

# MARK OF HERESY

A Marks of Chaos novel • Book Two

By James Wallis

**THE ONCE SOLID EMPIRE is in disarray as the dark hordes of Archaon rampage out of the northern lands, destroying all in its path. With the savage death of the Grand Theogonist and claims of Sigmar reincarnated, the population await their fate with trepidation. Former Empire soldier Karl Hoche has dedicated his life to hunting down the dark forces of Chaos and will not bow before rising storm – even though he hides a dark secret himself! Relentlessly tracked by three zealous witch hunters, Karl finds himself driven towards the Imperial capital, Altdorf, and into the jaws of Chaos!**



James Wallis runs Hogshead Publishing, which produces the Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay line of books. When not doing important gaming things or writing stories, he spends his spare time as the managing editor of the magazine *Bizarre*. He lives in London with three computers and no cats.

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### *from MARK OF HERESY*

HE CAME OUT of the darkness like a lion onto dogs, crashing out of the leafless trees beside the rough earth road, his sword raised and swinging. The first of the group half-turned towards him and fell with his face bisected in a spray of blood. The second lifted an axe to defend himself but the sword darted low, a flash of blue steel like a kingfisher over a stream, slicing through leather and cutting flesh. The third stared at the sudden stump of his arm as he dropped, his legs cut from under him. The fourth parried the thrust aimed at his heart, took the hilt of the sword in his face, staggered back a pace and was decapitated, his head falling to the frozen ground, followed a second later by his body.

The last two turned and fled, heading off the road and into the forest, leaving the corpses of their comrades twitching on the road around the statue-still newcomer. His tall form was dark against the sombre sky of the late afternoon. His hair was jet-black and wild, the feathers of some dark bird about to take flight. Shadows hid his eyes and scars.

The four men he had saved cowered beside the cart they had been pulling. They wore monks' robes and victims' bruises, and stared at their saviour with fright and disbelief. Two of them were silent, two muttered prayers and praises to a selection of gods. The dark man did not look at them, but walked to the edge of the earth road, tore up a handful of frost-dried grass and began to wipe the blood from his sword-blade.

The leader of the monks stepped away from his followers, moving towards the nearest of the corpses. The tall man

moved quickly towards him, blocking his path with a hand to prevent him from getting close.

‘Don’t. Leave them.’

The monk flinched, looking up, seeing the man’s face for the first time. A few weeks later, when the witch hunters questioned him about it, even under torture all he could remember was the dark, straight hair, the unshaved high cheekbones, the deep-set eyes bracketing the twisted shape of a nose that had been aquiline before it had been broken. This was a man who used to be handsome. Now his face commanded respect and fear, but few would smile at it. There was a bandage around his neck, almost hidden by the collar of his tunic.

The monk tore his gaze away. ‘These men are dead,’ he said, ‘and I must bless them.’

By answer the man drew his sword and used the tip to rip open the ragged shirt of the closest corpse. Under the skin, something thick writhed.

‘Not men,’ he said, ‘and not dead. Mutants, things of Chaos. They do not need your blessings.’

The monk shook his head. ‘If I do not bless them,’ he said, ‘then their bodies may be possessed by necromancers. It is my duty to protect them against dark magics.’

‘Then help me burn them, to destroy their contagion. No sorcery can raise a body from that.’

‘Let me bless them before you burn them.’ The monk paused. The tall man’s expression was guarded and unchanged, and he could not read a reaction in it. ‘Even mutants were men once,’ he said, ‘and some may have been good men. Even you cannot say that their souls should not be sent to sleep eternally with our lord Mórr.’

The tall man did not move as he paused, considering the priest’s words. Then: ‘Very well,’ and there was dark humour in the voice, though none in the face. ‘Begin your blessings, while your fellows help me gather firewood. Work fast: nightfall is not far off. What town is closest?’

‘Oberwil.’

‘I have heard of it. There is a monastery there. You are from its order?’

The older monk bowed. 'I am Father Darius of the temple of Sigmar. We have spent a week in prayer at the shrine of Sigmar's Water in the forest.' He turned, pointing away into the trees. 'We were ambushed as we began our return. They killed two of us and made the others pull the cart. They would not say where we were going.'

'To their camp, where your bodies would have joined their food-stocks. It has been a long, hungry winter for all of us, and their hunger has made them bold. Go, start your blessings.'

The monk turned away, then back. 'Stranger, we have not yet given you our thanks for saving us, nor asked your name.'

The man's expression was hidden in the shadows of the late afternoon. 'Your thanks is not important.'

'And your name?'

'Less important than your thanks.' He paused. The other monks were moving, picking up dead branches from beside the road, making a pyre, staying away from the corpses of the mutated bandits. 'Is Oberwil far?'

Father Darius shook his head. 'Two hours maybe.'

'I will come with you.' He paused, watching the monks work. 'Luthor Huss served his novitiate at your monastery, I believe?'

'A part of it, he did, and a very different novice he was to the warrior-priest he's become.' Father Darius grimaced. 'A diligent, faithful youth, attentive to his lessons and respectful to his superiors. How much has changed.'

The stranger stared away, towards the embers of sunlight. 'Tell me, does Frau Brida Farber still live in Oberwil?'

'She does. You know her?'

'I knew a friend of hers. Tell me of her.'

'A kind woman, though her life is sad. Her husband died two years ago, and her only grandchild died of cowpox this autumn. She visits the sick in the monastery hospice. You must excuse me: I have to say the blessings.' He walked away, then paused to look back. The enigmatic swordsman was silhouetted against the reddening sky, unmoving, staring down the road towards Oberwil.

There was something about him that unnerved Father Darius. He could not think of the last time he had spoken to

a man who had used language like a sword and shield, his questions fast and sharp, all responses parried and knocked aside. Perhaps this was a man who had much to be defensive about.

Blessing the corpses was slow and laborious. Darius had not performed the prayers to Mórr, god of death and afterlife, for some time and the words came to mind only slowly. By the time he finished praying over the last corpse the other monks had finished a good-sized bonfire and were standing around it, silent, watching him. He straightened up slowly, looking at them.

'Pile the bodies on the firewood,' he instructed.

Nobody moved, and he was not surprised. They might be priests of Sigmar but they were scared. There was something about the taint of Chaos that overruled knowledge, objectivity and the serenity of the gods' grace, shaking loose a deep primeval terror in the hearts and stomachs of all men. Even Father Darius felt it. His acolytes were young, initiates, and for most of them this was their first encounter with the world's darkest power. Rumour said that to touch a body infected with Chaos was to risk contagion and damnation for one's own flesh. Of course they were scared.

Then the tall stranger was striding past him to the first of the bodies, picking it up. Part of it twitched and flinched as he carried it a few paces and half-flung, half-dropped it on the woodpile with a sound of cracking branches, and the gathered monks took a pace backwards, away from it. He lifted the second body and dropped that beside the first, then turned to fetch the third. Father Darius had reached it first, gripping it below the arms to drag it to the pyre. He had to show this stranger that his order was not weak, in body or in spirit.

The corpse reared, twisting, its split face gaping wide. Teeth had formed along the edge of the wound. They clamped shut on his wrist. Father Darius jerked away in shock and pain, but the mutant's new jaw gripped hard. He could feel the teeth grating against his bones.

The stranger was beside him, sword drawn. A first stroke decapitated the savage corpse, a second smashed its skull and it fell away, leaving bones and teeth embedded in the priest's

arm. The stranger drew back his sword, looking down at Darius who had fallen to his knees. The priest looked up, into his eyes. There were no words, just a joint understanding of what had to be done.

The bloodied sword slashed down, and Darius's hand and wrist fell to the ground. He screamed. Blood pumped from the severed end of his arm. He stared for a second at the stump and went limp, unconscious from shock and pain.

The other monks, taken by surprise, reacted with screams and shouts. One ran at the stranger, trying to knock his sword down. The swordsman swatted the monk away with his free hand.

'Light the wood!' he yelled. 'Bring me fire to seal the wound!' Then, quieter: 'The rest of you pray to Sigmar that the creature's blood didn't mingle with the Father's before I acted.' He pulled a cord from his pocket, looped it tight round the stump and pulled it tight.

'Will he live?' one asked.

'He may. Pray that I was in time and his body is free of Chaos.' He turned to stare at them, his eyes wild and red. 'Pray, damn you! Pray!'

LOKSTEDTERWEG, A PROSPEROUS street in the mercantile district of the city of Altdorf, was shadowed and quiet in the late afternoon light. A few people were coming out of their houses and walking slowly down it, out of the street, their pace deliberately slow, their faces apprehensive. At one end of the street a high-sided cart stood at rest in the cobbled gutter, the large horse in its traces standing with bowed head. Behind it, huddled in a small group, stood four men. Three wore the black tunics and silver buttons of witch hunters while the fourth, shorter, older and balder, had on a heavy golden robe embroidered with a strange symbol like a circle pierced by an arrow over his breast.

The four men were watching a man wearing the leather apron of a carpenter further down the street. He had emerged from the front door of a house, leading a group of women and children out after him. Now, rather too nonchalantly, he was ushering them towards a side street that led away at right angles. The children and the women, a mix of goodwives and

servants from their clothes and scarfs, looked straight ahead and walked quickly. The carpenter followed more slowly, and glanced over his shoulder at another house that stood slightly back from the street, its shutters closed, a few doors down from the one he had left.

Erwin Rhinehart, a witch hunter for four years, with thirty-five successful prosecutions to his name, groaned. 'Idiot,' he said. 'He knows they're watching the street from in there.'

'The city watch are amateurs. I told you we should have used our people for this,' Theo Kratz said. Three years younger than Rhinehart, he had two inches in height, a year's superiority and twelve more executions to his status, and it was obvious he knew it.

'You know we don't have the manpower in Altdorf right now,' Rhinehart said without taking his eyes off the house.

'He's coming over,' said Anders Holger. Youngest and quietest of the three, his blond curls and soft western accent led his colleagues in the Order of Sigmar to take him less seriously, and some felt that his reputation for plodding thought and the fact he did not assume everyone was guilty of something indicated that perhaps he took himself less seriously too.

The last of the women had left the street, and the man in the carpenter's apron was approaching the cart. A few feet away he stopped and saluted the group. 'Rolf Aachen of the city watch—' he started.

Kratz grabbed his raised arm, pulling it down and yanking the man out of sight of the house. 'You idiot,' he growled. 'If you've blown this operation...'

Rhinehart put a hand on his shoulder. 'Enough, Theo. He's only doing his job, however badly. He doesn't know what's going on because we didn't brief him on it. Do you?' The watchman rubbed his shoulder and shook his head. Rhinehart stared at Kratz. 'I'm in charge of this operation. I'm the one who followed these two all the way here from Talabheim. If there are reprimands to give, I'll give them,' he said. Then to the watchman: 'Continue.'

'All houses within fifty yards have been cleared, sir. Men with crossbows are out of sight down every street and alley. There's no way out.'

The man in the gold robes coughed gently. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'Time is creeping on. This operation would be a good deal easier if carried out before evening falls, and besides I have an audience with the Supreme Patriarch in under an hour. Could we proceed?'

Rhinehart shook his head. 'I apologise, my lord wizard, but we can't start till the magus from the jade college gets here.'

The wizard pursed his lips. 'My skills have been proved on the Empire's battlefields many times. In a matter such as this—'

'The matter,' said Rhinehart, 'my lord wizard, is that one of the renegade acolytes holed up in that house was from your college, and one is from the jade college. Each has to have a representative at their arrest. That is the matter.'

The wizard looked put out. 'Yes, but merely a matter of protocol.'

'Protocol and defence. If spells start flying, we need someone from each college to neutralise them.'

'The spells?'

'The casters.'

'I thought you wanted these men alive?'

'If possible, yes.'

'But nobody will weep if they die,' Kratz said. Rhinehart turned and glared at him, but before an argument could start Holger tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the far end of the street. A gaunt man with shaven head, bare feet and green robes had rounded the corner and was standing, looking around, looking lost. Then he spotted the group by the cart and began walking down the street towards them, his strides long and purposeful.

'Is that him,?'

'Damn him, it is!' Rhinehart waved frantically, gesturing him to move back down the road. The approaching wizard saw the movement and waved back, quickening his pace.

'He's in clear view! They must have seen him!' Kratz exclaimed.

'No movement from inside,' Holger said, his eyes not moving from the house.

'We can't take the risk we have to move now.' Rhinehart drew his sword and pointed, the tone of command in his

voice. 'Kratz, you get the jade mage under cover. My lord Rudolphus, stay here and give fire if necessary. Anders, you with me.'

Holger looked startled. 'Wouldn't it be better to wait for them to make a move?'

'That would be your way, yes? More pragmatic, and safer. But this is Altdorf and I'm in charge, so we are doing this one by the letter of the law. And that says we have to try to arrest them and they have to resist before we can kill them. Come on.' He ran across the street to the cover of the far side, then edged towards the heavy front door of the watched house. Holger followed, feeling hidden eyes watching him.

They stood either side of the door. Holger watched as Kratz pulled the jade wizard away down the street. Then Rhinehart drew a dagger with his left and used its pommel to bang three hard knocks on the impassive wood.

'Harald Töpfer! Timotheus Jäger! We are witch hunters! In the name of Sigmar, we charge you with unauthorised casting of spells and dealing with dark powers! Surrender or—'

The door blew out across the street in a concussion of fire and noise. The shutters shattered, exploding into splinters, flames gouting from the windows. Holger was knocked back and down, landing hard on the blunt cobbles. He dragged himself up. His ears and head were ringing. Rhinehart was still on his feet, clutching at his left arm. It hung oddly, where the fragments of the exploding door had hit it. Holger glanced at it. Possibly dislocated but not broken, he thought. Bloody painful all the same.

There was a moment of silence, then a hiss as balls of fire sped down the street from the fingers of the wizard in gold robes. They flew through the now-open windows of the house to detonate inside with heavy reports. Holger caught Rhinehart's attention.

'We've got to go in,' he shouted above the noise.

'What!'

'That explosion was a distraction. They know we're out here. They'll try to escape over the back wall.'

Rhinehart's eyes were full of pain but he nodded. Holger went in first.

The interior of the house was gutted, full of smoke, dimly lit by burning furniture. It was hellish and hard to breathe. Holger ran through the rooms towards the rear. The wizards outside had stopped throwing fireballs, he noticed, and felt grateful.

The main rooms led to the servants' quarters, and from there into a scrubby herb-garden surrounded by a high brick wall. Two men stood by the doorway to the rear street, one with his hand on the bolt. They were arguing. Holger took them in at a glance: their unstubbed faces, unlined brows and the intensity of their panic. Still in their teens, he thought, caught up in their studies, forgot to get the proper authority to practise their new-learned magic, and suddenly found themselves criminals, suspected of dealings with Chaos and pursued half-way across the Empire. No wonder they were panicked.

He raised his gloved left hand. 'Don't open the gate!' he shouted. 'There are crossbowmen outside with orders to shoot you.'

'We're not here to kill you.' Rhinehart called from behind him. 'It's not too late. Give yourselves up, cooperate and we'll help you.' It was a lie, Holger knew, but a lie in the service of the greater truth was an allowable sin for a witch hunter.

The two sorcerers looked at each other, then one stepped forward with hands out and palms up, a gesture of supplication. 'Please,' he said, 'don't hurt us. We only—'

Holger was trying to see the other man. The second wizard was hidden behind his partner, one hand raised in front of his mouth. Suddenly he knew what was happening. 'Spellcasting!' he shouted and lunged forward, sword high. But as he did he felt himself falling, his mind swirling away. He saw Rhinehart collapse ahead of him, and then his vision went black. He was not aware of hitting the ground.

Someone slapped his face and he jerked awake. Rhinehart knelt over him. 'Get up,' he said through gritted teeth. Holger staggered upright.

'What happened?' he asked.

'They hit us with a sleeping spell. I fell on my bad arm and woke up fast. They've gone back into the house. Come on.'

Inside, the house was still burning. They ran through the flames, knowing that their quarry would not have paused either. The stairs were ablaze and impassable. There was only one way out: the front doorway. They went for it.

Outside there was a commotion in the street. Men in city watch uniforms stood in doorways and windows, aiming crossbows. Kratz stood on top of the cart, his sword drawn and raised. In the centre of the street lay two figures, flailing weakly as if trapped under an invisible weight, unable to move or speak. They were surrounded by a lattice of glowing gold bars that pulsed with energy. Hofstadter's Enchantment of the Gilded Cage, Holger thought. He'd heard of it but never seen it cast. Thank Sigmar they'd cleared the area: the citizens of Altdorf were better schooled and more sophisticated than the country peasants, but even they tended to panic at the sight of raw magic. At opposite ends of the street, the representatives of the gold and jade colleges stood, gazes fixed in concentration to maintain their spells.

'Neutralised,' Rhinehart said. 'Six bloody months it took, but now we can question—'

'Fire!' Kratz shouted from atop the cart, slashing his sword down.

'No!' Holger cried. Crossbow bolts filled the air, thudding into the prone and helpless figures of the two sorcerers, pin-cushioning their bodies. Rhinehart gave a strangled groan. The men's blood seeped through their robes and flowed over the cobbles around them in a red pool, and they lay still.

By the time the burning house had been extinguished and searched, the corpses had been removed, the wizards from the colleges of magic thanked, the watchmen dismissed, the locals allowed back into their houses and the blood cleaned from the street, some of Rhinehart's fury and frustration had abated, but much remained. Holger watched him smolder over the next hour, impressed with the man's ability to remain professional despite his obvious rage at Kratz.

Finally they were sat around a table in the Fist and Glove tavern, surrounded by the dark atmosphere of the room where witch hunters have gathered for centuries to drink to forget the horrors they had seen. At last Rhinehart could hold in his

anger no longer, and he started in on Kratz before the pot-boy had brought their first beers.

'You had no right to give that order.'

'I had every right.' Kratz sat back with the smug half-grin of a man convinced of his own supremacy. 'I was the ranking officer and in my opinion the renegades presented a threat and had to be killed.'

'Ranking officer? Anders and I were standing in front of you!'

'You were compromised. You'd been in the same building as the sorcerers, so you could have been under their influence. I had no choice.'

The beer arrived. 'Of course you had a bloody choice,' Rhinehart said, his pint in his hand. 'But you saw a way to snatch the glory for six months of my work, and you couldn't resist it. You son of a bitch.'

Kratz put his tankard down carefully. 'Two renegade spell-casters are dead. The Empire is safer than it was a few hours ago. I do Sigmar's work.'

'You do your own work, pleasing your high-born friends close to the Grand Theogonist. Maybe they told you to have the wizards killed?'

'Magic channels the stuff of Chaos,' Kratz growled, 'and men who misuse it are as dangerous to Sigmar's empire as the mad army that sacked Wolfenburg in the autumn. The law is clear: they must die.'

'They were my prisoners!'

'You were compromised!'

'What I don't understand,' Holger interrupted before the argument went any further over old ground, 'is why they came back to Altdorf.' There was a momentary silence from the other two and he ploughed on: 'They fled from here originally, I'm right? So why would they return, especially if they knew there was a witch hunter on their trail? All in all,' he concluded, 'it would have been useful to question them before they were killed.'

The other two stared at him and he felt pleased that he had been able to defuse the argument, drawing its aim onto him, before his two colleagues tore each other apart. Rhinehart had

every right to be angry, but there was something in Kratz's defensiveness that was disturbing. He was about to continue his train of thought, hoping to distract the two from their argument, but someone was standing by the table. It was one of the novices from the Order of Sigmar. Holger had seen the boy before, in the hallways of the Altdorf chapter-house, their headquarters. He couldn't have been more than twelve.

'Brothers,' the novice began, 'I have a message...' He paused and swallowed. Holger guessed he was intimidated by having to address two witch hunters whose hair and clothes were still scorched and smelling of smoke from the house-fire, and a third widely known to be among the more notoriously zealous members of their order.

'Spit it out,' Rhinehart said. 'Who's it for?'

'All of you, brothers.'

'All of us?'

'Yes, brothers'

'Who's it from?'

'Brother Karin... wishes to speak with you in the upper library at ten bells.'

The three exchanged a look of surprise. Rhinehart drank his beer. Kratz's face was blank. It was left for Holger to smile at the boy. 'Thank you for your message, brother,' he said. 'Tell Brother Karin that we will be there.' The novice nodded and left them to their beers.

'Ten bells,' Holger said. 'Late for a meeting.'

Kratz spat in his half-empty tankard and rose to his feet. 'Excuse me. I must scourge myself and pray.' Holger and Rhinehart watched him leave.

'We should finish our beers and go too,' Holger said, 'and wash the day's filth away.'

'Filth is right,' Rhinehart said. 'Ashes and bile. I hate him. Six months of my work destroyed for a ounce of his patron's favour.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's transparent,' Rhinehart said. 'His zeal and ambition have found favour with our new Lord Protector, Lord Bethe, and Bethe's master Johann Esmer, the Grand Theogonist. He's their creature now. Bethe's as hard-line as Kratz is, and Esmer

hates all wizards because he believes them a threat to his power.'

Holger shook his head. 'Theo is ambitious, I grant, but he's not a political animal. Being political implies an ability to negotiate and compromise, and Sigmar knows he has neither of those. Besides, interrogating the two renegades might have brought us information that would embarrass the colleges of magic, weakening them that way.' He sipped his beer, thinking. 'It's possible that he was just following the law: it says renegades must be put to death, and his zeal is unmatched among our contemporaries. But...'

Rhinehart drained his tankard and waved the pot-boy over for a refill. 'What do you mean?'

Holger shrugged. 'I don't know. A suspicion, nothing more. I pray I'm wrong.'

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