern. There had been a makeshift quality to the place when he first reopened it. Now the interior was more to Kurt's liking, a proper base for a working station. No longer did the insides reek of stale ale and rat droppings, nor did drunks wander in expecting to be served dregs or drugs.

Instead there was a purpose-built set of cells in the centre of the ground floor, ensuring those in custody were in plain view of anyone passing across the busy bridge. This had the effect of shaming potential prisoners into paying a swift fine to spare their blushes, or chastening them from offending in the first place. The old bar had been cut in half and converted into the desk sergeant's domain, while Kurt had his own office on the ground floor, better to keep an eye on events as they happened.

Upstairs was devoted to sleeping quarters and ablutions, the kitchen and mess, plus secure storage for weapons and important evidence. The basement was now used for interrogations, but a jetty had also been built enabling ease of access to the waterways that comprised Marienburg's fastest form of transport. Use of this was sometimes shared with Suiddock's complement of the River Watch, though relations between those responsible for policing dry crimes and those policing wet crimes were often fractious.

Kurt arrived as the graveyard shift watchmen were pushing the last of the night's drunk and disorderly culprits into the holding cells. Meanwhile each member of the dayshift was getting individual assignments from Three Penny Bridge's desk sergeant, the formidable figure of Jacques Scheusal. 'Silenti and Kramer, you

two are patrolling Riddra today. It's been all quiet there the last three days, so keep your eyes peeled.'

The two Black Caps given this assignment were new to the station, but had been doing good work so far, according to Scheusal. Both nodded their understanding of his orders. The sergeant barked out another two names, and their assignment.

'Holismus and Ganz, you've got Luydenhoek. Watch for smugglers trying to bring goods ashore from along the Bruynwater, we've been hearing whispers of a new kind of crimson shade being sold from the Anchor and Albatross.'

'Yes, sergeant,' Holismus said. But the watchman stood next to him was too busy glaring at Kurt to respond. There was little love lost between Kurt and Marc Ganz.

'Ganz!' Scheusal snarled, getting the Black Cap's attention.

'Yes, sergeant.'

'Luydenhoek for you and Holismus!'

'Yes, sergeant.'

'That's better,' Scheusal glanced over at Kurt, the two men exchanging a knowing look. Ganz was a powderkeg of resentment, waiting to explode. Of all the newcomers to the station in the last year, his arrival was the least welcome. Ganz was a good watchman, but his issues with Kurt were creating too much friction. Scheusal returned to the rest of the dayshift. A small, weasel-faced figure was lurking at the back. 'Bescheiden, you and Speer will be staying close to home today. Stoessel for you two.'

The greasy-haired watchman cleared his throat. 'I haven't seen Belladonna yet today. I think she said something about helping Captain Damphoost with a case.'

'Never heard it called that before,' Ganz hissed, just loud enough to make sure Kurt heard him. The others laughed, until Scheusal silenced them with a glare.

'Very well, you're on your own until midday. Can you cope with that?'

Bescheiden nodded.

'Good,' Scheusal said, making a note in his logbook. 'I want everybody back here, in full dress uniform, by noon. We march to

the Temple of Morr where the ceremony will take place. Gerta will remain here in case of emergencies, but attendance is mandatory for everyone else, and absence will be punished by a month on graveyard shift.' There were some dark mutterings among the newer recruits. Scheusal slammed his logbook down on the desk, the mighty thud ending the complaints. 'I know many of you were not here a year ago, were not involved with what happened then. I don't care. Sergeant Woxholt and the other men we'll be honouring today gave their lives to keep this station open. Without them, you wouldn't have a job. The least you can do is mark their sacrifice, and hope you can equal their valour should you ever be called upon.'

'Yes, sergeant,' Holismus and Bescheiden replied in unison. Both had lived through those dark days, seen their friends and colleagues die beside them. The others nodded their agreement, however unwillingly.

'Very well,' Scheusal glowered. 'Dismissed.'

The dayshift filed out, Ganz making sure his shoulder bumped into Kurt as they passed one another. The captain stood his ground, keeping a close check on his temper. Kurt did not suffer fools or the arrogant gladly, but the unfinished business between him and Ganz would have to wait. Scheusal was hovering in the background, eager to report on the night's events across Suiddock.

FRODE DIED FIRST, screaming his mother's name as bones extruded themselves from his body, one at a time. A hundred tiny slivers of white burst from the skin on his hands, followed by his ribs ripping their way free from his abdomen. The toes exploded next, spraying those nearby with blood and flaps of skin. The loss of his jawbone finished Frode off, a merciful ending to seventeen minutes of pain and terror.

Captain Haaland watched it all from his vantage point, floating in the air above the deck of the *Altena*. The vessel was trapped inside the fog, the air coloured a sickly yellow with smudges of darkness. Haaland choked on the bilious, foetid fumes. A pink spray soothed his face until the captain realised it was blood from one of

his sailors, death made airborne, murder flung at him. Haaland gasped at the scenes all around him, unable to shut his eyes, no matter how much he willed the lids downwards.

When the last crewman had perished and only the captain remained, the malevolent mist parted to reveal its progenitor. Haaland gasped, a scream dying in his throat, trapped there and unable to escape, much like Haaland himself. A voice rattled in his mind, like a knife-edge on flint, razor on flesh – cutting, cruel, certain.

‘Amazing how many bones there are in the human body, don’t you think?’

The terrified captain couldn’t reply, his larynx clutched in some unseen grasp.

‘It’s only when we see them all laid out like this, one beside the other, that you realise just how many there are,’ the voice continued. It had a sibilant tinge, but Haaland could determine no accent, no hint of where the speaker might once have called home. Then again, it only took one glance at what was speaking to know its place of origin: some hellish domain, where carnage was all that mattered.

Haaland had never been a religious man. He muttered and uttered the names of various gods as expletives when shocked or angry, he gave to various charities run by religions if they looked after retired seafarers, and he liked to believe there was a higher power behind the strange, inexplicable catalogue of events known as life. But no firm faith had ever been there to comfort him on the long, dark nights of the soul when the thought of dying shook the captain to his very core. On such occasions Haaland had always felt he was utterly alone in the world. This was such an occasion.

The thing that held him in its thrall moved closer. ‘I wonder how long you would survive if I broke your bones, one at a time?’ Haaland heard a snap, not unlike a twig breaking underfoot in an autumnal forest. Then came the pain, a sharp, serrated edge of hurt that jagged up from his left foot. It was followed by a second snapping, and a third and a fourth. By the time the twenty-seventh bone in his body had broken, the captain was close to unconsciousness, unable to sustain each fresh assault on his nerves.

‘No, no, no, no,’ whispered his tormentor, cooing the words like a lover. But the breath was closer to stale game and rotten cheese, foul and bitter and flavoured by death. ‘I saved you until last for a reason. The others were experiments. You shall be my masterpiece. You shall be my vessel, just as this ship has been your vessel.’

Something punctured Haaland’s chest, stabbing into his torso just below the sternum. Once inside, a feeling both warm and insidious spread outwards from the fleshy barb lodged in the captain. Something was invading him, possessing him, consuming him. Haaland felt his insides being eaten away, gnawed and chewed and gnashed.

‘Nothing to say? No final words, no grand statements?’

The captain wanted to respond, but his throat remained frozen.

Something sniffed at him, and a long, leathery tongue licked the side of his face.

No, Haaland had never been a religious man. But now he prayed for death.

‘TWO ROBBERIES, ONE allegation of attempted murder, three domestic disputes, a case of spying and the usual selection of drunkards who couldn’t make it home without urinating in places they shouldn’t,’ Scheusal said, running his finger down the previous night’s page in his logbook. ‘Nothing out of the ordinary, to be honest.’

‘You’re calling an allegation of attempted murder and spying nothing out of the ordinary?’ Kurt laughed. They were sat in his office, going over arrest logs and paperwork. Having survived an ordeal by sword and claw a year ago, the station had won a reprieve from the city’s scheming watch commander. He now seemed intent upon drowning the Black Caps of Three Penny Bridge in paperwork instead, requiring an endless stream of reports, all filed in triplicate.

Scheusal shrugged. ‘I was trying to liven up our crime figures. The attempted murder happened next door at the bordello. A visiting sailor from Lustria tried to leave without paying and Molly took off his right earlobe with a flying dagger.’

‘Let me guess – he was foolish enough to come in here, pressing charges?’

The sergeant nodded. ‘Didn’t seem to realise she was within her rights to claim a pound of flesh as compensation for his failure to meet his part of their contract agreement, as stipulated under Marienburg’s municipal mandates and bylaws.’

‘He should count himself lucky it was the earlobe that got cut off,’ Kurt observed.

‘Our lusty Lustrian did, once I’d explained things to him. Allegation withdrawn.’

‘And the spying?’

‘Result of a citizen’s arrest, actually. Cook from the Cormorant and Crab caught a customer copying down a list of thirteen secret herbs and spices used to make the tavern’s special Bretonnian fried seagull.’ Scheusal jerked a thumb towards a sorry-looking, white-haired figure cowering in one of the holding cells. ‘Planning to open a chain of stalls selling his speciality, apparently. Nineteen secret herbs and spices.’

Kurt shook his head, never ceasing to be amazed at the lunatic schemes launched by some residents of Marienburg eager to make their fortune. ‘Anything else?’

Scheusal’s smile faded. ‘Yes. When are you going to do something about Ganz?’

‘Not today, that’s for certain. We’ve got enough on our plate.’

‘He’s not just disrespecting you, he’s disrespecting the whole station.’

‘I told you, leave it alone.’

The sergeant sighed as he stood up. ‘Well, you can’t let it go on much longer. Either settle whatever’s going on between you two, or get him transferred. His attitude is tainting the other new recruits. We had to fight tooth and nail to get some decent Black Caps. Don’t let one bad apple spoil the rest.’

‘Ganz isn’t bad. He was a good soldier.’

‘Maybe he was, once. But he’s a liability now, captain.’

The *Altena* sailed out of the fog, though no breath of air touched its sails. The blood that had caked them was gone, borne away by some unseen power. The vessel gathered speed as it neared Rijker's Isle, but there were no sailors on deck to acknowledge the sentries standing guard atop the prison walls. The single figure visible on board the ship was stood behind the wheel, gripping the circle of wood, a rictus grin fixed upon his face. Haaland stared straight ahead, his features frozen as if utterly numb.

He was coming home, but it was already too late for the sea veteran. A pool of blood seeped into the wooden deck beneath his boots. The stench of death filled the captain's nostrils, but he did not breathe it in, did not flinch, did not notice. A gaping wound lingered in the centre of his chest, and deep inside his body something was hungry. The feast of the flesh was come and all hell followed along behind.

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