

# ***MASTERS OF MAGIC***

A Warhammer novel

*By Chris Wraight*

*Under constant pressure from its enemies, the Empire maintains mighty armies to protect its borders from the many foes that seek to invade its fertile lands. Crucial among these troops are the Imperial battle wizards whose magic can turn the tide of war.*

*When Grey wizard Lothar and his colleagues ride to war against a massive orc invasion they must control their rivalry and ambition to stand any chance of victory.*

*In Masters of Magic, debut author Chris Wraight provides a unique insight into the deadly and intrigue-ridden world of the Imperial battle wizards and the Colleges of Magic.*



## **About the Author**

A long-time Games Workshop fan, Chris Wraight is a freelance writer and teacher.

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NIKLAS STEINHAUER URGED his horse on faster. Its ragged breath assured him it was near dropping, but he had to keep riding; there was so little time. The land around him was broken, scattered with boulders and treacherous scree. The mighty peaks of the Grey Mountains reared high, on either side, into the cold, blue sky. His heart was pumping, his skin running with sweat, even in the chill wind. He'd been in many tight spots before as a scout, but he'd never run things quite so close before. Then, he saw it. As the horse careered wildly around the final shoulder of rock, it was finally there before him: Helmgart, gate to the Reikland. His heart leapt. He felt the relief pass over him. The old citadel sat at the mouth of the valley in a solid, reassuring manner and was surrounded by a cluster of walls and steep-sided roofs. Its tall ramparts rose high into the bitter air of the mountains, and the standards of the Reikland and the Empire snapped and rippled proudly in the strong wind. He had made it.

Without pausing, Niklas spurred his mount on. Its sides were flecked with white, its eyes wild with anger and fatigue, but he didn't care. The slopes of the valley narrowed sharply on either side of him, and the dark walls of the fortifications loomed before him.

With a clatter of hooves, the horse galloped the short distance to the citadel and passed under the mighty gates. The watchmen, standing on either side, looked at him intently for any sign of what his tidings would be. He ignored them, and rode swiftly up the

cobbled streets, past empty houses and deserted alleyways. Most of the inhabitants of Helmgart had long since left, and the soldiers were the only ones who remained. The silence was eerie, and he was glad to get to the inner citadel walls where the clatter of iron and steel being moved around filled the air. Leaping off his steed, he brusquely handed it to the stable hand and made his way quickly towards the main courtyard. All was a hive of activity in the open space between the thick walls: men trundled heavy cannons to their places behind the ramparts, spears and arrows were laid out in long racks, and pitch was heated in massive vats. A grim feeling of satisfaction filled the scout. At least they would be ready. They needed to be.

His body aching from fatigue, he went quickly across the smooth flagstones towards the keep doors. Helmgart was ancient. Its dark foundations had been hewn from the mountains in the early days of the Empire, and its towering outer walls raised over centuries by successive generations of noblemen and soldiers. By comparison, the dwellings all around it were mere clutter. The precautions had proved necessary time and again. The citadel was the only guard between the rich, fertile lands of the Reikland and the strange, semi-wild country of eastern Bretonnia and the Massif Orcal.

Little though they would recognise it, Niklas thought, the well-fed and well-protected citizens of Altdorf had many reasons to be grateful for the mighty barrier across the narrow Axe Bite Pass. No doubt precious few of them even knew it existed. Now it would be tested, and tested sorely. There had not been time to request reinforcements. They were on their own, and only Niklas had a good idea of the full horror that awaited them.

He paused for a moment to study the fortifications, which would soon be put to the test. The building was simple in design: a square of thick walls with a squat tower at each corner. The main entrance faced south, away from the Empire, and the only other gate was on the north side. In between, surrounded by a wide courtyard, rose the crude shape of the central keep, surmounted by rough battlements and a jumble of utilitarian lookout towers.

It was not a pretty sight. The citadel had been constructed for a single purpose: to straddle the narrowest section of the high pass, cutting off the passages on either side. Anyone who wished to traverse the narrow way had to pass through the walls of Helmgart, or else trek for miles over difficult and perilous terrain. Despite being so far from the populated lands of the Empire, its strategic location ensured that the castle was large and strong. A sizeable garrison was kept within the walls at all times, and they were kept amply supplied and equipped, at least when the Imperial commanders in the Reikland remembered they were there.

Niklas felt his breath gradually returning. It was no use dawdling outside; he needed to report his findings and take fresh orders. Inhaling deeply, feeling the cold mountain air invigorate him, he strode purposefully across the courtyard towards the keep's main doors. The sentry looked at him quizzically.

'What did you see, Steinhauer?' he asked, his eyes betraying his fear.

'Later, Hans,' replied Niklas, pushing past him impatiently. 'The castellan needs to hear my news first.'

He barged through the doors and into the dark corridors of the keep. There was no less activity within than outside, as the last of the citadel's chambers were cleared for the battle ahead. Men laboured with barrels of blackpowder or quivers of arrows in every room. All unnecessary items had been taken away and stored, replaced by the tools of war. Clearly, preparations were well advanced. He barely paid attention to the detail, though, and pressed on through the rough stone passageway towards the centre of the keep.

At length, he paused at the end of a long corridor. Its rich tapestries of hunting scenes were a rare decoration in the otherwise bleak frontier castle. Waiting for his breathing to still, he strode up to the heavy barred door before him and rapped firmly on it.

'Come!' issued a voice from inside, and he entered the chamber of Karsten Ansgard, Castellan of Helmgart.

The room was large by the standards of the citadel, with a glowing fire and a huge, heavy oak table placed squarely in the

centre. Strong sunlight poured through the narrow lead-lined windows, illuminating a pile of parchment and vellum on the tabletop. Each map, report, estimate and dispatch had been scrawled on. Two men were poring over the mass of information. One was the castellan himself, tall and dark-haired, with strangely pale eyes. He looked tired, and his face was lined with care. The other was Gunnery Captain Marcus Gram, thickset and heavily scarred. A third figure, shrouded in grey robes, sat slightly removed from the table, his expression distant.

As the castellan saw Niklas, a hopeful expression flickered across his spare features.

‘Steinhauer?’ he said. ‘I’d given you up for dead. What news?’

Niklas saluted hastily, knowing they had limited time.

‘Bad, sir,’ he said, his breathing still heavy. ‘They’re moving up the pass quickly. We barely escaped with our lives. I was separated from Lukas. He was... taken. The horde numbers many thousands, the biggest I’ve seen.’

Marcus scowled even more than usual.

‘How long have we got?’ he asked, looking as if he was itching to employ his beloved cannons.

‘They’ll be upon us by nightfall, no later,’ said Niklas bluntly. He’d learned the hard way not to mince words with the captain.

Karsten nodded grimly.

‘I need details of their composition, movement patterns, anything that can give us a chance.’

‘The greenskins seem better led than usual,’ replied Niklas. ‘They’re marching quickly, and with good discipline. We expected to encounter them far to the south. Instead, we were still in the mountains when we found them. That was our mistake.’

He thought of Lukas suddenly, and had to check himself.

‘We were caught unawares,’ he continued. ‘When we realised how close we’d got, both of us made for higher ground, hoping to get a good impression of them from above, before withdrawing. We were able to dismount and climb along a high, narrow ridge. It was a good vantage point, and we made our estimates from there. They completely filled the valley below. I’ve never seen so many orcs in

one place. The noise was incredible. I tried to persuade Lukas to go back to the horses and ride back with me, but he wanted to see more. He scrambled down the slope, thinking we'd still be safe on account of the distance; we were still far above them. He was wrong. Something happened. He didn't come back.'

'What do you mean?' asked the castellan, sharply.

Niklas looked uncertain, and struggled to find adequate words.

'I don't know exactly. He was below me, partly hidden by an outcrop of rock. There were lights, green lights, in the air, and something that felt hot. I couldn't make out exactly what went on, but there was a roar from the orcs below. Something had streaked up the mountain, some... power. I made my way down to where Lukas had been, but there was nothing, just a patch of charred rock. I knew then that we'd been seen, and that they could somehow get to us. I climbed out of danger as quickly as I could. Perhaps I should have searched more carefully for Lukas, but, I'm ashamed to say, I was terrified. The orcs were too close, and whatever had happened was unnatural. I climbed back up the ridge, found my horse and rode back here as fast as I could. Even riding hard, I felt as if the greenskins were behind me the whole way.'

Niklas looked around the hard, scarred faces staring back at him, and felt foolish and cowardly.

The grey-clad figure leaned forward, his eyes intent. All turned towards him, including Karsten.

'What do you make of that, Helmut?' asked the castellan.

Helmut Anselmus, Imperial wizard of the Grey Order, placed his hands together on the table calmly. He was a tall, grave figure with a long nose and protruding eyebrows. Niklas neither liked nor trusted him. Like all magicians, his eyes were hard to meet, and it seemed on occasion as if he was looking at things that none of the rest of them could quite see.

'Unusual,' he said in his quiet voice. 'Certainly magic, from what you say. The greenskins have a kind of crude magician caste of their own: shamans, no more. Strange, tormented creatures, they use a power very different from our own, and from a different source. I've heard of their kind leading an incursion before, but never

encountered it myself. I admit it intrigues me. If true, it's good news you have two wizards here at your command.'

Marcus gave a barely concealed scowl. For him, like many in the castle, even one wizard was one too many. Karsten shot him an irritated glance.

'It's fortunate indeed you were passing,' the castellan said. 'Your assignment in Bretonnia can wait. Even if this storm were not upon us I'd have asked you to stay a while. I've seen the benefit a battle wizard can bring to an army.'

Helmut bowed uncertainly. Like all wizards, he wasn't used to compliments.

'I've faced greenskin magic before, of course,' he said, recovering his poise. 'Let me assure you there's very little in the known world that can stand against the magic of the Imperial Colleges, and the orcs are no different. A shaman is a fairly weak thing: a crazed, warped and tormented fanatic, a mere cipher for the power and battle-lust that drives its horde onwards. Disturb and confuse the raving orcs around it, and the shaman will lose its grip and become as weak as any village hedge wizard. Unlike true magicians, who tap into the winds of magic with the force and power of will, the greenskins rely on creating their own power through mania. It's easily defused and negated, when you know what you're doing. If you can handle the soldiers, we can certainly handle this debased creature.'

Niklas, as ever, found himself deeply annoyed at the superior tone in the wizard's voice. Powerful they may be, but they were also unreliable. He'd seen the effects of a spell gone wrong on battlefields across the Empire, including some sights no mortal man ought to have to witness. He glanced back towards the castellan, who looked pensive.

'Very well,' Karsten said deliberately. 'This is a complication we could have done without, but at least we're prepared for it, Sigmar be praised.'

He looked up at Niklas.

'Before nightfall I want you on the road again,' he said crisply. 'We must draft a detailed report of all we know of this monstrosity

and send it to Altdorf without delay. You're my fastest rider, and I need to be sure it gets through. Time is short, and we haven't even discussed the bulk of the horde. Now, tell me everything.'

Niklas took a deep breath, trying to recall all he had seen of the approaching horde. None of it was good news, at least for those staying in the castle to face it.

Inwardly, as he started to speak, he couldn't suppress a guilty feeling of relief. He was no coward, but the thought of fighting an incursion that big chilled his blood. Even though he was tired, the prospect of riding to Altdorf with tidings of the assault was far preferable. It seemed he was destined to survive for a little longer, if only by the skin of his teeth.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, the castellan and gunnery captain stood on the ramparts over the main gate. The sun was low in the western sky. From their vantage point, the two men could see far down the valley ahead of them, already lined with long shadows. The noise of frantic preparation filled the courtyard below. Karsten turned from the view southwards and looked down at his men, studying everything, measuring the reality against his plans in the chamber.

'Are all the cannon deployed and fit to fire, Marcus?' he asked.

'Yes, sir. All in place below us within the south-facing walls. The crews have been preparing the shot for days. They'll fire straight and true.'

Karsten nodded, still looking pensive.

'Good. We'll be hard pressed, if the scout's report is near the mark. If we'd had more time, I would've sent for reinforcements. We have our full complement of men, it's true, but an incursion on this scale... Still, there's nothing to be done now. We'll just have to hope we've done enough to hold out.'

'These walls are old and thick,' Marcus said, slapping the stone appreciatively. 'They won't get over them, not while we have men on the ramparts and the cannon are still firing.'

'Aye, the walls are the key. I believe I've been in worse positions. We have the most hardened members of the garrison, a solid regiment of swordsmen, and a decent number of archers. As

long as we can stick to our strengths, stopping them from getting over the battlements, using the archers and the cannon to frustrate their approach, we may yet beat them off. They can only get at us from the south, and there's no easy way around the walls. The architects of this place knew what they were doing. If we stick to a simple plan, stay inside the walls and trust to arrows and cannon-fire, all should be well. No heroics, nothing fancy. We've got plenty of provisions for a siege, as long as we weather the initial assault.'

Marcus nodded, but didn't say anything. The castellan was being optimistic, and they both knew it. Karsten sighed, gazing into the gathering gloom of the valley. It looked silent, grave, expectant. No birds sang.

'I'd give anything for more men,' he said in a low voice.

Ahead of them, the silent valley gaped, and a cold wind from the south sighed its way up to the dark walls of the ancient keep. Although there was as yet no sound or sight of them, the whole landscape seemed to whisper the thoughts in all of the defenders' minds: they are coming.

DEEP WITHIN THE heart of the citadel, Grey wizard Lothar Auerbach, Helmut's acolyte, was sitting quietly, preparing his mind for the trials ahead. He sat on the edge of his low, hard bed in the dank chamber he had been allocated. There was little enough to distract him. The single window in the room was set high up in the wall and let in meagre light even during the day. Now that dusk had fallen, only candlelight illuminated the shadowy interior. So he sat in shadows.

A mix of emotions ran through Lothar's young, callow frame: excitement, fear and fierce concentration. Over and over, he ran through the spells and techniques due to be employed when the time came. As he whispered to himself, the candles in the gloomy chamber seemed to gutter slightly in sympathy.

Using magic was a dangerous business at the best of times, and the heat of battle amplified those perils. Even in his short career, Lothar had seen mages destroyed in terrible ways through a slipped word or mis-timed thought. Magic was like a fickle tide within them

all. Sometimes you could ride it to glory, other times it would overwhelm you. Even the mightiest wizard knew the dangers. Every spell, every summoning of force, carried the seeds of destruction within it. It was a sobering thought. Perhaps it explained why so many of his kind went mad, or became recluses, or turned to...

Lothar halted his trail of thought; it was best not to think of such things. Despite what had happened to Malgar, there was always hope. Dwelling on the darkness was dangerous. It was the unguarded, undisciplined mind that opened the way to disaster. He needed to stay calm, stay focused.

His introspection was interrupted by a knock on the door. Without waiting for a response, his master bustled into the narrow chamber and went over to a crude wooden stool standing by Lothar's bed. With two men in the room, it seemed smaller and more spartan than ever; there was barely space for them to walk past one another.

Helmut leaned his staff against the wall and sat down heavily beside Lothar on the stool. He looked around him distastefully. No doubt his quarters were slightly more comfortable.

'By Ulgu,' he said breathlessly, 'I've just got back from another meeting with the castellan. He's had a look at the defences, and wants us stationed in the east tower, rather than the west. That shouldn't affect our preparation too much, but it is annoying. They have no conception of the ways of magic, the trials of our privileged status. Even so...'

He turned his long face to Lothar, who stayed silent. A look of concern seemed to pass across his features.

'But enough of that,' he said, his voice gentler. 'How are things with you?'

'I'm keen to start, master,' the acolyte said, truthfully enough. 'We've been travelling for a while, and it seems a long time since we've used the battle lore properly. I feel rusty, but I'm sure it will all come back.'

Helmut nodded.

'Aye,' he said, 'it will. I have confidence in you. You've got potential, that's for certain. You're learning, to be sure, and you

have more to discover. Your presence here is reassuring for me; it'll be a long night, and I'm an old man.'

Lothar smiled again. Despite himself, the praise was welcome. It came infrequently enough from any source. He knew he cut a pretty unimpressive figure: slim, lightly built, his slender features topped by a messy thatch of blond hair. Any peasant tinker would look the same. Only through magic was he in any way remarkable, and so far that had brought him nothing but trouble.

Helmut leaned back on the stool. He looked weary already, and they both knew the call to arms was imminent. Letting his long legs stretch out, the old wizard looked at his pupil fondly.

'Remember your teaching,' he said. 'That's all you need to do. A wizard's power is in his mind, his will, his imagination. Follow the Wind of Ulgu, don't fight it. Orcs may look fearsome, but they'll succumb to the art as quickly as any man. Keep some power in reserve; it'll be a testing time tonight, and weariness is one of the many paths to ruin. And don't try anything too fancy. If you blow the ramparts to bits you'll be back in the college washing pots before the end of the month, and even Starke won't be able to save you.'

It was meant to be a joke, but the mention of the master of the Grey College was ill-chosen. Lothar bowed his head, thinking back to his days in Altdorf, both the good and the bad. In some ways, he was much stronger now. He could feel the surge of the Grey Wind pulse around him. There was much that was dank and secretive about this place, many hidden events and emotions, all of which drew the strange wind inwards, curling around the ancient foundations and drifting against the hard stone of the mountains.

'I'm prepared, master,' he said, defiantly.

Helmut leaned forward, placing a calloused hand on Lothar's shoulder approvingly.

'Excellent,' he said. 'There are plenty in this wretched place who doubt our worth and our prowess. It would be nice to prove them wrong.'

At that, a low, rumbling noise started above them. The sounds of men shouting could be heard from the narrow window above their

heads, followed by the clatter of running feet. Above all the noises, the clear call of a horn echoed in the night air. The signal had been given. Helmut pulled back. Lothar listened carefully.

‘The cannon have fired already. They must be close.’

‘Sounds like it,’ said Helmut, nodding and taking up his staff. ‘Remember, there’s no way around the walls in this narrow space, so the entire assault will be against the south wall of the citadel. As I said, the castellan has decided to place us in the turret at the southeast corner, giving us a view of the battlements beneath and the expected press of greenskins against the gates. Despite what I said earlier, his change of heart is probably for the best. Due to the way the land lies south of the castle, we’ll have better angles to strike from the east tower. It’s a good vantage point, but we may be vulnerable, so be careful. Oh, one more thing: Karsten wants us to keep an eye out for a shaman leading the army. The scout who came in this afternoon thinks the whole horde is being led by one. If he’s right, we’ll be able to detect its presence better than anyone else.’

He rose, brandishing his staff expertly. Lothar, his hands shaking slightly, picked his up more gingerly. The noises above rose in volume, and a second shuddering boom announced that the cannons were firing again. A faint roaring could be heard from far away, almost as if a great crowd of men and beasts had been mingled and augmented. Even deep within the stone walls, the noise was unmistakable.

Helmut turned to his acolyte, maintaining his usual calm demeanour.

‘Come,’ he said, flatly.

They strode from the chamber into the narrow ways of the keep. All around them, men were running, carrying swords and shields, and yelling orders at one another. Their grey cloaks swirling around them, the wizards made their way through a short series of corridors and out into the courtyard. The noise from beyond the walls was deafening in the open air. The faces of the defenders looked pale and nervous in the moonlight. They could all hear the noise of the horde, and it chilled the blood.

The wizards went quickly through the press of men and into the south-east tower, ducking under the low doorway. After clambering up the tightly wound spiral stairs, they emerged into the cold air at the summit, and the whole scene unfolded before them. The sun had sunk beneath the western horizon, leaving only a sliver of blood red against the jagged peaks of the Grey Mountains. The stars had come out fitfully, and the pale light of Mannslieb cast a chill glow over the land. Clouds boiled behind them, and the first drops of rain had begun to fall. It looked like a storm was coming. From their vantage point above the castle, the furious activity of the defenders could be made out even in the growing darkness. Flashes of light from the guns illuminated the continual movement of men, their armour glinting in the night.

Lothar turned his gaze southwards, beyond the walls of the castle and over the roofs of the empty houses. Before him, the whole valley had been transformed into a scene of horror. From the feet of the mountains on either side of the narrow way, the entire space was filled with a host of dark forms. It was hard to see far into the murk, but the noise was shattering, and told of many thousands of greenskins surging through the shadows. Dimly, Lothar made out the ranks of heavily built infantry, loping towards the castle in a disorganised mass. The jagged tips of their cleavers and battle-axes glinted dully in the moonlight. Gaudy, tattered standards flapped in the fitful wind, black against the pale stone of the mountains around them. The sound of drums rolled across the ramparts in a flood of oppressive aggression.

Scattered fires had been started in great braziers by the orcs, and the lower walls of the castle were bathed in a lurid vermilion glow. Perhaps even the keen-eyed greenskins needed them to see by under the shadows of the overhanging battlements, or maybe they were just intent on causing as much fear as possible. From his vantage point, Lothar could see the silhouettes of monstrous forms hurling themselves towards the citadel in a mad frenzy.

‘By the Eight Colours,’ he breathed. ‘How many are there?’  
Helmut didn’t answer, but began to brandish his staff.

‘Don’t worry about that, my lad,’ he said in his usual impassive tone. ‘Just get to work.’

With that, he began to weave the deep shadows between the ancient stones around him, drawing the pools of gloom towards his staff like streaks of pitch. When the ball of darkness was complete, far deeper and more intense than the night air around it, he hurled it into the mass of forms below, knocking a bellowing greenskin champion from his feet as he charged blindly towards the gates. Taking a deep breath, Lothar raised his staff likewise. He felt the familiar rush of power surge through his limbs. His face setting into a flat mask of concentration, he joined his master, and the wind of shadows began to flow through his body, erupting from his hands and staff in deadly energy. It had begun.

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