Psody grew up, and his adventure continues! With his friends and family, he must now manage a whole kingdom where Skaven and Humans can live together.
End of an adventure

Foreword

Ratgirls, ratmen,

After several years of silence, I finally decided to work seriously and upload the sequel of *The Enfant Terrible of the Horned Rat*. Psody grew up, and his adventure continues! What were simple notes and ideas of scenes finally gave birth to a new story which, I sincerely hope, will please you as much as the "first narrative arc" staging the emancipation of an idealist refusing a system that he finds unjust and concludes with the foundation of a new kingdom.

It took me about a year to write *The Enfant Terrible*, my schooling as a librarian, not too overloading, allowed me to write at a steady pace. After the obtaining of my degree, in September 2014, after years of precarious contracts and unemployment, I finally started a sustainable career, which led me from the University of Paris East Marne-la-Vallée (next to Disneyland Paris, where I also part-time worked for twelve years) to the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the largest library in the country.

I have not forgotten Psody and his friends for all these years, and I always kept my notes. But time has passed, I had a lot to settle, new projects to build. Time has unfortunately also brought tragedies, and my family had to overcome a particularly painful ordeal. The years will smooth the pain, thankfully.

In July 2017, curiously, I started to have new ideas. Colourful characters came to my mind, but I couldn’t see how to integrate them into the story that was under construction, that I will call "second narrative arc", where the consolidation of the kingdom founded by Ludwig Steiner is witnessed by the reader. Thus I had the idea of a third "narrative arc" that would complete the story definitively. Here again, scenes came to me, I wrote them, and I got them for two hundred pages. At the same time, I realised that you continued to read *The Enfant Terrible*. Finally, on the day of my birthday, I was hit by two readers who added me to their list of favourite authors. For me, it was a sign. I wanted to share my stories with you again. No matter if it takes time that will not yield money, the pleasure of telling stories is greater. When I would have said everything I have to say about the world of Warhammer, I will seriously resume my project to write fantastic news that I hope to sell to a publisher, but in the meantime, I want to finish what I started, for myself and for you.

So here is the second part of what I will now call "Rat Kingdom Cycle", the most ambitious fanfiction of my life. I sincerely hope that you will enjoy reading this story, that your reunion with the old characters will not disappoint you, and that the new protagonists will be endearing enough to you. As usual, do not hesitate to comment as you read, to give your opinion, positive or negative, as long as it is constructive.

I don’t know yet at what pace I’ll write, I prefer to be honest. I’ll try to publish a chapter per month, we’ll see where it leads us. Please accept my apologies in advance if the frequency of publication doesn’t suit you, or if I can’t hold it.

If some of you have the desire and kindness for that, all the drawings, fanarts of the
characters or scenes will be welcomed with open arms. You'll just have to tell me by PM, I'll give an email address where to send your work, and I will publish the drawings on DeviantArt on an account that I created for that.

You'll find the pictures of the fan readers here:

https://childrenofpsody.deviantart.com/

Glory to the Horned Rat!

(Wednesday, March 21, 2012)

(I would like to dedicate this story to three artists: Robert C. O’Brien, author of Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of N.I.M.H., who imagined a beautiful story where Rats become humans, with their qualities and defaults, Don Bluth, who sublimated this work in a monumental fresco, and Marcus Lindemann, allowing the characters to grow with me as they deserved with his fanfic N.I.M.H. – the Final Experiment.)

(I would also like to thank the actor Gérard Depardieu for his entire career. Although he has a special personality and sometimes controversial actions, he’s above all a prodigious artist who would have brilliantly encamped the Prince of the Rat Kingdom.)

Prologue

The flames crackled loudly, the black and thick smoke rose to the night sky. Three yards of glowing tree trunks were glowing and kindled the atmosphere. A strong wind fanned the fire more. The cries of hundreds of large mouths rang, clenched fists rose, others brandished weapons.

A huge figure stood before the pyre, and raised with both hands above its head an enormous double-bladed axe. It was bristled with iron heavy armour – actually a collection of bits and pieces of metal parts recovered on multiple battlefields. Its bellicose howling covered those of others.

Targhân Sreefingerz was an Orc. An eight feet tall giant, green-skinned and with a mountain-framed body. Nerved legs and stoned muscles arms confirmed his quality of the strongest Orc of the whole tribe. For the Greenskin people, the strongest was the one who gave orders, and anyone who disagreed with the chief was quickly dismissed or eliminated unless he was even stronger and more aggressive, in which case he took his place at the end of a duel to the death.

Sreefingerz leaded his troops with fool proof authority for four seasons now, and had never lost a battle. His facies was cracked with a long vertical scar. Two brown canines streamed from under his protruding lower lip. His eyebrows almost hid his eyes, but the two red eyeballs shone strong enough to scare anyone crossed the bloody stare of the big Orc.

Yes, Targhân was truly worthy of his status. Even for an Orc, he was exceptionally tall and strong, and brutal, too. His top lieutenants were chiefs of other rival tribes submitted after violent fights. There were even among these two Black Orcs. Black Orcs were even bigger and stronger for a
reason that few knew – the most common rumour about this claimed that the first Black Orcs were magically created by the people of Chaos Dwarfs. An ordinary Orc with Black Orcs under his command had the right to boast being a fighter among the most skilled, and having a strength of mind well above average, if not particularly intelligent.

All around him, hundreds of Greenskins chanted two names, “Gork” and “Mork”. The first was the Orc god of war, who incarnated all their warrior values. The other passed his magic to the shamans who listened to his messages and returned them to the warriors. Orcs were very superstitious and never lacked respect for their deities. These gave them back well: the more the Orcs were enthusiastic, the more the energy of the Waaagh circulated into them and made them strong and aggressive.

Targhân hit the ground with the butt of his weapon, and raised his right hand to command silence. A minute was required, Orcs were not known to be disciplined.

When he heard nothing but the crackling of the wood fire, the orc leader spoke in a loud voice, in the rough and simple Goblinoid language:

- Boyz! Today, Gork and Mork are proud of you!

Thunderous cheers rang above the field. The great Orc awaited the return of silence before continuing:

- It’s time to show to men what we are made of! We are tough, we hit hard, we are the best all over the world, and beyond! Even Chaos goons are afraid of us when we fight because we have Gork and Mork with us!

He gestured, and another Orc went join him. This one seemed older, less mad than any other. He was dressed with a loincloth, wore copper bracelets on his wrists and ankles. A necklace made of vertebrae attached together rattled around his neck. He wore an animal skin cape on his shoulders, and a skull of the same animal served as his helmet. He brandished a staff tipped with a freshly cut head of a wyvern.

The whole assembly stood silent. There was not a single Orc who dared to speak louder than the shaman Wozza the Farsiher. Among Orcs, shamans were the bearers of the voice of the gods, and disrespect them was the worst thing to do for the Greenskins. Even the Black Orcs, even the great Targhân, all the members of the tribe bowed their heads before Wozza.

The old Orc cleared his throat, coughed several times and spat huge phlegm in the crowd. Hit Orcs muttered thanks. Wozza threw his head back and yelled in a voice hoarse by years and mushroom alcohol:

- Boyz, gods are glad of you! You are faithful! You are strong! You are the bests! Gork and Mork watched you this last days and decided it was the right moment to attack!

The cry was repeated: “Attack! Attack!” and Wozza continued:

- Yesterday, I, Wozza the Farsiher, had a vision. I saw Big Rats. Lots of Big Rats. They died all open mouth, crushed under our boots!
- Death to Big Rats! Targhân bellowed while brandishing his axe.
- Death to Big Rats! Death to Big Rats!
- Big Rats weren’t dying alone. Men were there, too! Weak Men and Big Rats were fighting together, but no one could take the advantage against us, brave Boyz! In my dream, Orcs slaughtered Men!
Death to Men! Targhân yet resumed.
Death to Men! Death to Men!

Once again, Wozza the Farsiher let a few moments, the time to the clamour of weak. Once income silence, the shaman replied calmly:

- Usually, Big Rats and Men fight each other. But those were not. Was something not natural. Gork told me they lived together. Nonsense! But…

Orcs got ready to giggle once more, as Targhân raised his fist.

- Shut up, morons! It’s important!

Nobody wanted to have his jaw broken by a punch of the chieftain, so the silence came quickly on the meeting. Wozza growled louder, showing his fangs.

- Big Rats are vicious, coward and traitors! Men are strong. Less than us, but they are strong anyway. Today, the gods Gork and Mork order us to confront both at the same time, United against us! Traitors Big Rats and less strong than us Men... alone, they are easy to defeat, but together is different...

There was some worried grumbling in the ranks. No Orc refused to take part in a good fight. But now, two different armies at the same time, two armies made of opponents who could be dreadful... was there a chance? The shaman stood silent for a few long seconds. His silence worried warriors. Suddenly he burst out:

- Who cares! They come, if they dare! We will demolish their skulls! In my dream, I saw Gork and Mork who smashed our enemies to the ground!

This invective redoubled the ardour of Orcs. Overjoyed, they bawled, sang and cheered. The shaman raised his stick and waved it furiously.

- Continue to believe and pray Gork and Mork, they’ll give back to you! Gods will lend us strength to exterminate all people who are not green as we are!

A new clamour answered this curse. Targhân raised his left hand, the reason for his nickname; indeed, there were only three fingers, the annular and little finger missed. It was not a war wound or any mutilation. He was born with this defect, but it had never bothered him. His grip was strong enough to hold the handle of a weapon without letting it slip.

- Boyz, we go to war! cried the leader. Gods want us to fill them with pride, so we’ll do it!
- Hooray! the warriors replied. Hooray!
- Men are pink, and soon they will be red! With their own blood!
- Death to Humans! Hooray for Orcs!
- Rodents have to watch out! We will pulp all of them to death!
- Death to Big Rats! Hooray for Orcs!
- Nobody plays with the Waaagh, boyz! We’ll turn everyone into powder, because Gork and Mork want to!
- Gork! Mork! Gork! Mork!

Targhân swung his axe above his head, made reels, and a terrible "Waaagh!" came from his throat, immediately accompanied by his warriors. As and when they cried, all felt the energy of the Waaagh invade them, and that caused them to scream even louder. Only the green skin kindred could experience such a feeling. Orcs, Goblins, Hobgoblins, and anything else with green blood in
its veins, shared something unique, a violent instinct buried deep into their being, which expected a small excuse to ignite. Also, when the heart of a Goblinoid beat faster under the influence of rage, it was so animated with new energy, running through its body, and prepared it in a nod to battle: its strength were increased tenfold, all fatigue fainted on the spot, it didn’t feel any pain, nor any fear. This energy transmitted to other surrounding greenskins, who passed it in turn, and the more numerous the boyz were, the more the Waagh powerful and destructive was.

Targhân Sreefingerz snickered and even once uttered the battle cry of Waaagh. Their gods would be pleased, carnage promised to be terrible!

*

The corroded bronze bell rang for the thirteenth time. Everyone was silent. The bass sound still sounded above the heads during a long half-minute. Hundreds of eyes sparkled in the semi-darkness of the nave. Round ears pricked, whiskers quivered. A rumour went, some timid whispers were quickly rebuked by indignant yelps.

A foreign eye accustomed to the darkness of the huge low room would undoubtedly have been petrified with fear at this sight. People were standing there, dozens and dozens of individuals, all squatting, sitting on the ground, compressed against each other. All wore filthy rags, stolen clothes, clumsily patched rags, capes with holes. An abominable smell of carrion and excrement hovered over this disgusting pile of flesh, fur and fabrics. All were eagerly awaiting the start of the weekly mass. Eyes were turned toward the back of the room. A large platform made of wooden planks assembled convoluted way, but securely nailed, could be seen. In the middle of the building, there was a cauldron perched on a brass tripod. Finally, while on the back, an impressive statue in the likeness of a fearsome creature with long incisors under its muzzle, and two great pairs of horns stood on its skull and two large pairs of horns on the skull; two horns were straight like those of a goat, the other two twisted themselves such the adornment of a ram.

Finally, two figures tiptoed on the platform, stopped side by side before the altar, facing the great idol. Their face remained hidden, covered with a stylized mask, but other features were visible to the assembly. Visible hair from their coat was white, and horns emerged from behind the masks. These particular signs were revealing: they were blessed by their god, and the community recognized them as chosen ones.

The two masked persons knelt, clasped their hands and bowed their head. They stayed a long time, and the whole room silently prayed with them. Then a heavy step made crack the wood of the platform. Someone was coming, someone was going in front of the community, someone was about to give orders.

The newcomer was a humanoid creature, as big as a huge, stooped-backed Human. An ordinary man, facing this being, would have shuddered with horror and disgust. Indeed, it had specific traits to animals that Humans considered like the last vermin – rats. It wore a studded leather armour boiled with stains. Its sandy coloured coat was peeled in spots, as it had swallowed several severe injuries. A large spear was tied between its shoulders. Some of the rings of its long pink flesh tail were wrapped in fabric cloths soaked in dried blood.

Skaven... the dregs of intelligent species inhabiting the Old World. Accustomed to live in underground tunnels, haunting the deepest sewers of large cities, they fed with garbage left by the inhabitants of the surface. Their society was a reflection of their personality: impulsive, violent, deceitful opportunist. No one knew exactly what their origin was. Some thought they were a people of Beastmen of the same species that had gathered in a unique people. But the few scholars who had discussed at length the subject and knew a little better these beings had theories that were
all more or less in the same direction: Skaven were ordinary rats, thousands of years ago, but contact with a substance fallen from the sky had gradually transformed them to become disgusting parodies of smart people. Over the millennia, they had made their way of life more complex, organized in Clans, and even had created a religion, the cult of the Horned Rat. Warpstone, this material consisting of crystallized magic, was the backbone of their society. It was their main source of power, and they used it as money, as fuel, as a component for practicing magic, as hallucinogen drug during the mystical communion sessions, and as a weapon in multiple and formidable variations.

The Skaven who stood on the stage was the Clanlord of this terrier. It had grown and evolved within Clan Moulder. Members of this clan were specialized in the manufacture of monstrous, mindless, but formidable in combat creatures. Warpstone was their main tool. Hence, numerous modifications appeared on its body: metal claws grafted after its phalanges, integrated cutting blades around its tail and an enlarged muzzle that could spot smells with accuracy twice better than an ordinary nose. It threw its head back and let out a shrill chirping. Then it yelped:

- All of you, honourable citizens of the Colony of Ysibos, listen to your Warlord!
- Hooray for Blokfiste! someone squeaked.

A slap noise followed by a groan of pain echoed in the vault. Without noticing it, Warlord Blokfiste of Clan Moulder rose to his full height, to look more impressive as he was already

- I, Blokfiste, announce you great days-victories! The Upper-Empire will shiver in fear before the omnipotence-omnipotence of the Sons of the Horned Rat!

Blökfiste had spoken in queekish, the Skaven language, which made double the important words of a sentence. He reached out to the two masked Skaven.

- I have the great honour-honour to introduce two chosen-ones of the Horned Rat, who will attract good luck and prosperity to our terrier!

The two horned Skaven advanced. Slowly, ceremoniously, they removed their mask. The younger Clanrats pushed admiring squeaks. They had never seen a White Skaven, so seeing two of them at once was a real blessing. Those two seemed relatively young for Grey Seers. They were not older than half a dozen seasons, and didn’t wear dross or old injuries yet.

- I am Karhi, solemnly announced the first, the smaller of the two.
- I am Iapoch, chained the second.

Karhi and Iapoch were physically quite dissimilar: Karhi was smaller, rounder, with horns bent backwards, whose points slipped behind the pavilion of each ear. His muzzle was wide and flattened under his red eyes. Iapoch was tall and very thin, with a triangular head, a long, slender nose, a thin vibrant moustache and small black and vicious eyes. He had two long straight horns. He curled his lips into a smile, showing off decayed, but formidable teeth. Indeed, the teeth of a well-fed Skaven could pierce a metal foil such as those used to manufacture armours.

- We had a vision, Sons of the Horned Rat. Karhi and I have seen-seen the same thing!
- This is a sign that the Horned Rat wants us to do it! Karhi exclaimed. We will explain everything to you!

Blökfiste bowed obsequiously, and went down from the platform backwards. He remained behind the scenes to attend the rest of the discourse of the both chosen ones.

Iapoch reached out to his right, and gave a little wave with his hand. There were mocking chuckles
as a misshapen figure trudged with difficulty to the two White Skaven. It was a slave, with its left ear cut – every adult Skaven wore a scarifying, proper to its own burrow of birth, on its left ear, and an earless Skaven was considered as a pariah. It was not possible to distinguish anything else because its carcass was completely covered with strips of soiled fabrics, worn patches, leaving appear just its toes, fingers and tail. Its head was wrapped in the same way, with two holes for its eyes, one for the right ear, and an opening for its mouth. It wore a large, rough canvas grains bag, in which it had drilled an opening for the head, and holes in the sides for its arms.

The slave was carrying at arm’s length a corroded copper tray on which was laid a long brass pipe and a bowl of green powder. Warpstone powder favoured divination trances. The servant knelt before Iapoch and handed the set before, lowing its head. The White Skaven gently grabbed the pipe, stuffed it with powder, and lit it by holding above the brazier. Karhi flanked a pat on the neck of the slave to intimate it the order to rid the floor.

Iapoch drew a deep breath of toxic smoke. He loudly exhaled a greenish cloud, and handed the pipe to Karhi. The stumpy White Skaven inhaled in turn. A few brief moments were enough for them to reach the trance state.

Karhi raised his muzzle and roared:

- The Horned Rat loves his children, but all the rest must disappear!
- Disappear ... Iapoch repeated softly.
- There are too many men-things on the surface. But we found a place to fight them and crush them.
- Decimate... annihilate... muttered the huge, still dazed White Skaven White.
- In South of the mountains inhabited by dwarf-things, there is a country where men-things are disorganized. It’s not like the Empire, where all men-thing cities are governed by the same laws.
- Disorganized... Fight between themselves... weak.
- This is where we begin the great invasion!

Skaven cried in joy, eager for bloodshed. Iapoch lifted a trembling hand.

- The Horned Rat... wants something else.

Everyone was silent.

- He said-told us... in this country... lives... the Blasphemous One.

A concert of indignant grunting sounded. Everyone knew the story of the Blasphemous One. A legend for some, the worst shame of the Horned Rat to others, it left no one indifferent. Iapoch snapped out of his daze, and became mad.

- The Blasphemous One betrayed the word of the Horned Rat! He even… treated men-things as our equals!

The indignation of the crowd was palpable. How could a Skaven fall so down?

- The worst-worst, you know it! Karhi thundered. The Blasphemous One is a... a... White Skaven!
- Filthy traitor! Unworthy son of the Horned Rat! Iapoch stormed.
- The Council of Thirteen, our great masters, are ready to reward the one who will bring them the Blasphemous One. We will! Glory to the Horned Rat!
- Glory to the Horned Rat! the crowd repeated.
- That’s why the Horned Rat ordered us to go south! That’s why he wants us to attack that country!
- Glory to the Horned Rat!
- Men-things, green-things and all other things will be sacrificed for the glory of the Horned Rat! And above all... traitors-traitors will pay for their cowardice and permanent-constant blasphemy!
- When we are ready, we will go up to the surface!
- When we go up to the surface, the world will be ours.
- Glory to the Horned Rat!

Karhi’s mouth creased into a grin translating incredible cruelty, and he concluded with an invective he wanted more refined. He articulated slowly:

- When the world is ours, the Blasphemous One will die!
- Glory to the Horned Rat! Glory to the Horned Rat!

The refrain was repeated endlessly by the whole congregation for a long minute. Both Grey Seers knelt again before the idol, and embarked in a feverish prayer.

Behind the scenes, the servant completely covered with strips watched the show, its head tilted to the side, while scratching either the different parts of its anatomy. A barking made him start.

- Hey, you, the rotten one!

The servant saw Blokfiste, threatening. Anger musk irritated its nostrils through gossamer and mucus. The Clanlord stepped forward and raised his clawed paws.

- What are you doing here?
- G ... Gozib looks, O mighty-beautiful Lord Blokfiste.
- Who told you that you had the right to look? Only Clanrats and their superiors may assist this ceremony! You think you’re at our level? You’re a slave without Clan and without rights!
- Gozib knows, O Supreme intellectual and physical superiority! But Gozib loves his master so-so... Wanted just admire him! Pity-pity, show yourself magnanimous.

The miserable creature emitted terrified sobs. This sad spectacle filled the Blokfiste’s dry heart with satisfaction.

- You’re lucky that I’m generous, otherwise I would have carve you up with my teeth! Now, go away! Your only sight makes me ill-nauseated!
- Many thanks, many thanks! the slave groaned, strongly nodding several times before disappearing.

Blokfiste spat a final insult to properly assert his status. In truth, if he had not executed his threat, it was because the poor thing was Iapoch’s favourite toy. Molest him without the direct order of the Grey Seer could put him in a very embarrassing situation. But all he had to do was show a little patience.

*The Grey Seers will eventually dissolve their brain with all the warpstone they smoke... I’ll so remind them who the boss is! And I’ll throw myself this pathetic wretch into a hole!*

- Are you sure to be the right person?
The man who had asked the question was tall and richly dressed. A short beard framed his thin face, and his receding hairline skull gleamed in the light of the fireplace. Although aged sixty springs, he had retained much of his force, and some lingering muscles could be seen under the fine fabrics that adorned him. His eagle eyes sparkled with a severe, inquisitive glow. He had the general attitude of a member of the nobility, and the banner with the image of a white horse on the wall behind his chair confirmed that status in the eyes of his interlocutor.

The latter had a well-shaped mouth and white and well-groomed teeth over a thin and beardless chin. It was not possible to distinguish anything of his face, as the hood of his coat was folded over his head. This didn’t indispose the man of noble bearing, because he was used to deal with all kinds of partners.

The hooded individual replied without hesitation, in a clear and confident voice:

- Not only I am sure of it, but I can even prove that there is no one but me to do this job.
- Really? In this case, I’m curious to hear your explanation.

The Elf – indeed it was an Elf – smirked and spoke in a clear voice.

“Once upon a time, long ago, in the Kingdom of Bretonnia, a noble lord. He reigned as a unique master in a province of the Duchy of Montfort, where life was not easy every day. Sure, between Greenskins attacks, difficult harvests due to the capricious nature of the land, misery, life wasn’t rosy. But the brave peasants made the best of a bad hand, because they knew they could count on their suzerain.”

“The lord was not deemed to be good and magnanimous. On the contrary, he was rather severe, and deficiencies in the law were harshly repressed. Fortunately, this severity was tinted with justice. The lord was austere, lived in sobriety, and tried to do his best to set a good example to his vassals. He didn’t use his power for selfish goals, and his subjects didn’t criticize his way of rule the province. Everyone knew that without this iron fist in a velvet glove, anarchy and chaos would be permanent.”

“For only one person, however, used to pay little attention to this austerity. A young hedonist, which allowed to himself many excesses. His life was a permanent debauchery, every time he could he obviously flaunted his wealth, his male and female conquests, and he liked feasting. Worse, he didn’t hesitate to mock people of social rank lower to his, even humiliate them. No one dared to say anything, no one dared to defend, for a simple reason: this young man was none other than the son of the lord.”

“He was not content to contradict directly the lifestyle of his father, he was abusing his position; he held regular feasts paid with the money of the people, he threw in prison peasants who tried to protest when he came torment them. Of course, the noble lord was ashamed, and regularly threatened to get his child back on the right path, with violence if necessary. But the young man was his only child, his beloved son, his only heir. Weakness? Love? Whatever it was, the suzerain forgave each mistake. And finally, the inevitable happened.”

“One day, the young dissolute met the wrong people. Needing any substances prohibited by the laws of many countries, including Bretonnia, he contacted a network of notorious criminals. Thugs, brutes, murderers, some of them were bandits on the run from the Empire. They provided the young man the goods he needed to "spice up" a party with close friends, in exchange for a down payment. The evening was unforgettable; I will pass on the sordid details that are not necessary to develop. But a few days later, when the emissary of the bandits came to claim the rest of the previously agreed amount of money, the young man dismissed him with contempt, arguing that the effect of medications had not been up to his hopes. Of course it was a lie he had already used more than once for not paying a due.”

“Unfortunately for the young man, the band wasn’t composed with simple lesser bandits, but real ruffians, not at all the type to be daunted by a noble son. Once their messenger had returned without the money, the pundits reacted immediately. They captured the son of the lord, and led
him away into one of their secret hideouts. Then began a long and painful ordeal for the young noble, who was abundantly tortured for days by one of the criminals. This criminal in particular was really terrible. Although it was only a few years older than his prisoner, he had already mastered the art of inflicting pain.”

“The lord heard of the kidnapping, of course. He sent his militia search his son, but the hiding bandits remained out of his reach. Mercenaries refused to go to his research, not wanting to take the risk of running afoul of the criminal organization, even if the reward offered by the lord was very stimulating. Finally, the lord contacted himself the outlaws, to pay them a ransom. But the leaders didn’t want to accept his offer. Their reputation of "ruthless bandits" was not to be blunt. Finally, by order of, the torturer of the young man was designed to return the body of his unfortunate victim to the lord.”

“The criminal had come masked, but at the last moment, the suzerain managed to pull off his mask. He failed however to prevent his escape, but the image of his face etched in his mind. Bad luck for the bandit, the lord had a gift for drawing. He hastened to draw a picture including the smallest details of the face of the criminal, picture he hung right in front of his office, to never forget the traits of the man who had taken the life of his child.”

The Elf paused. Throughout his explanation, the lord had not said a word, but his skin complexion had become increasingly crimson, his breath most wheezing, and his eyes sparkled now with hate. With a small smirk, the hidden-traits individual resumed his story.

“Time passed. The wife of the lord, too affected by this tragedy, finally died in grief. Gradually, the lord had not any idea in his mind but this one: to find the man that had extinguished the flame of the existence of his son. A few weeks later, the group of bandits was overtaken within the frontiers of the Empire by a detachment of the Reikland Guard. The Bretonnian nobleman moved in person, hoping his son’s murderer would remain among the survivors. It was not so. His body was never found. It must be said that the capture of the band had been rough, and explosives had shaken the hideout, crushing some of the goons into pieces. But the lord knew, he felt in the depths of himself, the soul of his son was not in peace. And so the owner of that face, that hated face, was still alive. And the anger of the lord subsided even after twenty years of cursing this day.”

“I heard about this story, your lordship. Last year, I was among the guests of one of your hunting parties, without your knowledge – I master the art of disguise. When I asked your cellarer to show me the picture, with your permission, I immediately recognised the face. It turns out that I had the opportunity to meet this individual during my wanderings. Twenty years have passed, but I can assure you he has not changed so much. I spent the following months to track down my target and I finally found it. Without a doubt. I saw the man there. That’s your rascal. Immediately, I came back here as quickly as possible to bring you an opportunity to take your revenge.”

The lord coughed and leaned over the table. He whispered icily:

- Young man, I’d like to remind you something.
- “Young man”? It is surprising from you, my lord. Appearances say otherwise, but I’m much older than you.
- Whatever! the noble snapped, reluctant to play mind games. Elves are known to mature more slowly than Humans. The proof is here: that remark was childish. That’s what I was about to explain to you: I engage dedicated professionals only, not oddballs who behave as spoiled children! Do not make me regret having used your services, or our collaboration could stop on the spot.

The masked man stood silent, then muttered a few seconds later.

- You’re right, and I owe you apologies.
- I don’t care about your apologies, grumbled the Human, who was not fooled as he detected the lack of sincerity in the apology of the Elf. I have already paid for your testimony, it costed me
money enough, for a testimony without proof.
- I do not have so much merit, my lord. The story of your family is not a mystery, it’s been twenty years since you’re looking for this bandit.
- Don’t test my patience! You know the extent of your talent, otherwise you wouldn’t be so cheeky! If you had only repeated the official version that I transmit, I would have kicked you away. Solely, you revealed to me a lot of details that you did not need to know.

The Elf was still smiling. Indeed, publicly, the young Ignace de Vaucanson had been captured by a gang of bandits during a walk. No mention of the lethal transaction was included in any official document. Vaucanson continued:

- The fact that you have learned as much about my personal story gives me a rather positive picture of your abilities, but the stakes are too high to be reduced to nothing at the last minute because of your blustering! Twenty years I expect this moment, twenty years! I don’t know what it means for an Elf, but for me, it is the third of my existence!

The Elf stopped smiling.

- You don’t only want to see this individual die. You want to make him suffer as much as you. He must pay for his crime!
- I say! He must pay, not just for his crime! I’ve spent twenty years of suffering and regret due to this man. I am indebted to him for the loss of my son and my wife, so the destruction of my family. I want to destroy what is most dear for him! I want his name to be permanently soiled, and associated with the worst disaster! I want everything he has built with his hands, with his sweat and blood, to crumble before him. And mainly, I want him to be perfectly aware of being the only one in charge for everything that will happen to him and his family!
- And that’s why you were right to call me, mon sieur. I won’t need to multiply disguises. I will be unchanged. He won’t be suspicious of me. At worst, he knows me well enough to know that I can have some unusual behaviour from time to time. That’s why I am exactly the person for you. I can infiltrate the place without arousing suspicion, and prepare the plan that suits you. You are the employer, so I’ll proceed according to your will.

These words calmed the suzerain a little. The masked man took the opportunity to continue:

- The location of your target is outside the Empire and allied countries. Do you realize what it means?
- No matter the distance, I would go to the end of Naggaroth to find this man.
- I don’t have any doubt on it, but I was thinking about something else: so much to do, as much you also repay on the material level. He settled in a place where life is good, you could become the local suzerain.

The Human felt his brow crinkle.

- Are you talking about a complete annexation?
- You don’t have to exterminate everybody, mon sieur! If you note that your forces are sufficient to overthrow the government, do it. Nothing will change for the inhabitants, anyway, in the province we are talking about, this kind of “handover” is commonplace.
- Yes ... that deserves to be seriously considered. I will be able to do it, and those who have hidden this bandit from the justice of the Lady of the Lake can only blame themselves! They can’t be virtuous people anyway!

Vaucanson was now scarlet, and his eyes shone with a disturbing light. His interlocutor raised his hand.
- I wouldn’t push you into a conflict that you would not win.
- No, really, this idea is interesting, after all.
- There remains another problem! What if this country declares war to Bretonnia?
- Our army can resist any invader. I shall be the one who will increase the influence of His Majesty Louen Lionheart!

The masked individual didn’t know whether he should take the suzerain in admiration or in pity. Did he really think what he was saying? Did he wish to convince himself of those fine words intended to conceal his hunger for revenge? He almost jumped when the grave voice of the Human pulled him from his thoughts.

- Will you tell me where his hiding place is now?
- Of course, my lord.

And the Elf took out from his knapsack a cylindrical case of leather, unpacked a map and unrolled it on the table. The lord creased his forehead.

- Hum... the Renegade Crowns... I thought so. It’s a good place to flee, indeed. It’s huge.
- Not enough huge for me.

With a precise gesture, the Elf took a little dagger out of his sleeve and stuck it in the map. The Human didn’t flinch. He had seen worse. On the other hand, he could not restrain his eyebrow to raise when he saw where the blade had hit.

- What? Here? Are you sure?
- Absolutely sure, milord. I pretended to be a traveller passing through to my little tracking. I have not touched the target, I stayed well away every time, but anyway, thanks to my attire, he would not recognize me if he saw me.

The lord got up and took a few steps into the office. The floor creaked under his boots.

- I heard vaguely about this realm. It’s a strange place... The people who live there are unusual.

The masked man smiled again with malice.

- I saw it by myself. And the challenge will be even more interesting.

The noble had the intuition that there was something else. He knew enough psychology of so-called “civilized” peoples of the Empire to detect the smallest details that betrayed emotion. It was obvious that the character he was about to hire didn’t do this just for money. He seemed too interested, too accommodating, too ready to accept too many conditions... the mission appeared to be a pretext, a good opportunity to get to the targeted place with a precise justification.

*This spy doesn’t play all his cards on the table. He’s motivated by something in particular. What? Oh, never mind. The most important is the job to be done...*

He looked at the dagger. The tip was planted in the “K” of the second word that made up the name of their destination. The map indicated on this spot: “Rat Kingdom”.

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**Part One: Paths of cohabitation**

**Chapter 1: End of an adventure**
The wind was blowing on the moor, slightly shaking the tree leaves in a soft rustle.

The rain fell the previous night had turned the path muddy, and the convoy was progressing hardly. The horses pulled with all their might, and the riders did their best to prevent their mountings from slipping on loose soil. They were a dozen, men and women, accompanying three carts, one large and two smaller. The largest was in fact a large cage on wheels, and a Halfling held the reins. The second carriage, guided by a Human soldier was simply sheeted. Finally, at the back, another cage, just large enough for a single prisoner, closed the convoy.

Anyone who would have crossed these travellers from away would probably have passed his way with a shrug; these riders were heavily armed bounty hunters mercenaries, apparently, and the large cage contained their prey. But those who saw the prisoners had quickly turned away and had gone their way without daring to look back.

The first chariot contained fifteen ratmen, representatives of the Skaven people. As tall as below-average-sized Humans, some stood on their hind legs, others were sitting in the middle of the cage or pressed against the bars. They all had the attributes of rats: large protruding incisors, vibrant long moustaches, long tail made of flesh rings and claws at the end of each finger and each toe. All were naked, and each had a fur with unique colours and patterns. They remained silent, motionless, and none orientated its gaze to the outside of the cage. The sun, high in the spring sky, warmed their coat, which was not unpleasant.

One of the riders, who rode in the lead, was a woman. She was tall, measuring over six feet, and was also strong and muscular. Her blue eyes and blond very short cut hair presaged northern origins. She wore a simple but practical and comfortable armour. She ran a gloved hand through her hair and sighed in annoyance. Treble squeaks drilled her eardrums for almost an hour. Thinking back to the direction of their journey, her heart sank.

- Why didn’t we already stop?
- Because we have to leave this country first. Cheer up, sis’, almost there!

The man who spoke was even bigger, and broad-shouldered. We looked very athletic, agile and tough. His strong chin was covered with a thick beard and the same blue eyes that the woman’s sparkled under his brown hair. A great strength emanated from him, through this apparent tranquillity. He accelerated his horse, so to trot next to the tall woman who snarled:

- It’s becoming so tiring for my ears.
- They’re hungry, they’re afraid, you can’t blame them for that, they’re just babies.
- It is against me that I’m upset. I don’t like to inflict it to them.
- Don’t worry, in a few minutes, we’ll be able to feed them and they’ll calm down.
- Yeah, Jochen. Sure, Jochen.
- Here, look! We’re arriving.

The carts came around a hillside. A little further flowed a river over which a bridge stretched. A wooden tunnel was constructed over the entire length of the bridge, and half-dozen guards were posted at the entrance of the tunnel. Just a few steps to the left stood a barrack. The bridge was the last frontier in this region of the empire, Wissenland. Beyond that arose the Black Mountains, then further to the south, extended the border principalities, also known as the “Renegade Crowns”. In this fragmented into numerous kingdoms country, Human laws changed to suit the mood of monarchs.

For now, conveyors had to face for the last time the law of Emperor Karl Franz. The young man
who was leading turned to his comrades.

- Well, no reason anything goes not as well as usual, right?
- Above all, don’t make the sly devils, added the woman. This is our ultimate output, I don’t want the conclusion of this story to be written in red ink.

They were now a few steps of the bridge. One of the guards raised his arm and stepped forward, approaching the convoy.

- Halt!

The carriages stopped in unison. The one who had spoken, probably the highest ranked, according to his ornate breastplate, gestured to the Halfling.

- Who’s in charge of this convoy? You are?
- I am! snapped the woman.

She dismounted, imitated by his brother, and told the guard:

- We leave the land of Emperor Karl Franz, and we’ll pay the right of way as required.

The high-ranked soldier frowned.

- First time in my life that I see you, yet I have the feeling I know you?
- We pass regularly here. You have already seen us.
  • I was assigned to this position two weeks ago. If I had seen a convoy like this, I would have remembered.

The woman felt the guard sinking deeper into his reflection. Finally, he shook his head.

- Wouldn’t you have previously lived near Carroburg?
- No, the woman grumbled.
- “No, sergeant”, I beg you, corrected one of the soldiers. Sergeant Melk.
- Right, Sergeant Melk. Nedland, would you please give his money to Sergeant Melk?
- With pleasure, Captain! the Halfling replied with a naughty smile.

He rose, lifted the plank on which he was sitting, and took out a purse and threw it to the sergeant. The latter caught it, counted the coins, then looked up.

- You really are a captain? A woman?
- You should get out of your backwater, Sergeant. There are more and more countries where women career in the army, or in a private militia, and that’s the way it works for me. Now let us pass, we are in a hurry.
- Sergeant, you saw that? one of the soldiers exclaimed.

Melk walked to the large cage, the one that contained the Skaven. They became more nervous as the Human approached. One of them whistled aggressively through its long incisors. The sergeant’s brow wrinkled in perplexed folds.

- What do you do on the road with these creatures?
- Hey, we’re paid to bring them back, we do it.
- They are Beastmen. Not immediately eliminate these things can be considered as heresy.
- Beyond this boundary are the Renegade Crowns, where your gods damn emperor has no power, right? retorted the Halfling.
One of the armed men approached his turn to one of the cages with caution. Immediately a Skaven rushed towards him with a shrill roar and stretched its arm between the bars. The man jumped back. Two of his comrades were already brandishing their spears.

- ENOUGH!

The woman grabbed the ratman by its wrist in a net movement, and pulled, which pressed its face on the steel bars. The Skaven moaned in pain.

- Calm down now, you rubbish rat, or I’ll rip your fur off hair by hair!

The ratman glared a furious stare, then closed its eyes, stopped fussing and tried to lower its head. The captain released his grip, walked away from the cage, and returned to the sergeant. The Skaven backed in a leap, squatted on the dirty straw of the cage, and stroked its bruised arm with little grievèd squeaks.

- Call back your men, Sergeant Melk, and keep them away from these animals. If you do not bother them, they won’t bother you. And in answer to your question, we keep them alive because our employer pays more expensive if we bring him back living specimens. Three of them already died during our cross, I’d rather limit the damage.

Melk gazed the young woman askance.

- You’re lucky that this is the last frontier of the Empire here, because otherwise I would have executed all of them, bounty or not. And what is that noise? It’s definitively unbearable!

The soldier who was attacked by the Skaven was next to the covered wagon. He stuck his head under the cloth and had a little surprised start.

- In the name of Ulric, what the Hell is that?
- Hands off! The young man barked. This is the article with the highest value!
- What? These small horrors?

He lifted the corner of the tarp, revealing the inside of the truck. It contained large metal cylinders, and wicker baskets in which were crammed small naked and blind Skaven. Their small teeth were already sharp, and some had gnawed the wicker. All emitted squeaks and shrill screeching. Melk came and moved back, covering his nose.

- Yuck! What a stink!

Indeed, small Skavens exhaled a strong odour of excrement and gamy meat. The sergeant saw that their pink skin was slimy and stained with dark matter, and preferred not to imagine what it was.

- What you want to do with these vermin?
- We’ll raise them so they’ll become good little citizens! the Halfling sneered. What do you think we’ll do?
- Our employer needs quality food for his kennel, said the young man named Jochen. In fact, the meat of these creatures is a piece of choice for greyhounds. This meat looks a bit tough, with a first glance, but I can guarantee that once boiled, spicy and prepared in the right way, our bloodhounds love it. Of course, we must keep them alive by then, because their flesh is tenderer when we throw them into the pot of boiling water while they are screaming. And it excites dogs.

Jochen stopped talking, but his stare full of sadism was going to petrify Sergeant Melk. The latter noticed out of the corner of his eye something that made him vaguely regain his senses.
- What about that one?

He pointed with his index to the third carriage, the little one with a single cage. One prisoner was sitting inside on a wooden chair. It was tied with shackles on its wrists and ankles. The coat over its naked body was completely white. Its head was locked in a small skull cage. Its face couldn’t be seen, masked by a piece of black fabric. However, the sergeant noticed two long straight horns, like those of a goat, the tips slightly bent forward, that exceeded the top of the head of the individual.

The Halfling of the company spat in contempt.

- This one is the most dangerous of the herd. Do not be fooled by appearances. It doesn’t look brawny, but it’s a real terror. It toasted six guys of mine in a snap.
- You mean it’s a wizard?
- Yep, not least!
- Why not kill it immediately if it’s dangerous?
- Because it can serve...

The little one did not continue his sentence. Her mouth pursed in a sceptical pout.

- Well, on reflection, it would be better for everyone I tell you nothing.
- Your silence has been bought on this?
- In part, but it is also a precaution.
- Our employer might consider you as embarrassing witnesses, the tall blonde woman intervened. He could pay us to come back and eliminate all of you.

The woman stared at the sergeant with insistence. Melk felt increasingly uncomfortable. He thought quickly. His men were not very numerous, and the mercenary group was well equipped. Would he take the risk of letting potential heretics run away and let them do their schemes before returning to create real problems? Or could his men they stop them and defeat them? Did they have only any chance against them?

The voice of the young man with brown hair pulled him from his thoughts.

- Come on, Sergeant Melk. All we want is to leave the Empire. We won’t never come back. No need we spoil more of your time? Or maybe I can help you choose the right decision?

And he pulled out of his waistcoat pocket a purse he threw in his direction. The sergeant caught it up, shook it, and heard a very characteristic tinkle. The purse contained a good amount of gold crowns, much more than the price of passage normally applicable which they had already paid.

Finally, Melk let greed stifle his respect for the law, and considered that beyond the border, things were no more within his jurisdiction.

- All right, go ahead. But if I see you again here, I’ll have to deny you access.
- No problem, Sergeant, the woman replied coldly. We’ll never return.

She remounted her horse. The Halfling cracked his whip, and the entire convoy advanced again. The three cages crossed the covered bridge and then walked away. Sergeant Melk looked at these strange people disappear beyond a hillock, and sighed with relief. Convinced he did what he had to do, he felt a weight off of his stomach.

- Sergeant... you okay?
- Yes, soldier.
He wanted to show his leadership:

- All of you, listen to me: next time we see this kind of people with this kind of prisoners, bounty or not, we prevent the headquarters. If they want to go out, we retain them. And if they want to go in... we annihilate them. Understood?

The guards approved together, some were still shivering. To ensure the silence of his men, Sergeant Melk concluded:

- We’ll share this gold, but the first one who opens his loud mouth on this subject, I eviscerate him myself. Clear?

No one dared say a word. The message was passed.

* *

The improbable caravan continued on its way for two miles. The woman in head cast a glance over his shoulder. As she could not see the bridge, nor the guards, she breathed a sigh of relief. Jochen trotted his horse in order to be at her side.

- Hey, is everything right?
- It was a narrow escape!
- What? Nothing more compared to usual, though?
- Jochen, didn’t you recognize the sergeant? He was part of our father’s guard!
- No kidding! You sure?

The young woman gave a lightly wry smile.

- I used to watch trainings sometimes in secret, I was curious. I already had vocation. And Melk was the one I liked the most. When I was a child, I considered him a handsome knight worthy of me.
- Your handsome knight would have been able to recognize you, understood the Halfling. You look like much to your mother! And you, Jochen, I haven’t known your father, but from what I hear, you start to look like him, too!
- He joined our ancestors six years ago, and considering how the domain ended, I think all the survivors of that night preferred to forget, Nedland.
- Yeah. Whatever...

One of the tail riders trotted had his mount to the level of Halfling.

- Hey, Ned! We’re completely out of their sight, and they don’t follow us.
- They’re too stupid to ask more questions and abandon their posts, said the Halfling with a shrug.

Marjan Gottlieb raised her hand and gestured to her right.

- Let’s install the bivouac fifty yards away of the trail.

The carriages left the dirt road to sink into the plain. A few long minutes went by. The young woman stopped the convoy with a wave. She asked the Halfling named Nedland:

- You see someone?

Nedland grabbed out of a holster attached to the wooden seat a telescope. He climbed nimbly on the cage, and looked around for a moment.
- No one anywhere. Way’s clear!

Marjan dismounted, and stood before the large cage.

- Come on. Relax, boys.

In an instant, all the faces lightened up. Some Skaven laughed, particularly the smallest, a young anthracite-coated Skaven.

- How foolish Imperials!
- You said it!
- Still you didn’t were so proud before them!
- Come on, Fritz has done very well, said the brown Skaven who assaulted the soldier. It was his first mission, don’t forget it.

While speaking, he cleared with his foot the straw in a corner of the large cage, and discovered a trap door, which he opened with a snap. Skaven emerged from their prison, one after the other, sliding smoothly. Once outside, they twitched and deeply inspired.

- I’m a bit cold, Fritz moaned to the attention of brown Skaven, his arms crossed over his chest.
- Wait a second. Guys?

Jochen and Nedland lifted down the second carriage a large chest. The Halfling opened it, and pulled out clothes. He distributed them to the ratmen, which got dressed, not without relieved satisfaction.

Skaven living in the depths of the Under-Empire used to care of their clothes, often their only possession, and the element representing their status. The Skaven of the convoy had learned the habit of stay dressed in public, but for different reasons. While their fur covered their bodies in order to hide their intimacy while protecting them from cold, only they had adopted the Human decency. As they also liked to wear nice clothes, everyone was satisfied.

Marjan Gottlieb approached the brown Skaven who was adjusting his jacket and patted his arm amicably.

- Not too ached, Kit?
- No, I’m fine. At the same time, I looked for it.

“Kit” was the diminutive for “Kristofferson”. Kristofferson was a Skaven entered walk-in adulthood. He came to the world six years ago, for the Children of the Horned Rat who grew old about three times faster than Humans, so this represented eighteen springs. Firmly on his two feet, he was about the size of an ordinary Human. His stature was average, but two years of training in the barracks had sculpted his body; strong muscles rolled under his brown coat, and he walked with a certain grace. Copper highlights gleamed here and there on his fur and a long black line sprang on his neck and followed his spine to his lower back, at the base of his long, made of flesh pink rings tail.

He had the face of a rat, but clean and harmonious, without being disgusting. His eyes were bright green, his muzzle fine, and thick tufts of hair on his cheeks made him side whiskers that made his look friendlier. His incisors were spotless and well-maintained.

This gentleman was naturally prepossessing, and applied to follow the code of honour of the knights of the legends that had enchanted his childhood. He knew how the Old World was corrupt from all sides, and wanted to do everything to maintain the few sparks of hope of the most
optimistic people. Humble, respectful, courteous, he nevertheless knew how to be ruthless against a dangerous opponent, and was able to wield any weapon, with preference for rapier – he particularly liked the fight combining agility, speed, accuracy and elegance, and rarely encumbered with heavy armour. Finally, another special sign characterized him: he was left-handed.

Jochen and Marjan Gottlieb had seen him grow up. Now he was about the same age, considering the physiological and psychological point of view, all three had become the best friends for life. Marjan, who was not one to let anyone show any familiarity vis-à-vis of her, didn’t push him away when he came between her and her brother, and put an arm around the shoulder of each of them, clenching against him.

- Ah, the thrill of adventure! Apprehension facing the danger! Action, fighting for a just cause! I feel I’ll miss all of this!
- I don’t, retorted Marjan. And your mother either, I bet. It lasts for two years and you don’t have enough yet?
- If I could, I would go back again, and again!
- Really, it’s time to find you a wife, Jochen mocked.
- And say goodbye to my freedom? Come on, brother, you’re not thinking!
- Love can be a very pleasant prison, Fritz intervened.

Kristofferson loosened his grip, and approached the small anthracite Skaven.

- So this is it? You’ll pronounce your proposal?
- Yes. As I participated in at least one expedition, it will prove to him that I am a man, a real one!
- You didn’t need that to seduce her, you know.
- It was important to me, Nedland. And now that there is no more risk not coming back for me, it’s good! I’ll kneel in front of Martha, and tell her:

The young Skaven put one knee, to strengthen the weight of words, and declared emphatically, hand on heart, the other stretched forward:

- “Martha Spiegel, I love you! Will you marry me?”

The whole company applauded. Jochen laughed.

- Sure, there are less pleasant ways to be trapped in a cage!
- Speaking of cage... Jochen, can you pass me the keys?
- Nedland has, sis’.

The Halfling, who had heard the conversation, took a few steps towards the third cart, the one with a small cage.

- Don’t move, I take care of the looniest of our birds!

And he jumped on the carriage and hastened to open the cage. He unlocked the bracelets that bounded the hands and feet of the prisoner. Once freed of these hindering, the one got up and removed the tissue that hid his view. Nedland helped the white ratman to set his feet on solid ground.

- Wait, said the little man, still manipulating the locks of the box.

A few clicks later, the small cage opened. Nedland withdrew it, and revealed the face of the real head of the convoy. He quipped with exaggerated solemnity:

- You are now in the open, Monsignor Prospero Steiner.
Prospero Steiner was a citizen of the Principality of Vereinbarung. He was the intellectual, the head of all the cases that involved magic. For six years he was implicated with all his soul in the regency of this principality located in the Renegade Crowns, with his friends and his girlfriend’s father.

“Prospero”, however, was not his birth name. He had adopted it to definitively conform himself with Human customs. No one would have been fooled, seeing him, because he was not Human. It was not possible to confuse him with a citizen of the Old World Empire.

Prospero Steiner was a White Skaven, and his closest friends and family members used to call him Psody.

For Skaven society, Psody was at the top of the pyramid. His all white fur and horns represented the greatest blessing, the mark of the chosen ones of the Horned Rat, the god of ratmen. He was born with this privilege, and magic flew in his veins as naturally as his blood.

Psody measured four and a half feet tall, not counting his horns, straight like those of a goat, long about twenty inches. He was the oldest of all ratmen of the group, and had celebrated his eleventh anniversary some time before. Smaller than the average Skaven, he was nonetheless in good health. Some silver tufts of his white coat gleamed in the sun, his pink eyes above his wide and flat nose sparkled with life. The outdoor life, impeccable hygiene and special care in his appearance made him a remarkable White Skaven. He was smart, charismatic, and did his best to be in harmony with those he loved.

But it had not always been so.

Psody was once a Grey Seer, one of the recognized priests of the Horned Rat. And ratmen who preached this religion in the Under-Empire where Skaven holed were generally deceitful, manipulative, arrogant and violent individuals. He spent the first four years of his life in the burrow of Brissuc, a Skaven settlement located somewhere in the Reikland, the province of the Empire where the capital of Humans was located, Altdorf. Youngest of a sibling of six brothers, he had done everything to satisfy his master, mentor and adoptive father, Grey Seer Vellux.

Everything had flipped as he had started receiving messages from the Horned Rat. He had developed an insatiable curiosity and had asked more and more questions about the teachings of the tutelary deity of the Skaven that Vellux had transmitted him. Anxious to see his young disciple risk of escaping his control, Vellux ordered his discreet execution. Thus Psody had been left for dead in a swamp. His life would probably have done so without the right care of a witch living in places that had saved his life.

It was for the young White Skaven the beginning of a long quest full of pitfalls, in which he sought a sense to the visions of the Horned Rat, and a place somewhere in the world to do his life. He met many people and made such friends as unlikely as himself, including the prior Romulus, priest of the goddess of compassion Shallya, and especially the merchant Ludwig Steiner, Human passionate by Skaven to the point of having adopted one of them, he had baptized Heike, and raised her as his own daughter.

This meeting upset completely Psody’s life. He understood what true happiness looked like. An expedition organized by the trader deep into the jungle of Lustria allowed him to discover the meaning of the visions that haunted him, and on his return, he faced his former master and defeated him, after a long and bloody battle.

The Battle of Gottliebschloss was a tragedy in which many valuable people lost their lives. Once over, the survivors decided to leave the Empire, become too dangerous for them, to settle in a
province purchased by Steiner years earlier. This province, located in the Renegade Crowns, southeast of the Empire, thus became Psody’s new home.

When he arrived with his girlfriend and Human companions, the little ratman had found a desolate territory, with a mansion in ruins. Everyone worked hard to make it the capital of this brand new kingdom. It had taken nearly a year to build a decent city, with solid fortifications and comfortable homes. While the labourers had worked so, a mercenary company led by Captain Hallbjörn Ludviksson of Norsca had chased the Orc tribes settled here and there, and had trained able citizens to fight, before returning North. Meanwhile, other Humans had heard of this new kingdom, and saw an opportunity to lead a good life. Many left when they learned the true purpose of the Kingdom of Vereinbarung.

This official name, meaning “concord” in ancient Reikspiel, was the ultimate goal of its leaders: to create a kingdom where Humans and Skaven could live in harmony, and thus elevate ratmen as the fifth race qualified “civilized” after Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Halflings.

This project was a crazy, insane, moonstruck bet. Any institution in charge of laws in one or other of the countries of the Empire, or the Dwarf strongholds, any king of the distant island of Ulthuan, home of the Elves, would have considered this plan as a vile heresy, something that had to be quickly suffocated. The vast majority of people from all nations regarded Skaven as vulgar Beastman, good for nothing but to be slaughtered. The few scholars who know their manners knew they were more advanced, and therefore more dangerous. The Sons of the Horned Rat constituted a particularly unhealthy society based on violence, fear, betrayal and ongoing aggression.

But Ludwig Steiner had realized a Skaven might behave as well as a Human, if raised as such. And his contact with Psody allowed him to understand that even Skaven destined to become the leaders, I addition the vilest, could change. This is why he had decided to create a kingdom where Skaven could live and prosper in harmony. And once the first cities built, the capital well protected and laws clearly defined (on the model of the laws of the Karl Franz Empire), the inhabitants had begun the second step: populating.

At first there was only one pair of Skaven. Of course, it was hardly conceivable for them to populate a whole kingdom. Also, Psody, Romulus and Prince Steiner had organized expeditions across the Old World. First, the scouts spotted small Skaven colonies; they were less populated and less protected than large under-cities such as Sub-Altdorf or Hellpit. Second, Harvesters, men of arms specially trained in discreet undercover operations, made a breakthrough after sabotaged strategic points, and rushed to the incubators, dens where young Skaven were stored. The Sons of the Horned Rat put their young in nurseries before fully integrating them into their society. The Harvesters priority took the youngest babies away, and tried to recover as many females as males. With Skaven, the girls were a minority and therefore more valuable. Prior Romulus had estimated there had to be a good balance for gender equality, and demographics; a too small proportion of girls to boys could be detrimental.

Psody had participated in each expedition, and had developed a bold scheme to the smallest colonies where his name had remained unknown and unheard. As he was a White Skaven very familiar with the customs of this people, he could easily impersonate a Grey Seer on the move. All he had to do was pretend to have a mandate from the Council of Thirteen and enter, identify the place, and go. The Harvesters team intervened the next day. To make the task easier, Psody sometimes managed to weaken the Skaven by pushing them to a party in honour of the Horned Rat. He brought a liquor barrel so-called “stolen from the men-things” whose content was drugged. The strongest and most dangerous Skaven were the first to drink. The Harvesters therefore only had to deal with the sickliest that had been left out of the banquet, before getting their hands on the newborns.
Each expedition asked a learned preparation, upstream and downstream, so there were only four or five each year, some focused on a medium-sized terrier, others divided between two or three isolated colonies. One shipment was made in a larger colony, the Harvesters took advantage of a moment of weakness among residents for a more daring operation.

Over the years, Psody and his friends had gathered several hundred babies. Each had been adopted by a couple of Human volunteers who had taken in charge their education. The first months were the most difficult because Skaven babies didn’t behave in the same way that Human children. All the priestesses of Shallya, under the responsibility of Romulus, were solicited from all sides. Fortunately, patience and love overcame the instinctive fear. Soon, the first small adopted Skaven became more sociable, and they managed to speak Reikspiel, the language of Humans. Small special schools we improvised to accustom young Skaven to life in common. This first generation was called “Generation of Freed ones”. Each group of small Skaven removed from a burrow was formally incorporated, including the company was trying to bring back to the fold.

The people of Vereinbarung didn’t make the distinction between Humans and Skaven. The usual term was “citizen” or title of the person. However, the Prince’s advisers had suggested finding a way to distinguish them from the remained “traditionalists” Skaven. Thus it was in the habit of calling the inhabitants of the Under-Empire “Feral Skaven”. The place itself was now known as the “Rat Kingdom”.

During those years, however, Psody had wanted to spend time with his companion-girl Heike. Both Skaven adopted by the prince loved dearly, and were a happy couple. And things had not dragged. Four months after their installation in Vereinbarung, their first child arrived. They had called him Kristofferson, in memory of Prince Ludwig’s missing son. Twins, a brother and a sister, came the next year, and then a third boy, and finally the youngest daughter.

Psody adored his five children with all his strength, and was ready to do anything for any of them. He had not been able to educate them as much as he liked, but had done his best. He never had been negligent. His long absences had not always been easy, because the distance with his family weighed upon him. But now it was over. There wouldn’t be another expedition. He was therefore fully able to take care of his family, while managing the affairs related to magic. No more risk-taking, nor painful moments when he had to bear the grief of Heike who feared not to see him back.

Indeed, he had travelled so far, on long way, since his departure from the Brissuc terrier. Psody Steiner was a great hero for some, the worst sacrilege to others.

He turned to the young Human, and gave him a wink.

- I congratulate you, Jochen! Your composure facing the Imperial is admirable-admirable!

Although he learned to speak the language of Humans, Psody had always kept the little repeat tic own to Queekish language. He didn’t want to minimize the efforts of others.

- Otherwise, I really want to thank you all for what you have done for us. Especially you, Fritz. It was your first outing, you were afraid, and yet you didn’t waver.
- Master Mage, I... thank you, but how you... how could you know I was scared? You couldn’t see me?
- I couldn’t, but I could smell you. I learned to sharpen my senses with Warp energy-magic, and I could distinguish your scent over others. And it is that smell that oozes-sweat yet from your musk glands.
Fritz looked down. Psody amicably patted his back.

- Don’t let embarrassment overwhelm this fear. Frankly, you don’t have to be ashamed, you were fine. Your future wife will be flattered to have a husband like you.

Another Skaven approached. He handed the White Skaven clothes of soft and comfortable fabrics.

- Here, Father.
- Thank you, Siggy.

The Human captain gave a little tender smile on hearing this exchange. It was fun to see two diametrically opposed Skaven yet be related by blood. Indeed, Siggy – his real name was Sigmund Steiner – also had a particular sign Skaven. An exceptional heritage flowed in the blood of some of the representatives of this people: the gift of the Mighty of the Horned Rat.

Each Skaven generation had its share of Black Skaven. They were easily recognizable: sturdy and much larger than average, all had fur as black as night. The more muscular of them could deploy an incredible strength, much powerful than that of a Human. All were also stronger, and could endure otherwise fatal injuries. In some of them, however, that power was accompanied by a readiness to overreact and put themselves in a state of rage difficult to control. The Sons of the Horned Rat frantically called this “Black Hunger”. Black Hunger was both a strength and a weakness for Black Skaven.

Sigmund was one of them. Five years old, his height upped to six feet and two inches for one hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and nerves. He was very tall, but he was slim, his limbs seemed thinner, but still able to deploy an often impressive strength. He knew that Black Hunger was curved in the deepest corner of his body, and only allowed it to let loose in case of emergency. Black Hunger made no difference between friend and foe. In addition, once the destructive fever subsided, the Black Skaven suffered a violent backlash that reduced him to helplessness for the next few hours. Psody had even heard that some Mighty Ones had died like that, their heart literally exploded.

The most surprising thing about Sigmund was his voice: it was very soft, and when he spoke normally, it was hard to believe that such a reassuring tone could come out of that oak-tree-robust chest. Conversely, when he led his men into battle, his voice became more frightening and stronger than a troll roar. As with some Skaven, his face was not entirely covered with hair; his chin and muzzle, broad and flat like his father’s, were naturally glabrous. Usually, he was careful never to loosen his jaws, because his Black Skaven teeth was more disturbing to the eye than those of an ordinary Skaven. His two long, razor-sharp incisors protruded from his upper lips by a few inches.

Under this appearance of formidable fighter, Sigmund was nevertheless a very sensible person. He was well aware of his strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes it undermined his morale. Fortunately, his parents and his friends knew how to comfort him. He participated in “harvests” for two years, and still had trouble getting used to the plight of Skaven babies.

All Skaven were now dressed again. Jochen fumbled in the second carriage, and came out a collection of swords, axes and war hammers. Soon, each retrieved his personal weapon. Fritz Hafner, the smallest Skaven of the expedition, asked:

- Was all that necessary? On the coming, we crossed the border in secret, without going through the guardhouse. Why not have done the same in the other direction?
- Because the pups trolley wouldn’t have crossed the river by another mean than the bridge. And the waters are too deep and too turbulent for us to dare to cross to swim with babies on our back.
- And... one truck wouldn’t have be sufficient? Adult Skaven could have crossed the river on their
Sigmund wrinkled his nose.

- To let our Human friends between the spears and the guns of the guards?
- They might have been less nervous without our presence.
- Not sure, Psody replied. And with “prisoners”, it was more credible. The bigger it is, the better it passes.
- What if they had become aggressive?
- We could have defended ourselves.
- Even you, locked up and tied in your cage?
- I wasn’t gagged. As long as I can talk, I can use magic. I could have used it against them.
- There were still great risks.
- You’re right, but remember this well, Fritz Hafner: I refuse-refuse to let my children take those risks without me, and that is the same for you, too.

Fritz nodded. This was exactly why each inhabitant of the Rat Kingdom regarded Psody as a true hero.

- Come on, little ones have waited long enough. Gunther, Marjan, Hans, Kit, Siggy, Michael, Kerstin and Ingrid, feed them. Nedland, light a fire for milk. The other ones, up the tents. The night will soon-soon fall.
The Hill of Hope

All members of the band obeyed and harnessed themselves to the task.

Nedland Barnrooster walked off into the forest to collect some wood. While walking, he thought about the reasons which had pushed him to get into this business.

Halflings were not deemed to be great adventurers. The majority had gathered in the province of Mootland, and the few people that leaved their homeland were considered eccentric, mad or enlightened. Generally, these exceptions preferred city life of large, built by Humans towns. Even fewer were those who deliberately refused any sedentary lifestyle to live a life on the highways.

Nedland had not experienced some family tragedy that justified his attraction to the world outside Mootland. Only his curiosity had prompted his departure, as a young man. A few years in the slums of big cities like Moussillon or Sartosa had made him an experienced rogue, able to hold his own in any game containing anything illegal, shameful, or in all case secret.

His life took a new turn when he met Hallbjörn Ludviksson. As he had just needed to get away from cities, following a “small dispute” with the leader of a bandit guild, he had joined the Norscan mercenaries company as a scout. He thus accomplished several trips through the Empire, and to the South Lands. It was during this trip that the Halfling made the acquaintance of Ludwig Steiner. Ludviksson had worked for the merchant in the past, and had agreed to mount a trading post in the mysterious land of oliphants.

The second trip Nedland made on behalf of Steiner definitively tied his fate to ratmen. Indeed, the little man had met Psody, and had participated in the expedition to Lustria. After their return and the Battle of Gottliebschloss the company of mercenaries had accompanied the survivors to the location where was founded Steinerburg, the capital of the Rat Kingdom. As mercenaries, he had helped to build the foundations of the Kingdom. Unlike Ludviksson and his men, he had chosen to stay. The Norscan captain had gone to war to creatures of Chaos implanted in his home country, a task the Halfling had deemed too dangerous and not sufficiently profitable.

What had primarily decided him was the challenge of such an opportunity: to build a kingdom and occupy a prominent place. He couldn’t resist the call of the enterprise. To establish a society in which Humans and Skaven live together seemed crazy, and that’s what he liked the most: to make evolve something as crazy and wonderful at once.

So he had bid farewell to his adventurous life and had settled in Vereinbarung. The prince had named him Grand Cartographer. He had spent all the reconstruction year to draw the map of the kingdom, to organize communication networks between villages, to identify the roads and topography. When the “Harvests” had begun, he was the first volunteer. His experience, resourcefulness and nerve had proved to be valuable assets. He became master in the fight against the Feral Skaven, because with time, he had become familiar with their strengths and weaknesses.

Back at camp, some dry branches under his arm, he wasn’t long to start a fire. A little oil on wood arranged in the middle of a circle of stones and his lighter sufficed. He put a big pot on the makeshift hearth. Two Skaven, Hans and Michael poured into the container the contents of several metal cylinders. It was a thick milk, almost pasty, not very appetizing, but at least nourishing. Marjan and Gunther, a former farmer, prepared a curious device.

It was a kind of huge gourd, made from the udder of a cow stretched on an iron tank. The skin had hardened and cracked, but held firmly.
The contour of the breasts was lined with fur, authentic Skaven fur. An opening on the opposite side to the teats allowed filling the tank with hot milk.

They had to wait until the milk to be at the right temperature. While stirring the mixture with a ladle, Nedland turned to the space the others were up the tents. Jochen gave directives, more out by habit than necessity. There were a total of four tents: a long one where Jochen and Humans could sleep, a smaller one for Marjan and the two other women of the expedition, Kerstin and Ingrid, the third for himself and the three Steiner, and the last sheltered the Skaven. It was not by segregation, but a concern for privacy and respect. Even if they did everything to live in a common society, there were still some limits, and the two kinds had still difficulties to accept such promiscuity, promiscuity that bothered no way the veteran Halfling, used to sleep in any condition.

He looked down, and saw the creamy liquid was seething.

- Hans! Michael! It’s ready!

The ratmen, came, loaded with milk two big fake udders, and brought them to the two Steiner brothers.

Kristofferson and Sigmund took care of the most delicate part of the operation. Young Skaven were not really cute, they stank and hollered, and were surly to the point of biting anything that came within reach of their baby teeth, but they represented the first generation of Vereinbarung, and were very valuable. It was therefore necessary to treat them with the utmost caution. Every little pup had to be fed separately, and two people were required for the manoeuvre. One of them held the infant in his arms, wrapped in a cloth, the other one slipped the artificial breast in its mouth and kept the gourd above. The small Skaven loudly and greedily sucked up to be sated. It was then put in another cart, where were settled the pups which had been fed, and were therefore calmer, and the two feeders repeated the same operation with the next baby.

Gradually, the babies were transferred from one basket to another. The two brothers were assisted by Kerstin and Ingrid, experts in this kind of task. So two pups at a time could be fed. All four put on reinforced leather gloves to avoid bites. They were careful not to mix them, and placed females in a small basket apart. These were always less numerous, even if the Harvesters made all efforts to have a number roughly equal between the sexes. During this expedition, they had found only six, the other was too old and ill-treated for a chance to live fully. Meanwhile, they had picked up thirty males.

False breasts were a true blessing. Fruit of the imagination and the creative genius of Gabriel Steiner, the youngest son of Psody and Heike, they were quickly proved much more effective and practical than serving milk with a spoon. This milk was also one of his inventions. It was a mixture of cow milk and other substances rich in calories, which allowed to quickly feed a small Skaven during the time of the travel up to Vereinbarung. Once a bottle was empty, Hans or Michael got it back and went to Nedland to refill it. They also made sure to put cold milk in the pot when it was almost empty. Marjan and Gunther, meanwhile, watched the comfort of small Skaven fed by arranging the basket, and disposed blankets to keep them warm.

While moving the dirty woollen fabric, the tall woman sighed deeply.

- I swear, Gunther, I cannot bear these little monsters no more.
- These are just new-born children, Captain. It is their instinct that speaks, and nothing else. They will seem much less repugnant in a few months.
- Besides, you know it, you’ve picked up all those who came with us, Jochen added mischievously. You appreciate their company, now, right?
- Yeah, for sure, bro.
But she still winced. Not only were they really not beautiful to look at, but again, seeing those in this constant fear undermined her spirits. Despite the repulsion she could not help but share their distress.

And I am not the only one in this case, she thought seeing the corner of his eye the big massive silhouette of Black Skaven.

Sigmund and Kristofferson finished to give its meal to the last pup of the basket. When the little thing ceased to suckle and spat the udder, Sigmund went empty the last gallons of remaining milk in the pot, then sat down and wiped the inside of the container with a cloth. Fire softly crackled, and its warmth comforted him a while. His brother sat beside him.

- Well! A great expedition with a nice conclusion, I say!
- It was really about time for it to end, Kit.

Kristofferson perceived embarrassment in the voice of his younger brother.

- Something wrong, Siggy?

The great Skaven Black turned to the brown one.

- In five years, more than a thousand babies have been torn from their mother’s side. I know it’s for a good cause, but…

The brown Skaven nodded and glanced to his left. Marjan was separating two pups who threatened to use their weak forces to fight each other. Kristofferson took his younger friend by the arm.

- Come on, it’s over. You’ll never have to endure all that anymore.

The Black Skaven didn’t answer. It was not necessary to remind him of the torment that was the daily life of the daughters of the Horned Rat. Enclosed in a special incubator as soon as they came into the world, they were deprived of any identity. No name, no education, they served only to ensure the survival of the species. When a female came into age to give birth, the Feral Skaven bordered it in a cell, and intoxicated it with warpstone used as ointments, incense and seasonings in food. Within months, its organism was completely out of whack. It became obese, flabby, and could not move its huge carcass.

Warpstone always destroyed the brain first, letting the unfortunate female completely stupefied, unable to think. There was little more than bits of instinct which sometimes expressed. And when the balance of its mind wasn’t lost in the warpstone mist, it was worse, because the poor creature felt only pain and terror. The pain was caused by the decay of its battered body, terror seized it when it remembered its condition.

Feral Skaven didn’t treat their breeders by pure free cruelty: warpstone ointment applied on their belly increased fertility to produce offspring at a frantic pace. A female could give birth to a twenty little pup in a row, pups that were quickly snatched to it before being distributed among the Clans that constituted the burrow. The breeder was then again available to the most deserving male, who had earned the right to mate it. It thus served as a pleasure tool between the paws of Feral Skaven, until it was pregnant again. This terrible cycle was the life of a girl of the Underground Empire.

For Humans like Skaven that belonged the generation of “Liberated”, such a life was definitively not enviable, in any way.

- You look really tired, Siggy, Jochen noticed.
- I’m hungry, especially.
- Excellent observation! Nedland said then. Guys, I need a hand for the grub. Would you help me?

Night had fallen completely. All pups were satiated and finally, a comforting silence settled over the camp. The great Skaven Black rose, imitated by his older brother. Kristofferson whistled and gestured to a small group of three Skaven.

Fifteen minutes later, all the members of the expedition had gathered around the fire. Nedland had added branches to make it bigger. Jochen brought the game hunted in the morning. The Harvesters were glad to return home after a risky expedition.

Psody could not help noticing absently.

- Kit?
- Yes, Father?
- Difficult for Sigmund to go unnoticed, even when he’s not there! Where is he?
- He said he needed to empty his bladder, a little further.

The young brown Skaven noticed a crease of worry cross the front of his father.

- Is there a concern-problem with your brother? He didn’t look like so valiant.
- You know him, Father: every Harvest seriously undermines his morale, even if he knows we are doing it for a good cause.
- He’ll recover. The second part of the work will begin, now-now. We have enough children, in a few years, they will give us children in their turn!
- I still regret not being able to save more of them.
- It’s very hard, I know, but it’s so. There are hundreds of thousands of Skaven around the world, we won’t be able to take care of all of them. Now, we even have enough pups. They will very quickly multiply, if there are more-more numerous, we risk fail to properly handle the second generation. So we have to focus on those.

Psody paused for a moment, then continued:

- We only have a few years before us to lay solid foundations, and to allow the existence of a kingdom where Skaven and Humans can live in harmony. I’m not eternal, Kit. I still have many years to live, but this kind of plan must be thought of in the long term, so that our descendants can continue the work alone.

Kristofferson nodded silently. The shadows projected by the flames emphasized a small detail on the White Skaven: three small notches carved in the pavilion of his left ear; a long, a short, a long. It was the mark of the colony where he was born, visible to all Feral Skaven who had passed their rite of passage into adulthood. These three small scars represented what all of them were fighting against. The young ratman always felt, seeing them, a slight bitterness tinged with admiration for his father, who had chosen to live with that trace that magic could have concealed, and the burden that went with it. He couldn’t see it in the semi-darkness of the night, but Kristofferson knew that the other ear of the Master Mage was decorated with a tattoo representing a simple constellation, the mystical link between him and the Horned Rat, his tutelary deity.

Psody buttoned up his coat and got up in a rustle of leather.

- I’ll fetch him. Start eating, we arrive-arrive.

* *

It took the company three days more to finally arrive at the first guardhouse of Vereinbarung. This
part of the world known as “Renegade Crowns” was actually composed of many kingdoms, each managed by a generally self-proclaimed prince. Before to re-join their own principality, the Harvesters had to pass through two other provinces. Patrol officers and other guards knew the nature of the subjects of Prince Ludwig the First, and even if they were not especially friendly, they closed their eyes. The “crossing taxes” collected at each passage were excellent blinders.

During the rest of the trip, the Skaven needed anymore to pretend being the Feral people of the Under-Empire. Some continued the journey on foot, others preferred to remain settled in the large cage or the small one. Psody was in the lead, sitting next to Nedland while his two sons were watching the truck that contained the little pups. As soon as the first hungry screeches sounded, the whole party stopped and paused.

Finally, the building announcing the entrance to the Rat Kingdom appeared, and with it a sense of security welcome after the long journey. The road passed by a stone fort. Humans and Skaven patrolled together on the walkway. The pavilion of the kingdom floated above the entrance gate. The blazon of the Rat Kingdom wore four symbols, each in a corner of its surface divided into four parts by a central cross. Verena’s owl was in the upper left corner, the bleeding heart of Shallya beat in the top right corner. Under the owl appeared a rat’s head, and a round sun, with the features of a face drawn in the style of Lustrian bas-reliefs, was embroidered on the last corner.

Nedland pulled out of his bag a horn, and blew in it three times. From the top of the wall, one of the sentries answered the same way. The heavy harrow was slowly raised, and the three carriages could get inside the enclosure. One groom untied the horses and lead them in the barn, while other domestic hastened to recover the baskets to carry them carefully inside.

This large building, Hoffnungshügel, was the first decisive step to new life of the small Skaven torn from Feral Skaven nurseries. Priestesses of Shallya, gathered on the occasion of each return shipping, took care of new-borns in the same way as for Human babies. They were gently washed and swaddled in clean swaddling clothes, and everyone ended up deposited in a cradle. The process was a clear symbolic of second birth.

Once all the little Skaven well cared for, adoptive parents entered in turn in the dormitory, chose the child with whom they felt most “related”, then declared the first name to a sworn clerk of Verena, Goddess of Justice and Law. Finally, they walked away with the little adopted and started their family life. The Harvesters returned back home a few days later, time to rest, and once sure of not being followed.

Initially, the names were given by the priestesses and expedition leaders. But for the past two years, Human volunteers to adopt a young Skaven, emboldened by the success of the first surrogate parents, felt closer of the pups even before seeing them for the first time, and preferred to have this privilege. The Prince acceded to the request of his subjects, and it was decided that only the family name of the litter would be chosen by the leaders of the expedition, that precaution was necessary to distinguish the Skaven from the same litter, and avoid consanguinity.

Human parents never came uselessly. Nedland had devised a clever system of communication pigeons-based between the convoy, Hoffnungshügel, and the Steinerburg Main Temple of Shallya, to avoid bad accounts between the number of candidate parents for adoption and the number of collected children. Once they were far enough away from the burrow, they counted the “liberated” and classified them by sex, apparent age and any physical features. Over the years, Harvesters had recovered about a quarter of black Skaven, all males. However, they never found any White Skaven. The message was sent to the fort where the priestesses waited, and they relayed the message to Steinerburg. Prior Romulus then was in charge to gather the prospective adoptive parents and made them escort up to Hoffnungshügel. Humans arrived a couple of days before the
convoy and took advantage of that time to prepare themselves.

Up to this day, there had been too many problems: the case of a couple of Humans left without child, disappointment at heart, never arrived. Once, there were even brave enough parents to adopt not one, but two small Skaven obviously inseparable, probably from the same litter. But the number of volunteer parents became very limited. Prior Romulus had told the prince that was another reason not to organise any "Harvest" more: the surplus could be detrimental to the welfare and education.

Standing in front of all Skaven babies installed in the dormitory cradles, Mother Dorothy was finishing counting them. The mother superior was the main religious authority of the Order of Shallya, after Romulus. This old woman, whose long silver hair waved on her shoulders, wore the white dress adorned with an embroidered heart on which a teardrop was beaded. She had been freshly promoted by the hierarchy of the Grenzstadt Temple, a town on the edge of the Averland, which Romulus had quietly kept in touch with.

- Mother Dorothy?

She turned her head, and her blue eyes met the gaze of a young red-haired girl, who was also dressed with the sackcloth of Shallyans priestesses.

- Yes, sister Judy?

Sister Judy Hoffnung was a special case. This priestess, who was in her early twenties, was rather small, and her russet and abundant hair jarred with her white dress. She had a slightly reddened complexion, clear eyes, quick eyes, and for a reason known to very few people, had a rune that evoked a tear flowing down on her left cheekbone. It was undeniably a sign of the goddess Shallya. This rune glowed weakly when the young woman felt compassion for someone, so there was no doubt about its authenticity. Mother Dorothy didn’t know the secret of this brand, but she knew that Judy was very ticklish on this issue, and still refused to answer. In a general way, her character was like her hair; she was passionate and quick to overreact... which didn’t always please her sisters. Nevertheless, she showed a certain gift for treating wounds and healing illnesses, which earned her the blind trust of her patients.

- I... can I tell you about a concern?
- Please.

- I’m afraid the Skaven of this expedition are a little too numerous. Thirty-six is even too much. We only have a dozen of volunteer couples this time. What to do with all those who will not be adopted?
- The same as for Human orphans; we welcome them, and make initiated for our Order!
- You think the Prince and the Master Mage will agree?
- It’s even their instructions. After all, the purpose of our kingdom is to unite Humans and Skaven, religion is part of this union.

It didn’t seem to reassure the younger sister Judy.

- Are you sure that...

Sister Judy was about to continue, but a heavy hesitation held her back. The Mother Superior realized this.

- Speak without fear, my sister.
- The Skaven are the enemies of Humans all over the world. Aren’t you afraid that there will be a backlash?
- Why? To allow lost souls to give meaning to their lives by transmitting to them the teachings our 
gods have given us? To form friendship bonds with a real people? Remember that Skaven are not 
demons or Beastmen. Meet and converse with anyone of them within the walls of Hoffungshügel, 
and you’ll see that they have a soul and feelings like we have. Since we started this project, my 
sister, no one, no man, no god, has openly opposed it to the point that it becomes dangerous. Look 
at me: I would not be in this position if the priests of the temple of Shallya who ordained me 
Mother had considered me to be a heretic.
- So, we are acting well?
- Nothing has proved the opposite, so far, and especially not Shallya, who only condemns the 
creatures of the Fly Lord. I’m wondering where this worry comes from, given your past, Sister 
Judy?

Mother Dorothy spoke ironically. She didn’t know all the dark corners of Sister Judy’s life, but she 
already knew what circumstances had brought her into the orders of the Goddess of Compassion. 
In her younger years, Judy Hoffnung had been the apprentice of an apothecary known to be a witch 
turned to heretical ways. She herself had aroused the jealousy of academic doctors, reluctant to let a 
woman who didn’t frequent university be more efficient – and the gods knew how much young Judy had talent in the field. It was the direct intervention of Romulus which spared the pyre the 
girl. The prior had heard of her almost supernatural talents, and had been able to convince the 
Sigmarites to let her live, in exchange for Shallya’s vow. He quickly understood that a talented 
initiate with such a contentious character could only be a valuable asset to Vereinbarung.

Sister Judy protested:

- Mother Dorothy, I have always acted according to my convictions, and I have had proof that 
powerful forces make the Empire turn. These forces are above our concerns, far more often than 
we accept to believe. I do not fear a judgment from Shallya. Skaven can be normal people, like you 
and me, and are as trustworthy as Humans. What worries me are the men themselves. They forced 
me to convert to Shallya, they risk forcing us to go to war! When the first adult Skaven will roam 
the Renegade Crowns, who knows what will happen?
- Time will tell, but precautions are taken. And if it is the Empire that you fear, for your personal 
safety, be quiet. Here, no one will come for you.

The priestesses of Shallya, as well as some members of the Order of Verena, were more tolerant 
than the Sigmarites or the Ulricans, and the idea of a kingdom where Skaven were friendly with 
the Humans, although really far-fetched, was conceivable to their eyes. Prince Ludwig the First 
was also part of the Verena Lorekeepers branch, who advocated the safeguarding of all knowledge, 
whether productive or harmful. To avoid any charge of collaboration and heresy, there was, 
however, no official contact, the Prince just used to send a coded missive once every six months.

Mother Dorothy thought about something else:

- You have been "forced"... do you want to leave? If you want to try your luck, you will have my 
blessing. A person with your talent could get rich quickly by opening her own shop. In the 
Renegade Crowns, you won’t have too many difficulties to find a prince to sponsor you.

Sister Judy looked up, with a small defiant smile.

- You know I won’t, Mother Dorothy. I got to know the Prince’s family, and I became attached to 
his members. Here, I’m fine, except for my fear of the outside. And I ended up getting used to the 
shallean dress. Wherever I go, it guarantees respect.
- In this case, everything is fine.

The Mother Superior decided to conclude the interview.
Come on, it’s time to give these children the warmth and love of a home. Bring in the first couple, Sister Judy.

With a thousand precautions, the White Skaven slid into the wooden tub filled with hot water, inch by inch. The contact of the water was a real blessing, enjoyable and relaxing. When he was submerged up to his shoulders, he heaved a deep sigh of relief. He hadn’t taken a bath for several weeks. He sipped with relish the sensation of the liquid seeping into his fur, waving his hair. He felt his spirit descending gradually into limbo, as if he was about to fall asleep. Eyes closed, he could hear nothing but the gentle lapping of the water on his body and his own breathing. Small muscle pain, cramps, stiff neck, a few scrapes, even impedes on his left big toe pierced by a thorn the day before, everything faded. There was nothing but the warmth of the water.

Finally, the last expedition was over. He saw the face of his wife and his three youngest children, and felt joy fill his heart. But then he imagined tighten them in his arms, other elements came to darken the picture.

*The first Skaven brought here are adults now. What will happen in two or three generations?*

Psody didn’t fear the judgment of the gods. He was faithful to the Horned Rat, and was convinced to have his agreement – he had received no divine contestation, anyway. Humans continued to worship their own gods, adopted Skaven did the same. Some Skaven even began to take an interest in Human religion to the point of wanting to completely relate themselves to it. His own younger daughter had indeed the vocation of the priestesses of Shallya.

But if Vereinbarung citizens had the endorsement of the gods, he couldn’t help to doubt they had the Emperor Karl Franz approval, nor the citizens of the Empire. Sometimes he was afraid to see in his homeland an army led by the White Wolves or the Panther Knights to eradicate everyone. Furthermore, the neighbouring princes could also pose a serious threat, and be tempted to attack as a preventive. The Rat Kingdom had a small army to defend itself, but it was probably not sufficient to withstand more than a tentative of invasion in a row. The commander of the army, Johannes Schmetterling, hoped to see more volunteers in the militia, especially in Skaven, who could be formidable fighters when they were well trained.

Each of the relatives of the prince had been appointed to an important post. He had become the appointed Master Mage, responsible for the study of issues related to magic. But he suspected that the prince might employ his capacities for other purposes. More negotiations? Diplomatic missions? Or recruiting people with abilities to handle the winds of the Warp to form them to magical mysteries? For now, he was the only magician officially recorded in the Rat Kingdom. What if a neighbouring prince hired magician mercenaries to sow chaos in his country?

*That’s too bad we won’t live in a forever peace, but then again, who does?* thought the White Skaven.

He thought back to other known countries of the Old World, and their own characteristic problems. Norsca risked more than other by the assaults of the Chaos brood. The Arabian lands were threatened by the undead, Tilea was infested by Feral Skaven, with Skavenblight, their capital city, at the border. Kislev was also subjected to regular attacks by the powers of Chaos, and the particularly harsh climate didn’t tolerate the slightest weakness. Citizens of Vereinbarung least feared an attack from demons or Dark Elves pirates than other countries. Besides, Karl Franz had enough worries to manage without entering into open war with a country of the Renegade Crowns whose inhabitants had no ambition of conquest.
Being in the Renegade Crowns was an extra obstacle for the imperial contingents, and since the official creation of Vereinbarung, there was no crisis. A couple of times, a fanatic inquisitor or a small battalion led by a zealous templar had almost created problems, but these people hadn’t at all the same official support outside the borders of the Empire. It was hardly went beyond a confrontation after which spoilsport were repulsed.

Psody was awakened from his meditation by another very characteristic sensation, his stomach gurgling. He came out of the tub, shook himself, vigorously rubbed his body with a towel and looked in the mirror hanging on the wall.

With his tattoo, Psody’s exact age had been established. He was passing his eleventh year of existence, which represented thirty-three years if he was born as Human. The terrible Feral Skaven society forced the average age to stay low, and the majority of them hardly crossed this milestone. The White Skaven had the opportunity to meet some individuals of this maturity, but none had kept a good health. He felt in great shape, and the prospect of never again leave his family even more lightened his heart. Even if he had participated in several skirmishes, he had not received any serious injury. Even wading in the filthiest underground, not any disease damaged his constitution – although the protective mask system imagined by his younger son had probably a good share of utility in this process. He felt good, and ready to meet all the challenges implied in the management of a kingdom.

He smiled at his reflection, and considered himself well-preserved. His hair was soft and silky, his well-maintained horns gleamed in the light of candles. He thought back to Katel, the old hermit who had saved his life years earlier, and chuckled when he heard her voice that promised him that one day, he would enjoy a good bath. Every time he remembered that sentence, he smiled wistfully.

Sometimes he thought occasionally to the woman who had cared for him like a mother during his convalesce. He had retained her good advice, and had tried to pass on to his own children. He had never known, nor even tried to know, who that strange old woman really was, alone in her hut, retired away from the world, with the stuffed head troll who had killed her husband and children for only companion. This bonesetter had fixed him up using plasters and medicinal plants, then taught him to speak reikspiel, and finally had educated him the basics of Human customs, lessons soon completed by his dear Heike.

The White Skaven regretted not having news from the witch, nor giving her. During his travels in the Empire, he hadn’t taken the time to make a detour through the swamp. And now he would no longer roam outside the Rat Kingdom. Was she only still alive? When they met, she was already old.

*I will send her a letter-missive next time Nedland take news from Imperial Humans!*

Once this resolution taken, Psody, who was dry, repassed a clean tunic, and joined the others in the dining hall, eager to supper.

*After two days of resting, they went back on the roads. Now they didn’t have to care for the newborns, the caravan was traveling much faster. It became smaller and smaller all along the way, as and when the volunteers left the route of the main path and headed to their home village. Skaven couldn’t wait to return home, and they pushed their rides in a hurry. Each departure was greeted warmly, and Nedland Barnrooster, the appointed treasurer, gave the agreed compensation agreed to those who left – the chest containing the payroll was prepared at Hoffnungshügel.*
Only a small group remained when the three carts approached the capital, Steinerburg. The paths came together all at the edge of the walls that encircled the city. Psody, his two son, Marjan, Jochen, Nedland and the few Skaven remained at their sides savoured their homecoming. Since it was market day, the crowd was colourful. Skaven and Humans praised their goods, fresh produce or crafts. On their way, they greeted and applauded. The Harvesters were always sensitive to these signs of recognition and appreciated the ovations sincerely. The most enthusiastic cheers were launched by the Skaven and their adoptive parents.

The first rescued Skaven had all passed the adolescence. Most had started working for the proper functioning of the Kingdom. It became usual to see Humans and Skaven live together as if there were no racial barrier. They began even, in the biggest cities, to mix the two peoples on school benches. Of course, physiological differences couldn’t completely been overshadowed, but all the authority figures, whether they are priests, lawmen or militaries, applied to maintain the principle of racial and gender equality.

The surrounding princes regarded with great suspicion these unusual neighbours. Prince Ludwig the First, aware that he couldn’t long hide the nature of his people, had deployed treasures of diplomacy to convince his counterparts of the good nature of his extraordinary vassals. Some of the princes whose kingdom adjoined Vereinbarung had tolerated this, failing to fully accept it. A prince a little more eccentric than others had even expressed interest and said he wanted himself some welcome Skaven desirous to see new horizons. But the others didn’t like the situation, and relations with them were strained.

This was hardly felt in this wonderful day. Kristofferson felt his heart overflowing with joy when the doors of the wall of Steinerburg appeared from behind a hill.

- Siggy, we’re home!

The doors were wide open, allowing the passage of pedestrians and carts. The convoy crossed them, still circulated a good half hour on paved streets, then stopped in front of a large building. A worker slid the grid, and the three carts stationed inside. Everyone dismounted. Two grooms, a Human and a Skaven, took charge of the horses.

- Whew! My friends, the trip is over! I invite you all to the Beard of Taal, is my tour! the White Skaven announced.

The band expressed his joy, and all went to the hostel deemed as the most festive of the district. A couple of minutes later, they were gathered around a table while the waitress laid on the wooden tankards of beer one by one.

The Harvesters exchanged their impressions on their last mission, evoked the cold sweat, regrets, and all agreed on at least one fact: the satisfaction of having done something right, and above all, never to have to take risks.

A lull hovered above the large dining room. Someone took the opportunity to draw attention.

- Kristofferson!

The person stood up, and his eyes met those of a Skaven rather easy to notice: he was tall and strongly built, without being a Skaven Black – he had the clear coat covered with dark spots. A tuft of long black hair drew a goatee on his chin. He had two big green eyes with naturally raised eyebrows, giving him an inquisitive stare. He wore a breastplate of mail covered with a tabard the colours of the flag of Vereinbarung and strengthened with an iron hull on the right shoulder, and a handy-worked war hammer hung from his belt.
Kristofferson opened his arms, and gave the accolade to newcomer.

- Walter!
- How nice to see you, my friend!
- All the pleasure is for me!

Walter Klingmann was known as the first “Liberated”, and so was both the oldest, the first to be adopted by the Human – a couple of wealthy merchants who had business with Prince Steiner in the past – and in addition, Kristofferson’s first Skaven friend. Both had played together in the same corners, had been instructed by the same teacher, master Karl Seehecht, who had managed the teaching of a dozen young Skaven before opening a mixed school. So you could tell he was in the third place among the best friends of the brown Skaven, after the Gottlieb twins.

- So, Wally? What news?

Walter was the captain of the Steinerburg guard. He had received weapons training as rigorous as Kristofferson’s, and had also been trained to command and urban strategy by a former captain in retirement. He had authority over all the militia of the capital, and disposed a network of scouts who provided the communication of important news from more distant cities.

- The Southeast citizens begin to feel nervous.
- “Nervous”? In which way?
- Well... it seems that disappearances multiply. A hunter, a wanderer used to be seen between several villages... You know the farmers, they are rather superstitious. They put it down to the invisible forces of Chaos, and other elusive entities. They quickly fear what they don’t understand.

The smile of the brown Skaven faded.

- What would you accuse if these fears were well-founded?
- I don’t know. For now, I haven’t done anything yet, but it will be necessary to act, perhaps. One hour ago, I received a letter from Captain Müller, he’s in charge of Klapperschlange barracks. A farmer from one of the small villages of the sector found one of his cows completely cut into pieces.
- I say! A wild beast?
- We don’t know, the poor guy didn’t see anything; no footsteps, not the smallest piece of broken fence, not a single clod of turned ground. According to Müller, the farmer thinks a flying Mutant fell down his cattle. He asked my opinion because he’s not so sure what to do. Well, Müller is a novice, he was newly appointed to this position, and we never had a problem like that in this part of our kingdom.

Kristofferson rubbed his chin while Walter continued:

- It’s probably an isolated incident, but I prefer to check it out.
- Do what you have to.
- Before that, I’d still like to have your opinion: do I confirm Müller to send at least a patrol to keep watch a couple of days?
- That sounds good to me. If ever they spot something wrong, I’ll come myself with a battalion.

Kristofferson turned to his father, who had listened to the conversation.

- And you? What do you think about it?
- Walter is right. Today we have a solid foundation, we must consolidate-maintenance it. Our kingdom has not been aggressed yet, and for me, it is a miracle, given the particular character of its inhabitants.
- Now that we returned, we’ll be able to work on it seriously, Sigmund said.
- Yes, and that’s why we’ll think about your new role, said Psody. You two, and all the Harvesters, you’ve already involved in outdoor-outdoor work. I’ll have a council with the Prince, the Provost and the Chaplain to give each of you a new function that will be profitable to the Kingdom, while remaining consistent-agreement with your capabilities.

This sentence gladdened again the comrades. Jochen laughed when he heard Kristofferson whispering, “after all, home is not such a boring place”.

Home, at last!

- The first “Freed” Skaven begin to have children. This is the first generation of Skaven citizens born here in Vereinbarung. It is a new age that is beginning, which will, of course, involve equally new dispositions. But I know you’ll be able to show yourself capable. As you have understood, your role will be of paramount importance.

The feathers creaked on the scrolls, while the Humans and Skaven who could write took notes.

- You, the Skaven, have all been the first to be raised according to the rules of conduct of Humans. You are the proof it’s possible to take this path. Mind you, you’ll tell me I am too.

There was some laughter in the room. Indeed, the person giving the lesson was not Human by nature, she was a Skaven. For the representatives of her species, she was of medium height, rather stocky, and her light coat formed a mop of straw on her round head. Above her short, flat muzzle, two blue eyes gazed at the world with a kind of permanent detachment. Dressed in elaborate clothes, she was twirling her wand between her slender fingers.

One of the Skaven observed:

- You are even a privileged person, lady Bianka. You were educated by your blood mother, who herself was raised by a Human. And given the character of the Prince, I imagine that Lady Heike’s loving mother’s reputation is not usurped.
- That’s right, you’re right. But remember, my father suffered a harsh education by Grey Seer Vellux. He could have become someone very evil. If that had been the case, my mother wouldn’t have had a life, and me... I prefer not to think about it.

Bianka Steiner was Psody’s third child, and his first daughter. She was also the first female Skaven born in Vereinbarung. Aged a few minutes less than Sigmund, she didn’t have the same features, and didn’t share with him the characteristics of Black Skaven. Not very inclined to action, she was passionate about nature and its functioning, and as soon as she was old enough to understand things, had revealed qualities in knowledge of biology well above average. Her grandfather had bought her by the intermediary of Nedland Barnrooster books on the topic, also a copy of Leiber’s *The Loathsome Ratmen and all their vile kin* too. The girl enjoyed working on this research, and sharing the fruit of her work.

Usually very concentrated, she didn’t have easy conversation; her elaborate phrasing and determination to be always right could put off, and anyone who didn’t know her well could quickly see her as haughty or even contemptuous. But a few times spent in her company outside the professional framework were sufficient to understand she could be very open-minded. Her application was an asset for the function of archivist. She knew it, and her appointment to this post was only a matter of time.

For the present time, she was giving short biology lessons to young Skaven parents, or those who were old enough to become so. Her lessons were also accessible to curious Humans who wanted to know more about their neighbours.

- I’d now like to talk to the Skaven girls. Ladies, you have reached a decisive age, the one when you enter your adult life. The characteristic signs appeared to you. Well, I won’t draw you a picture of “how babies are made”, I guess you already know it. But it is very important to understand that there are differences between the Skaven and the Humans at this level. Today, there are about twenty births if we don’t take into account the Steiner family, and the Prince felt that it was
important to anticipate the arrival of the new generation. What every civilization has done naturally for millennia, we must prepare for it.

Bianka nailed on the wall a diagram showing a Skaven in section, with visible internal organs. As she gave her explanation, the young woman pointed to one or the other part of the drawing with her wand.

- A Feral Skaven breeder raised in a colony is capable of generating an average of one hundred individuals per year. And of these one hundred individuals, still on average, ten of them will be female. These, because of their rarity, are immediately set apart, and will survive – finally, biologically only, I mean well. This won’t be the case for all male individuals. A good third won’t manage to attain adolescence. Depending on the colonies, however, these numbers may change. If there is less food... the strong ones have to eat to stay strong.

There were reactions of disgust.

- Are you kidding, Lady Bianka?
- Absolutely not, Geron. And I’ll even say it more clearly: in some cases, when there is nothing to eat, the Feral Skaven do not hesitate to devour the weakest.
- Even their own brothers?
- The notion of blood links doesn’t exist in the Feral Skaven society. My father paid to know it. They breed to be the most numerous, without paying attention or thinking about the consequences. It is a problem that undermines their society, but it is no so bad, because if they were aware of it, they would be a much bigger danger.
- In which way? asked a curious Human.
- By documenting myself, I think I understood where the problem came from. My own example suggests that warpstone-based treatments have their share of responsibility with it: I was born from a Skaven mother who has not been submitted to excessively large warpstone doses, and who used to live in a healthy environment, with a “good” education, according to imperial criteria. She gave birth to five Skaven, including two females. And, as far as I know, all five are in perfect health. In this example, quality has outweighed the quantity. According to Leiber’s studies and deductions from my grandfather’s research, warpstone impairs the body of females, so that their reproductive organs produce more substances that greatly increase the number of embryos but decrease their reliability. And I suppose there is a direct effect on the nature of these embryos. The future females are perhaps more fragile, and thus destroyed by the warpstone in the maternal matrix; only the most resistant mature. If they were a little more concerned about the welfare of their women, they would probably be far fewer, but healthier, and better organized. It is this lack of organization that prevents them from crushing us under their number, because, technically, they could do it.
- They hope to multiply with their warpstone, but sign their loss at the same time. How ironic! sneered one of the students.

Bianka showed a small smile.

- Warpstone is not the only thing responsible for this loss. What is most cruelly lacking in their society is love. Love of parents we all received, the attention of other family members, the friendship with people who are like us... The society of the Feral Skaven is based on violence and immediate satisfaction. Only the number guarantees their survival. Never forget that, young fellows. Your role is even more important because you will be the first ones in this part of the world to integrate love into education.
- Are Skaven not likely to feel their instincts take over, once become adults? asked a middle-aged Human.

There were some reproachful murmurs, especially from the present Skaven. Bianka’s smile
became more mischievous.

- You would already be dead, if that were the case. And I’m pretty sure that young Humans who would have been raised by Feral Skaven would behave like them. Well, the question doesn’t arise, because the Feral Skaven don’t raise Human babies, they eat them. Whatever, let’s go back to our lesson, if you don’t mind.

“The example of my mother proved it: if the Feral Skaven breed so quickly, it is because they mess up the whole system with their poison. An untreated female, living in a healthy manner, without spending its day in a nursery, will have only one child at a time, after a gestation period of five to six months, with an average of twenty-two weeks. It is faster than Humans, where we observe a period of nine months on average, so thirty-six weeks.”

“The needs of the new-born Skaven are no different from those of Humans, or any natural living being. It is completely dependent on its parents, especially its mother, at the beginning of its life. Like Humans, Skaven women can breastfeed their children before getting used them to eating more varied and more consistent food. Remember that we, Skaven, are carnivorous, by nature. I think that the Feral Skaven exclusively meat-composed diet directly influences their belligerence, and I don’t need to mention cannibalism.”

“So, dear parents, feed your children with breast milk, then with what you eat: fruits, vegetables, fish, some meat from time to time, anyway, but remember that the ingredient the most important thing is love. Lots of love. I know that I look silly, whispering the same chorus to weariness, but remember that’s your role, and that’s a decisive role. You are the first generation of Free Skavens natural parents, it must work, damn it! But I trust all of you, it will work.”

A young man asked:

- Aren’t you afraid of degeneration?
- What do you mean?
- You have collected the Skaven in full litters. The oldest ones start to have their own children. It can happen a male and a female...
  - Hey, say “a man and a woman,” I beg you! cut a Skaven in a pinched tone.
  - Uh... yes, sorry, replied the girl, blushing. I meant “a boy and a girl”, if they are from the same litt... family, and they have children, there is a bad chance to have a situation, like humans: incest gives weak and malformed children. How to prevent this?
  - The same way for Humans, indeed! With the last name. Last names of the Skaven children weren’t chosen by chance; you, Skaven, as you know it, have all been harvested... “freed” from the Feral Skaven burrows. All adopted Skaven received last names whose first letter was the same as that of their birth burrow. If my father had not taken my grandfather’s name, he would probably have been called “Bauer”, “Bäcker”, or any other “B” name, like “Brissuc”, his birth burrow. It is easy to identify who the potential siblings are. The law doesn’t allow marriages between Skaven whose last name would begin with the same letter, to avoid the risk of consanguinity. By necessity, adopted children don’t have the same last name as their adoptive parents. Bah! Your Human parents have made it, we have not really found a better solution, and as it was suitable for all, no need to go further.
  - How many burrows have you visited so far?
  - Me, not any, Verena be praised. If you talk about my father’s expeditions, they explored twenty-four, and we always managed to get a different initial every time. Some expeditions were more successful than others. The largest burrow was Sub-Wissendorf, and the Harvesters picked up over two hundred babies at one time! Many received the same family name, those who had obvious common traits or who came from the same hatchery. It was last year, and this operation required us more than six months of preparation. And don’t worry, we won’t be out of letters, because the current expedition will be the last. There are enough Skaven brought here now. It is time to let them grow on their own, even if it means climbing some expeditions in a few decades if the blood
of the Skaven people gets poorer.
- Unless other Skaven come here of their own free will? someone asked in the room.

Bianka frowned her muzzle.

- Frankly, I have doubts about this question.
- But it remains possible, isn’t it?
- Yes, technically... We have even enacted a law in this sense, a law of acceptance, in case it happens, but personally, I don’t think we’ll see this someday.
- That’s what your father – I mean, the Master Mage Prospero – did, right?
- Yes, but my father is a really special case. First, he’s exceptionally intelligent and daredevil for a Skaven, and he did something that goes against their innermost nature: he asked himself questions. Feral Skaven never question themselves, and that’s why they never progress. When something doesn’t happen as they foresee, they grunt against all the stupidity of the universe, shout at the plot and blame everyone except themselves. Result: they remain ignorant, and do not progress.
- You mean they do not get anything out of their mistakes?
- The simple concept of personal error is completely unknown among the Feral Skaven. But my father is different. He showed a truly unusual strength of character, for he gave up this system of thought and their education on his own. Then, he had the audacity to go to meet the Humans to parley, what no ordinary Feral Skaven would dare to do. Finally, he was very lucky, because he met the right people: Master Felix Jaeger, the poet adventurer, who helped him to see more clearly, as well as the prior Romulus and Ludwig Steiner. The icing on the cake, the latter, who was then a merchant in Altdorf, was keen on the Feral Skaven. He had adopted one of them, my own mother, and it was chance that put her on his road. The mercenaries with whom he was dealing to capture the subjects of his studies on the Skaven did not expect to find a female that day.

There were some surprised murmurs. Everyone didn’t know the whole story of the Steiner family.
A young man asked:

- When you talk about Felix Jaeger, you mean the author of the works with Gotrek Gurnisson?
- In person.
- Did the Master Mage really meet him?
- He did.
- Lucky! Is Jaeger really like in his books?
- You’ll have to ask it to my father. I didn’t have the opportunity to meet him. He left the Rat Kingdom a few days before its official founding, he just came back once to visit my parents a year later, and since then, we have never seen him here again. I wasn’t born on his last visit. All I can tell you is that he showed an uncommon coolness and openness to a human. He agreed to listen to a White Skaven, and their conversation was friendly, which was then completely inconceivable.

The girl narrowed her eyes, and smiled wryly.

- Exceptional individuals with rather close opinions, who met in a completely fortuitous way, all in a favourable environment – the home of my grandfather – then this kingdom... so many particularly rare elements having constituted a sequence which seems to me very difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce.
- It’s a salutary sequence, otherwise we would not be here today, observed another student.

Someone else asked:

- What if two people of different races try to have a child?

Bianka grimaced as she heard this question.
- Well, then... It is true that Humans and Elves are close enough for miscegenation, and that, by blood, the Dwarves could mix with Humans or Halflings, if their traditions didn’t prohibit it. About mixing with the Elves, a Dwarf would rather see his lineage disappear than knowing such a humiliation. As far as the Halflings are concerned, I don’t know anything except that they are not very keen on wealth diversification. But for us, it seems impossible to me. We are too different. We can live together, be friends, build and live in this kingdom, but we can’t go further. Personally, I have nothing against the fact that a Human and a Skaven decide to couple as long as they are two consenting adults, but even if they could have... well, I doubt that the possible offspring is healthy, and I don’t mention the social status. In all societies, the “half-breeds” whose existence has been a proven fact for thousands of years are not very well regarded, so what about a new... “race”? In addition, Skaven age faster than Humans, which affects mind-set and relationships. It is already possible that adopted Skaven die of old age before their Human parents.

Outside, the bell of Verena’s temple, located in front of the school, rang four times.

- No more question? So, the lesson finished for today. We’ll resume tomorrow, at the same time.

The students stood up. One Skaven girl had difficulty leaving her desk because of her advanced state of pregnancy. Her husband supported her. Bianka observed:

- Claudia, I advise you not to go too far from the dispensary of Shallya. The big day won’t be long for you, I think.

- No doubt, Lady Bianka.

- Don’t worry, everything will be fine. I can assure you that Sister Judy is an expert in the art of helping children come into the world. The proof is that she took care of my mother for her last four children, including me.

- Is not she in Hoffnungshügel?

- She is, but normally, she’ll be back tomorrow at the latest. Prior Romulus confirmed to me that the last Harvest should arrive sometime. At worst, he’ll take care of you, and it will be as safe. Good luck!

Bianka found herself alone in the classroom. However, there remained a student. It was a brunette girl with her hair tied in two short braids.

- Did you want something in particular, Wanda?

- Yes, Lady Bianka. I noticed in your remarks something that surprised me a bit.

- I’m listening you.

- Earlier, you said that we were the first to raise the Skaven with love “in this part of the world”. Do you mean that there are other countries where the Skaven live in harmony with humans?

- Well... I hesitate a little to answer you, because it is something that no Human would find realistic.

- No Human would find realistic to listen to biological lessons stated by a Skaven.

- You score a point. In fact, my father and his Human friends have done important research on the subject just before the foundation of Vereinbarung. Yes, the idea didn’t come to them like that, spontaneously. They only reproduced what another White Skaven realized about two thousand years ago.

- Another White Skaven as unusual as the Master Mage is?

- Yes. This one was called Cuelepok. He was adopted by a mystic wise man named Xarkish while he was a tiny pup. This Xarkish lived in the country of Lustria. He was a Slann, a Lizardman. This Lizardman tamed a handful of Feral Skaven to better study and know them, as the Lizardman and Feral Skaven were – and still are – fierce hereditary enemies. But he understood that these tame offspring began to love him the same way children love their parents. Later, growing up, they became useful to their society. Then they took new-borns out of Feral Skaven nurseries and raised
them the same way. After a few years, it was an entire city that lived like this. Unfortunately, the
great Slann leaders didn’t see this well. They eventually ordered the execution of all the tamed
Skaven.

As she was speaking, the scholar picked up a pile of books and left the study room, accompanied
by Wanda.

- Master Mage Prospero found some writings on this story?
- Better, he found the city where it happened. There remained only ruins, but he met the Slann,
Xarkish, who was still alive.
- After two thousand years?
- Slanns can live very long. Anyway, the Mage Priest explained everything to him before letting
him go. The expedition came back with the basics of the project, and enough treasure to cover the
biggest expenses
- Did your father ever think of going back to the Slanns to make other discoveries?
- Yes, but he won’t. The Slanns rulers sentenced Cuelepok to death two thousand years ago. If my
father returns there, they’ll do the same to him, which doesn’t particularly enchant him. They have
already eliminated Xarkish, because he let him leave Lustria. To put the feet back there would be a
suicide. And I doubt that it’s different for the Skaven living here. For the Slanns, we are harmful.

The two women were now in front of a small door that the Skaven unlocked.

- I have to leave you, I have other things to do. But... if you are interested in the subject, and if the
study doesn’t repel you... you seem rather curious, and then smarter than average. Would you like
to work in the field of scholarship?
- You mean I’ll be your assistant?
- If you really like it, perhaps, in the meantime, we will find something to exercise your research
spirit. What do you think?
- That would be exciting! I love history!

Bianka gave a little wink.

- Now we speak the same language!

The little cat purred with pleasure and rolled on its back, its belly deliciously scraped by the fine
hand with fluffy fingers. The picture was amazing for someone who was not used to the life in the
Rat Kingdom: a little ratgirl was lying on the grass, and was maliciously playing with her most-
beloved pet. Cats usually chase mice, rats, and other rodents, and the Skaven, superstitious as
possible, have a phobic fear of felines. Not the young Skaven, who continued to flatter her kitten.
When it planted its small pointed teeth in her knuckles, she just pulled her hand away with a
chuckle, without any animosity. In truth, she was unable to feel any sense of anger, aggression, or
anything like that, against anyone. Nobody explained it, she was born that way, and happily
communicated her good humour to everyone.

The name of the lastborn of the princely family was Isolde. She was the youngest of Psody’s five
children, and the most awake, the most enthusiastic, the most exalted. Two months ago, she had
celebrated her second birthday in Human years, the equivalent of six years for the Skaven. Her
morale was perpetually radiant. You only had to look at her to be in a good mood: she was cute as a
heart, always smiling and amazed, her big green eyes glittering with life joy. Today, she was
wearing a cyan dress that contrasted with her beige coat. One of her favourite clothes, made by the
most expert tailor in the capital, hired for the occasion by his grandfather.
This permanent good humour was accompanied by a desire to help others, so pronounced that it became almost annoying at times; there was no ulterior motive, she really liked to be helpful and to see others happy. Moreover, when she was not studying, instead of playing with most of the other children, she preferred to go to the Shallya dispensary to read the scriptures of the Goddess of Compassion and sometimes she accompanied the priestesses who were taking care of sick people who were not hopeless or too painful to assist.

Isolde’s overdeveloped altruism had somewhat worried her parents, but the prior Romulus had explained that the girl had received the grace of Shallya, apparently. He had already seen young Human children having such a vocation early, and becoming thereafter exemplary priests. Isolde could become the first Daughter of the Horned Rat to teach Shallya’s word. Psody and Heike accepted this idea, and little by little it seemed obvious to them.

For the time being, Isolde was still a little too young to be initiated, but she prepared herself for it. And in the meantime, she continued to play with the cat. Suddenly, the little pet got back on its feet, and flew in a flash. Isolde got up, patted her dress to drop the blades of grass, and wanted to admire the sunset. She hurried to climb the stone steps that led to the ramparts of the family manor.

The reconstruction of Steinerburg began with this district. The great fortified house and the surrounding dwellings were as resplendent as during the former beautiful days of the kingdom. The dwelling was on the highest hill of the plain, and dominated the whole city. The workers had added an annex to the main building to accommodate the staff, as well as a greenhouse, a stable and a large park. Indeed, the park was really huge, especially for a child of this age. Her mother had explained to her that her grandfather, the Prince, had lived in a property whose garden was much smaller.

She found herself on the walkway. She knew that her parents didn’t like her to walk around this high place, but she promised to herself not to stay more than a few minutes. The star of the day was gradually descending towards the mountains visible in the distance. A few clouds left orange streaks in the sky, and the first stars twinkled, silver pinheads in the velvet celestial vault.

A characteristic noise pulled the girl out of dusty poetic metaphors. She looked down, and saw horses advancing towards the entrance gate of the Steiner estate. Her little heart raced when she recognized her father and brothers at the head of the procession. Quickly, she ran down the stairs, and rushed to the mansion.

- Mother, Mother! They’re back! Father is here, and Siggy, and Kit!

She burst out like an imp in the living room, where her mother was sitting in an armchair.

- Mother! The expedition is here! They are all home!

Heike Steiner rose without haste despite the intense relief that untied the knot of his stomach. Nobody knew how old she was, even though it was suspected she was close to her White Skaven mate. In the eyes of the latter – of all who knew her, in fact – she was the epitome of gentleness and love. Physically, for a ratgirl, she was beautiful: a fine face with quiet features, short incisors under a pointed snout, large green eyes, a graceful body, harmoniously proportioned, fine hands with soft and racy fingers. Her coat was cream-colored, with a large brown spot coming up along her left thigh to her flank. She was kind-hearted. Despite her fragile appearance, she had a rather strong constitution, and having given birth to five children had not affected her health.

Isolde threw herself into the arms of her mother, mad with joy.

- Quick! Let’s welcome them!
- Yes, my angel, let’s go.

The Skaven mother didn’t seem to share Isolde’s happiness. The overflow of joy of the little girl diminished.

- Mother? Is something wrong?
- All is well, Isolde. Let’s welcome the men.

Again laughing and shouting loudly, Isolde left the living room and rushed to the entrance gate.

Jochen smiled slightly as he heard the little girl’s shrill voice.

- Ah... I think someone is waiting for you.
- Jochen, I propose we take care of the horses. That way, we’ll leave the family to his reunion.
- All right, sis’.
- Your mother is probably waiting for you, too, Nedland observed. I’m going to accompany you, I’ll present her my report.

The two Humans and the Halfling each took two horses by the reins and went off to the stable. Isolde appeared at that moment. She leaped first to her father.

- Father! Finally! You came back!
- Hello, my sweetie belle! You grew up again!

The little girl kissed the White Skaven for a long time, then turned to her two older brothers. Kristofferson was the first to receive a hug. Then Sigmund lifted her effortlessly, and threw her into the air with a loud laugh before catching her and hugging her against his heart.

It was then that Psody found himself facing his girlfriend. She stood still, a few yards away. Her face presented an indefinable expression, which greatly troubled the White Skaven.

An awkward silence then imposed itself. Isolde, perched on the shoulder of her brother, felt her heart squeezing again with worry. Since she was born, her father had often left many weeks in other countries to fetch Skaven. Each return was a day of celebration and rejoicing, and her mother was always happy to see him come back. But this time she did not show any joy.

Would Mother be angry against Father? she wondered.

The two big boys didn’t know what to think, either, and dared not say a word. Psody was the first to break the silence. He took a few steps towards his companion girl, then when he was in front of her, he clumsily said:

- Well, I’m back-back.

Without saying a word, the Skaven embraced her mate. She whispered in his ear:

- Are you satisfied, now? Or do you plan to go back on an adventure?
- The only adventure that I intend to live now is life at your side, in our home-home, in the heart of our kingdom.

The ratwoman saw in the eyes of the White Skaven that he was sincere. Finally, she smiled, and kissed him more frankly, under the cheerful glance of their three children.
They all headed towards the mansion, when Psody stopped.

- How’s Father?
- Very well, even if he happens to tire a little bit sometimes.
- Now that we’re back, we’ll be able to help! rejoiced Sigmund. I am very happy!
- Me too, Siggy! exclaimed Isolde. I was afraid of not seeing you anymore!
- But why? asked the tall Black Skaven with an astonished tone that sounded wrong.
- Because... because... you could get skewered by a Feral Skaven!

Sigmund burst out laughing.

- No Feral Skaven can beat me, sweetie belle! I am the strongest!
- And then, you know, there was not so much risk! With Gab’s gas globes, we force all these idiots to sleep, and we can do what we want without danger!

The White Skaven then asked his mate:

- How’s Teresa?
- It’s okay. These last days, she has been rather sulky. She missed you.
- I’m going to say hello. Bianka is at home?
- No, she’s at her desk, but I think Romulus has a double of the key. He is in the library.
- I join-join you right away.

The royal estate library was unquestionably the largest in the Rat Kingdom. Prince Ludwig the First had always been rich. He was the sole heir to a family of the imperial high bourgeoisie, he had been able to take advantage of his parents’ inheritance to the point of having an important commerce of various goods, from the simplest to the most luxurious. Over the years he had earned enough money to own a property in each of four largest cities of the Empire, Altdorf, Middenheim, Talabheim and Nuln. Six years earlier, he had to hurriedly leave the capital; Grey Seer Vellux had set fire to his house, and the fire had caught the attention of the guard. The merchant had managed to leave the place without being surprised, but he had to abandon all the stuff that had not disappeared in the flames.

His faithful servants had taken away a part of his fortune vaulted in Nuln, to cover the costs of the trip to the Renegade Crowns and pay the first restorations – the estate he had bought was then ruins. During this reconstruction, he had sent other servants to discreetly recover his possessions remained in the Empire. Gradually, he had restored the bulk of his wealth, including his collection of books. The works destroyed at Altdorf had been gradually replaced, notably the few works dealing with the Skaven according to the point of view of the imperial scientists.

One book in particular was considered as the master piece of the library. It was exposed on a display stand it never left. It was entitled *Encyclopaedia of the Children of the Horned Rat*, and bore three signatures: Ludwig Steiner, Prospero Steiner, and Romulus. It was a treatise speaking in the most neutral and complete manner of the people of the Under-Empire, written by the three men after long months of work. It was on this book that the prior Romulus was inclined.

Romulus was the official chaplain of the Rat Kingdom. He approached with serenity his fortieth spring, and every day, he thanked his goddess tutelary, Shallya, for allowing him to live according to his heart, for all these years, despite all what he had already gone through. Medium-sized, his blue eyes, his brown hair were gradually fading away with short silver locks. Small folds, signs of years, appeared gradually on his peaceful, clean shaven face. He respected Shallya’s commandments to the letter, which implied exemplary sobriety and moderation, so his physical
condition remained good, and his clean, orderly white coat concealed a well-maintained musculature.

The men were a minority in the Order of the Goddess of Compassion, but Prince Ludwig the First, who considered him somewhat like a son, judged that he was worth at least three ordinary men, and appointed him minister of religion of Vereinbarung. It was his task to make sure that the word of the gods of the Empire was properly spread. Shallya was not the only goddess worshiped in the Rat Kingdom. In second place was Verena, the Goddess of Knowledge. Then, according to the different places of the kingdom, there were different tendencies: the peasants prayed mainly Taal and Rhya, gods linked to fertility, nature and harvests, the traders relied on Handrich, and the workers of the big river which crossed the country followed the precepts of Manann. Everywhere, small temples housed the priests of Morr, the god of the dead. Sigmar was adored only in a very anecdotal way.

Each official religion had a leading representative in the kingdom, which regularly reported on his activity with Romulus. Each representative also held a position related to the teachings of his god. Among the Prince’s closest associates, one of them was Verena’s chief priest, Prior Tomas, who was also the Provost Marshal. Tomas was not only a magistrate, but also a member of the Order of the Lorekeepers, and the main contact with the Lorekeepers who remained in the Empire. The gods Taal and Rhya, mainly worshiped by peasants and other rural dwellers, also had their representatives. Even Morr, the god of Death, had an entitled prior, old brother Wenceslas.

Since he had made his vows, Romulus had never regretted one or the other of his decisions. It was he who established the first friendly contact with Psody, thus creating without suspecting the link that now justified the existence of the Rat Kingdom. Every day of collaboration with him had been more exciting than the previous one. He was a priest of Shallya, but worked regularly with Verena’s clergy. Knowledge was one of the keys to good communication, and therefore peace.

He never tired of re-reading the encyclopaedia from time to time, remembering with nostalgia the circumstances in which the text of this page or this page was written. This book was a reproduction, the original notes collected by Steiner had disappeared in the fire of his mansion in Altdorf. The three scholars had managed to recompile all the notes taken before, while adding some passages. The result was a source of pride for them.

The clatter of the doorknob that was lowered pulled him out of his reverie. He looked up at the door. He saw then the horned silhouette of his friend. He stood up with a big smile.

- Prospero! You’re back!
- Hi, Romulus!

The two men hugged each other.

- So, this expedition?
- No problem. No injuries, no danger. We have just fallen on suspicious-suspicious guards at the border, but gold has a magic power: when it appears, it opens the doors and closes the eyes, provided it is there in sufficient quantity!

Psody had spoken with a gesture resembling that of a magician casting an incantation. The two friends laughed together.

- Sister Astrid told me that you had harvested more than thirty individuals!
- Most of them will be borne by the Shalleans. We are short of adoptive parents.
- Bah! We have enough of them now. It’s time to let them live their lives as citizens, and let nature do what must be done. It will still be possible to repeat some Harvests in a few years, to avoid
seeing the blood of the Skaven becoming too poor.

The White Skaven noticed the illuminated cap on which the prior’s reading had stopped.

- “Skavenblight”... This chapter is surely incomplete-incomplete. Too bad I have never been there. And now, it’s way too late-dangerous.
- It would have been necessary to question an inhabitant of the capital. Maybe we should send a spy, one of these days?
- Hey, wait! Not so fast! We have just returned!
- You are right. And I suppose you do not intend to leave?
- I love my wife and my children, Romulus. I have been too long-often absent. From now on, I stay here. There is plenty to do for me. If a Skaven wants to go play the spies in Skavenblight, he will, but I won’t.

Romulus spotted a small spark of determination in the pink eyes of the Master Mage. He took the opportunity to tell him of his relief.

- It’s good to see you again, Prospero. You know, your wife and children were about to lose their temper, due to this situation.

Psody frowned, thinking back to the hot and cold reception Heike had given him.

- You think so?
- Heike didn’t dare to talk about it, but some mornings, I could see that her eyes were red with tears. Bianka always worked twice in your absence to think of something else, just like Gabriel, who only left his laboratory to eat fast and sleep a few hours before getting back to his plans. As for Isolde, she came every morning to the temple to pray for your return. Sometimes, she couldn’t finish reciting her prayer without crying.

These words inflicted a deep pain on the White Skaven’s heart, like a whiplash.

- Why didn’t anyone tell-explained to me? I knew it was not easy for them to see us go on a mission, but I did not think it was so hard!
- We had to avoid make you feel guilty, and lessen your energy. You needed all your resources to make the round trip and brave all the dangers. Members of your family, like your friends, like all those who left the Empire with us, are convinced that we are fulfilling a noble quest: to build a kingdom where Humans and Skaven are equal and live together. Ludwig claims that our goal requires sacrifices. He’s right, and we all agree with this idea, but the pains are hard to bear. Even if, with time, the Harvests became safer with Gabriel’s weapons, the fact remains that it was periods of absence longer and longer, with always the risk of an unforeseen event... and a tragedy.

Psody caught his breath. For him too, the backlash would be difficult to endure.

- And I didn’t realize that... I suspected, but I should have seen how serious it was.
- Come on, all this is over, now. A new page will be able to be turned.
- First, I’m going to put things right back as soon as possible.
- A wise decision. I really invite you to take time with your wife and children. Do not think of anything, stay together for a few days, take care only of yourself, and everything will be clear.
- Do you think my father can manage the kingdom without us? He seems tired.
- Sure, he’s getting old, but the situation is pretty quiet right now. I think he can reasonably grant you a few days. I’ll talk to him about it.
- I thank you. In the meantime, can you give me the key to Teresa’s room?
- Yes, of course. She will be delighted to see you again!
The prior handed a large iron key to the ratman. The latter greeted his friend and took leave of him.

The White Skaven came out of the mansion and headed for a small building apart. It was a tiny cabin, barely big enough to hold a room. The windows had bars, the door had a solid lock. Once again, Psody felt the taste of bitterness coming back into his mouth.

*Now that we’re back, we’ll have to change that, too-too.*

While turning the key in the lock, he remembered the events that had led the Steiner family to rearrange the recess where the gardener used to put his tools.
The other homecoming

It’s been a few years since Psody, Nedland, Jochen, Marjan and the others regularly went down the burrows to retrieve small Skaven. But today was a special day: for the first time, Kristofferson and Sigmund were part of the expedition. Sigmund had not quite reached adulthood yet, but by his nature of Black Skaven, he was already taller than his brother, even taller than Marjan, who was not short though. Sigmund had insisted on being part of the expedition. His mother had naturally worried, and the White Skaven had finally accepted on the sole condition of taking not the slightest risk.

Also, Romulus and Nedland had spent a week brewing enough dormant gas globes to lull the entire population of a small colony. And while the three Skaven were preparing to descend, Nedland came out of the tunnel.

- That’s it, I checked. Your plan was great, Psody. I trapped all the chimneys, and I just went for a ride. They are all sleeping like marmots!
- Perfect. My children, your first Harvest will be in the Brissuc colony!
- Why this one, Father? It’s not the closest to the border!
- You’re right, but it’s the one where I was born. So that’s the one I know best. It is not very big, so for a first try with you, it should be easier. And then... I have an account to settle with the Skaven of this colony.
- I thought it had been annihilated by the Empire?
- It was a long time ago. According to the Lorekeepers, some fugitives didn’t have the courage to go too far-far, and returned once the Imperialists left.
- They are still few, said Nedland. I imagine that, as the village just above was razed by the Sigmarites, there are not many resources to exploit to feed them. If I followed Psody’s plan without a false note, I gassed the places we’ll be passing. Other areas have not been affected, but we won’t have to cross them. And if Skaven hidden in these districts come for us, they’ll be asleep in a few seconds.
- Good. Let’s get ready!

Jochen opened a bag. Immediately, a strong odour infected the nostrils around. The Human went out one by one pieces of rotten meat.

- It stinks!
- It’s a lesser evil, Kristofferson. If we don’t smell like them, we’ll be spotted when they wake up. The fragrance of rotten meat is common in the burrows, it will make us impossible to track. We must not take unnecessary risks if we can avoid it! Rub it on your clothes!

Kristofferson hesitated a while, but finally obeyed, imitated by his brother. Once all impregnated with the smell, Psody looked at his two sons in turn.

- Listen to me: our goal is to bring back Skaven children, especially girls. The youngest must be selected in priority, because they’ll be the least degenerate-contaminated by warpstone. Above all, remember that we probably will not be able to take them all away. It will be very hard, I know it. You will feel bad, you may feel guilt. Unfortunately, that’s the way it is. We can never save everyone. Let’s try to save those who are most likely to live healthy lives. If it can help you choose, remember that the unhealthiest are probably already condemned by warpstone. They could contaminate others. Just leave them there. We are not yet able to cure warp diseases.
- And... what about the mothers? Sigmund stammered.

The white Skaven turned to his son, and looked him straight in the eyes.
- We’ll have to abandon them.
- Wh... what?
- You didn’t think we would collect them too, did you?

Sigmund raised his arms to heaven.

- How monstrous! Do you realize what we are going to do?
- That’s what we do for a few years, my dear. That’s how we brought your classmates.
- Do you mean we separate the little ones while they are still in their mother’s arms?
- What did you believe? Do you imagine the little Skaven would be picked up in the burrows of the different Clans, and would follow us nicely-wisely? No, it would be too late. They are conditioned as soon as they leave the nursery. The Pestilens are immediately infected, the Eshin mutilated, and some Masters Mutators like to experiment on the smallest, because they are defenceless and their loss-death is not a tragedy.

Psody’s second son was stunned. He could barely hear his father’s voice continue his explanation:

- We must take them while they have not yet separated from their mother. And we have to abandon her on the spot. It is impossible to take the ratmothers. The little ones may be afraid, you’ll have to endure-bear their cries. That’s what will be the most difficult. If that can help you not to think about it, Sigmund, remember that the breeders usually have marmalade instead of brains. They don’t notice anything.
- I... right.

Psody paternally patted the shoulder of his son.

- Come on, don’t forget we’re doing this for a good reason.

Then he spoke again to the group.

- I’ll do a check on those you pick up. With luck, they all will be viable. Remember: those who are clearly in poor health will have to stay put. Anyway, even out of this burrow, those ones will not live long-long.
- Are you sure there’s no way to cure them?
- No, Kristofferson. This is the first step in natural selection among the Skaven. From birth, the fight-perpetual fight begins.

Psody paused for a moment before adding:

- I probably wouldn’t have crossed this step if I had been an ordinary Skaven.
- What do you mean? Sigmund asked.
- Have you seen how I am built? Life in the fresh air and healthy food have pretty much fixed me, but before that, I was very sickly. Any one of my five brothers could have broken me in two in the leap of our mother’s side!
- Especially Uncle Chitik!

The children had never seen their father’s older brother, the huge Black Skaven, the first-born of their siblings, but Psody had talked them a lot about him. He nodded.

- Without a doubt. Fortunately he loved me hugely. Let’s go! Remember: we only kill to defend ourselves, and only if there is danger.
- Are you sure we cannot kill one or two of them? Nedland grumbled.
- As savage as they are, they are living and intelligent beings, like us! Marjan protested. It would be behaving even more cowardly than them!
- And then, these are not true warrior methods! Sigmund added.

The Halfling growled.

- Yeah... You make a point, little black rat.
- Good. Masks! Put on your masks, Psody ordered.

Humans and Skaven donned airproof metal helmets, with a long spout containing a poison filter, and thick lenses to protect the eyes. Marjan was the first to descend into the burrow, followed by her brother and then Nedland.

The other Humans had just disappeared. Kristofferson was sitting on the edge of the hole, ready to drop there, when his father put his hand on his shoulder.

- Kristofferson?
- Yes, Father?
- You know I do not oblige you. If you want to stop, we stop everything, and we leave. If something happens to you, I’ll never forgive myself... and your mother will be upset against herself all her life long. Sigmund, that’s the same thing for you too-too. If you have a bad feeling, we go away.
- That’s what Mother wants, that’s what I want too, responded the eldest son of Psody. You had the courage to give up their society, and we can live a better life. Now, it’s up to me to do something so that others have a brighter future than the rape pits or the life of a scavenger!
- I agree! Sigmund added. They don’t scare me, and I want to save the children.

The White Skaven put a hand on the neck of his two sons.

- I don’t know if I’m right, but I’m proud of both of you! Come on, follow me!

And the three Skaven sank into the depths of Niklasweiler Hill.

They walked along the tunnel for long minutes. Kristofferson heard his father’s voice, stifled by the mask.

- The first time I saw the outside world, I went through this tunnel. I was with my five brothers.
- And you go back to your native burrow through the same tunnel. It was written.

When they reached the end of the tunnel, they saw Nedland and Marjan waiting for them.

- Jochen went further with the others, explained the young woman.
- I think they won’t have too many problems, if they are all like this one.

As he spoke, Nedland tapped with his foot an inert body. It was a Skaven, spread out at full length, snoring loudly. The two brothers remained motionless in front of this show. Indeed, for the first time in their lives, they were observing a Feral Skaven.

- Ugly... Damn, it’s ugly! Kristofferson winced. I have never seen anything so unsightly!
- Still, a similar blood runs in your veins, Marjan reminded. You should talk about him as an intelligent being rather than a repulsive thing.
- Yes, I know, but it’s... look at it! It’s filthy, malformed, it has bad scars everywhere... even its face is aggressive!
- Don’t be so complaining, will you! With your mask, you don’t suffer the smell! sneered the Halfling.
Psody planted himself in front of Kristofferson.

- Marjan is right, Kristofferson; never forget that you could be one of them. Feral Skaven are different in manners, but you must not regard them as inferior creatures. It would be to enter into their game-delirium, they who believe themselves above all other peoples, while they live below. But also remember that if they are our equals on the physical level, there is no comparison-similitude about the social behaviour.
- Psody? Your son’s gas may be effective, but it only has a limited duration, Nedland recalled. It would be better to start!

One of Jochen’s men ran out of a tunnel.

- No one on that side, Master Mage.
- Good. Follow me, I will open-open the march!

They joined the other Harvesters who had stayed with Jochen, and the whole company hounded the White Skaven.

For long minutes, they crossed dark galleries. The Skaven naturally saw well in the darkness, and thus the underground hoses were never well lit. Some of the men in the group held up torches.

Sigmund was surprised.

- I didn’t think the tunnels could be so big, and so tall!

The vault above them rose about fifteen feet above them.

- It is necessary, also the Rats-ogres or the Technomages war machines can circulate!

As they plunged into the depths of the colony, the Harvesters came across more and more asleep Feral Skaven. Sigmund had a gag on seeing one of them, who had many signs of illness: rotten teeth, many festering wounds, buboes on the parts of its face that were not hidden by black bandages of filth glued to body fluids... Psody put a hand on his arm.

- It’s a Pestilens. Do not get too close, it can be contagious.

The tall Black Skaven hurried away. He mumbled:

- They all look unhealthy, or have injuries as if they spent their days fighting each other.
- That’s what they do. Let’s turn right!

Psody led the group to a huge room at the bottom of which a construction for the least strange could be seen: a sort of temple made of odds and ends, with a steeple that seemed about to hit the rocky ceiling. The White Skaven pointed to another hole in the wall facing them, on the other side, leaving the building on their left.

- Is it a temple for the Horned Rat? Kristofferson asked.
- Yes, son, and that’s where I was named Grey Seer, and I ate warpstone.
- It looks rather in ruins.
- It was not already in very good condition when I left, but now... Without their spiritual leader, they left everything in disuse. The only one who could have maintained a few coherence was Master Assassin Tweezl, but if he had any brains left, he had to use them to run away the fastest he could.

They didn’t hang out. Jochen observed:
- So far, so good, but I still wonder if we don’t risk crossing Skaven able to attack us?

Nedland explained:

- Gabriel’s gas was tested on a band of Orcs. Do you know how strong the Orcs are? And yet, they stayed unconscious for more than six hours. And it was in a meadow, in the open air! Do you imagine in these poorly ventilated caves?
- Let’s hope it does not kill them.

Suddenly, the great Black Skaven realized:

- Wait! These are grown up, but what about babies? They are more fragile!
- The nursery is isolated from the rest of the colony. You’ll see, first there is a large room with drafts, and then there is a watertight door. Hey, this is the most important place in the burrow, with the most valuable-precious resources inside!
- Yes, but they will breathe the gas, when we go back to the galleries!
- That way, we’ll have peace for the first few hours, Marjan mumbled.
- But it’ll kill them!
- No, Siggy, don’t worry. This gas is not deadly. I had the same fear-fear as you at first, but Gabriel did an experiment on rats. They slept longer than the Orcs, but had no problems. Since we use this technology, everything has always been very good. On the other hand, there is a risk that there will still be a few ratwives still awake.
- They expect to see us arrive?
- Not necessarily. Sometimes they stay a couple of days without a visit. But anyway, they will not oppose resistance. Be careful, it’s going to be steep.

The company tumbled into a large cave. They couldn’t see the ground, for an obscure chasm was tearing the earth to an indistinguishable depth. A complex network of rope, wood and copper bridges stretched over the void. Jochen thought of a monstrous cobweb in which scattered pieces of material would have intermingled. A warm wind came up whistling from the immense natural well.

- Hey, Psody, are you sure it’ll be tough enough? worried Jochen, not reassured.
- I am. Aside from the Skryre Clan inventions that use warpstone, everything the Feral Skaven builds is functional-functional, even if it does not look like much.

The White Skaven engaged on the bridge. The metal creaked under his toes, but the construction didn’t move. A few minutes later, the whole troop was on the other side of the chasm.

They were now facing a large round metal door.

- I forgot that door.
- Ah... Yeah, good. And how do we come in? asked the Halfling.
- This rope, next to the door, maybe a bell? Kristofferson suggested.
- Possible, said Jochen.
- The gas probably has not penetrated so far, Nedland observed. Let’s get ready!

The Human grabbed the noose, and pulled. The clinking of a bunch of bells echoed through the tunnel. Nobody moved. All stood ready to action. At the end of a half-minute, some mechanical rattling sounded, and the door slowly opened in a long squeak.

A Skaven of rather small size, but with a huge belly, was standing in the circular frame of the heavy door. It was surprised to see a procession of Skaven, Humans and Halfling all masked.
- What the…?!

It didn’t have time to finish its sentence. Sigmund lunged at it and punched it on its muzzle. The ratwife crashed against the wall with a short squeak of pain, slid to the ground and didn’t move anymore.

- That’s old Garog! chuckled the White Skaven. This puffy slimeball has not changed!
- There was already that ratwife when you left?
- He even gave me birth! He got on well to live so long! Right, let’s go! Kristofferson, go take a tour of the cells. If there is a Feral Skaven mating, neutralize it. The others, prepare the baskets.

The hallway into which the entrance opened contained ten doors, five on each side. All had a small opening. Jochen quickly inspected each cell, peeking through the holes.

- No riding Skaven!
- Right. Little ones?
- Yes, they are not very numerous, we will be able to take them all, if it is.
- Good! It does not surprise me, they must have lost all consistency since the disappearance of Vellux.

Psody turned to Sigmund.

- I prefer that you stay here, rather than see the nurseries.
- Ah?
- Yes, really, it’s a really nasty show to watch, and you’re still a bit young for that. The next time. Stand guard, you never know.

The Black Skaven didn’t protest. He squeezed the pommel of his sword on his belt a little harder, and faced the tunnel towards the cave.

Psody crossed the threshold of the circular door, walked down the hall, glancing through the openings. The Harvesters had already begun their work. They acted with speed and precision, always in groups of two: one carried on his back a large wicker basket with straps whose interior was lined with fabric, the other took small Skaven, usually placed on the huge belly of their mother, and put them carefully in the basket. As Psody had explained, they were careful to select only babies which looked healthy. Over time, they had learned to distinguish those who had the best chance of survival, but especially to close their hearts and ears. Others, less solid, had not borne the heart-breaking cries of the young rats that were torn from the breasts of their genitals, and could not participate in more than one mission.

The White Skaven saw his eldest son come out of the back cell.

- There are no pups in there, just a breeder.

Psody wanted to take a brief look at the creature by acquired consciousness. He passed his head through the door, and suddenly froze.

A female Skaven was lying on foul straw. Naked, chained to the wall by a heavy iron collar, she didn’t seem to be very old. She looked haggard, and gave a silly laugh as she saw Psody. She had not yet become huge and deformed. Her hips were a little wide, probably she had already given birth to two or three litters, but she was still relatively fit. Her warpstone treatment had only recently begun. But that was not what shocked the White Skaven.

She leaned on her hands to straighten up and flickered her eyelids. Their eyes met through the lens
glass of Psody’s mask, and he recognized a presence. A presence from the bottom of the ages, who had once called for help, and who he had fetched.

- Father? Father? Kristofferson called. We have them all. Let’s go!
- Not without her.

The brown Skaven had a start of surprise.

- Huh? But, Father, you said that...
- I know what I said, Kristofferson. But this girl goes away with us.
- Wh...
- Do not argue, please! The others will soon-soon wake up. Go get your brother, he’ll carry her. Come-come on!

Any discussion was useless. Without waiting, Kristofferson dashed. A moment later, he was back with Sigmund.

- Kristofferson, go help the others. Sigmund, can you free her?

The tall Black Skaven approached. The girl didn’t react. She remained crouched and motionless while Sigmund wrapped the chain around his arm. The young ratman pulled with all his might. The chain was rusty, and didn’t resist very long. Sigmund then heard a slight rustling, and felt a hot liquid moisten his naked toes.

- You must be kidding...

The female giggled happily, without being aware of having indisposed her saviour.

- You could have warned me, if you could not restrain! Sigmund reproached her.
- Sigmund, her mind is shattered. She is hardly more aware than a poisoned-intoxicated infant! Now, give her a meatball.
- You want me to... oh!

The Harvesters always had on them a few spare drugged paste balls, if they needed to quickly anesthetize a Skaven. Sigmund pinched the female’s snout, she squeaked, her mouth wide open. With his other hand, he stuffed the soporific into her throat, and held firmly with his both hands her jaws closed. The female roared, and swallowed the dough. Sigmund released her. She stepped back, trembling with panic, then wobbled, and her eyes closed. The Black Skaven caught her by her armpits, and remained motionless, not daring to make the slightest abrupt gesture. His father wanted to reassure him.

- Don’t worry, in a few hours, she’ll wake up and have forgotten everything. The gas will have her asleep anyway, so we lose less time. Let’s go!

Sigmund gently took the Skaven girl in his arms, and both left the cell. They joined the other Harvesters. Some seemed surprised, but no one objected. Already Nedland, Kristofferson and Marjan each carried a basket containing a few small pups. Everyone hurried to the exit. Once outside, they boarded the chariots and left Niklasweiler as quickly as they could.

They didn’t stop until after dark, a dozen hours later. They had to tie the girl to the bottom of the cart to avoid losing her. She didn’t seem determined to flee, besides too surprised and dazed by what she could see. The outside world was something completely new to her.
The company, gathered around the fire, was silent. Usually, each harvest was followed by a meal where the pressure of the previous hours fell. All the men and women remembered with a good laughing the most intense moments, to relieve the nervousness experienced. If there were losses, they were solemnly honoured. But this night, no one said a single word. All that was heard was the crackling of the campfire, the wind in the branches, and the whistling of their strange guest who slept soundly.

Psody stood up, and decided to give the explanation everyone was waiting for.

- When I quitted the Brissuc colony, I left ten children behind me. Kristofferson, Sigmund, you have ten half-brothers, all from the same litter. I don’t know if any of them is still alive. I don’t know their names, nor their faces. But I didn’t care, it’s part of the education-mentality of the Feral Skaven that I applied myself to follow. One evening, shortly before my... “banishment” from this burrow, I met three little girls. They were prisoners of the Chaos wizard Aescos Karkadourian, and I felt for the first time empathy. It was my first contact with children, pure emotions. They were terrified. They were counting on me to get them out of their jail. I felt it. I brought them back to Vellux. The next day, he explained to me that two of them, the older two, were no longer good at producing pups because the wizard had already experimented on them. So he had dissected them alive, without hesitation, to study them better.
- How horrible... Sigmund murmured.
- What happened to the third one? Oh, I understand! Kristofferson realized, looking towards the cart.

The pink eyes of the White Skaven shone in the semi-darkness of the twilight.

- I don’t know if this poor girl is effectively the baby I tried to save. When I saw her, she was really young, she had been born only a few weeks earlier, maybe a month. It is unlikely to be really the good one. But there still remains a chance, the age matches. I abandoned my first ten children, I abandoned this unfortunate kid, I refuse to abandon her again.
- Are you sure it’s the same? Nedland asked. However, the imperial troops completely cleaned this burrow after Gottliebschloss. They would have spared her? No way!
- You’re right. I think instead that they have not taken the time to search everything, remember that the nursery is isolated from the rest of the colony. The ratwives probably stayed hidden there during the battle-purge. And even if it’s not her, I would have given a Skaven girl a chance, which I have not done before. Anyway... yes, when I think about it, I really think she’s the good one. Behind the warpstone vapours, I felt her fear, it’s the same one that attracted me to Maraksberg that famous night. And I wonder if she did not recognize me?
- She only saw you a few hours years ago, when her intellect was not developed enough to constitute memories, and you really think she can recognise you now?
- It’s not intellect, Marjan, but instinct. Skaven trust a lot their instinct.
- And you have an idea of what you will do with her? Do you intend to adopt her?
- No, Jochen. I’m afraid she’s a defective-defective all her life long. I don’t feel able to take care of her, especially to the detriment of my own family. I will entrust her to the Shallya priestesses. They will know how to take care of her.
- Priestesses always need happy simpletons to wash their clams, if I can speak so, Nedland said ironically.

Finally, there were a few hesitant laughs. One of the Skaven asked:

- Master Mage, do you know her name?
- Feral Skaven do not bother to give names to their females. No name, no identity. No identity, no soul.
- So how are we going to call her? Sigmund asked with his deep voice
Psody shook his head, to finish chasing those painful memories. He entered the room, closed the door behind him. The Skaven’s eyes quickly got used to semi-darkness. He could see inside the room: two beds, a table and two chairs. Everything was tidy. No dangerous objects were within range. There was no one. At first glance. He said aloud:

- Hello, Teresa!

A burst of laughter answered his salvation. Something stirred under one of the beds. The White Skaven winced a tense smile.

- Do you want to play hide and seek? Where are you?

A rustle of fabric sounded, and a form leaped from beneath the furniture with a long cry of joy before falling on Psody and hurling him to the floor, on the carpet.

- Psody, home! Psody, home! shouted the apparition before getting up again, bursting out laughing again.

An unsuspecting visitor might have panicked or lost consciousness, but the Master Mage was used to these enthusiastic bursts. Teresa seemed to be in good shape. The young ratgirl had grown since her arrival. Better treated and feed than at Brissuc, she appeared in good health. Her coat was brilliant, maintained at best, considering the difficulty of any hygienic operation on her. Psody sighed, looking a little better at Teresa’s dress. The Skaven girl had completely ripped it apart.

- Oh no! You should be gentler with your stuff, my dear!
- Gentler? Gentler!

Teresa leaped on the table, then jumped to the bed, arms outstretched, as if to imitate a bird. She crashed on the mattress. The bed, a solid construction, held firm.

- Magda will have to fix your dress! It’s not funny to arrange your foolishness, Teresa!
- Funny, Teresa, Magda... Psody! Teresa happy Psody home!

The girl yawned loudly. She sat down on the bed, and amused herself rocking her tail from left to right. The White Skaven took place beside her. With a slight chuckle, she dropped her head on his knees. Understanding what she was waiting for, Psody began to caress her head, gently. He lowered his eyes.

- I’m glad to see you in such a good mood.

But he couldn’t hold back a tear. He knew that the Feral Skaven had poisoned the unfortunate with large doses of warpstone incense, and her brain had been greatly altered. She would forever be that chirping creature with intellect as limited as that of a little child barely able to articulate a couple of words. Heike recognized herself in her, for she had known the same fate, except that she had escaped the medications of the Sons of the Horned Rat. His adoptive father, Prince Ludwig the First, was convinced that one day Teresa would wake up, and acquire at least a little maturity, but the White Skaven had serious doubts.

The mere fact of keeping her in this little house was for him something very painful. Feral Skaven kept their layers permanently, never allowing them to leave their cells. The case of Teresa was
different: several Human women volunteers, as well as Bianka, took turns to be always with her. They tried to educate her, while ensuring her safety. Indeed, Teresa was a small child in an adult body, and several times she had almost caused an accident. And when circumstances intermingled in such a way as to oblige the girl to remain alone, she had to be locked up in this little house equipped with the bare minimum to reduce the risks. Normally, every night, there must always be one of the women volunteers to occupy one of the two beds.

The less sad thing was that the girl didn’t seem to suffer. Admittedly, being shut up alone unaccommodated her, but as soon as she was outside or accompanied, she immediately forgot her sadness. She was perpetually amazed, often laughing loudly, and her good humour was quickly shared by people willing to show a minimum of patience.

She looked up, and asked, looking unusually serious, and a little worried:

- Psody leave again?

He could smile at her sincerely.

- No, my Darling. I finished my job outside. Now I stay at home.

Teresa gave a cry of joy and dropped to the bed. A moment later, she snored loudly, her mouth wide open. It was as simple as that. The White Skaven got up, left the room on tiptoe.

When he was outside, he saw someone waiting in front of the house; that was Magdalena, the most faithful servant of the Prince. This generous blonde woman has been serving the Steiner family for over a dozen years, and was Heike’s confidante. She had no equal to look after children, Human or Skaven, and had helped the couple on many occasions. And now, she was the one who watched over Teresa’s well-being.

- Oh, hi Prospero! I knew I had seen Kit from a distance!
- Hi, Magda! Teresa is asleep-asleep.
- I’ll take over, the Prince is waiting for you to report.

The little ratman handed the key to the Human, and returned to the manor with a good step.
The glow of the candles flickered, and the room was lit up by the light passing through the stained-glass window. This large surface of pieces of glass of all colours joined together by the leaden sticks stood twelve feet high and eight feet wide. A very impressive work, which had required long months of work to the best craftsman of the kingdom. A magnificent work, glittering with details more applied than the others, and so numerous that an untrained eye could not perceive them all at once.

The chapel was rather small, but comfortable. The floor consisted of varnished planks covered with a soft and precious carpet. A single wooden bench faced a sober altar. Under the stained-glass window there was a small wooden tabernacle with two shutters.

Sat on the bench, Master Mage Prospero Steiner prayed in silence. He had wanted to take the time to thank his god for the success of the mission before reporting to the sovereign of Vereinbarung. He looked up at the stained-glass window, embracing the picture as a whole.

A green plain extended along the lower part of the stained-glass window. Two lines of characters stretched across the width to meet in the centre. From the left advanced Humans. They wore clothes of all kinds. And the line that went from the right to the middle was consisted by Skaven, the first ones naked, then those joining the Humans dressed like them. The two peoples mingled amicably under the watchful eye of a character above the gathering. It was a silhouette wearing a cape made of multi-coloured feathers, with hidden features under a round and golden mask. Two horns emerging on each side of his mask could be distinguished, at the height of the temples of the individual. Finally, on the upper part of the work appeared an immense Skaven, with two pairs of horns: a pair rising towards the heavens like the attributes of a goat, the other with the protuberances curved on themselves like the horns of a ram. At Psody’s request, the representation of the Horned Rat should not inspire fear or disgust. The god sported a neutral expression, and raised his hand above the crowd, as if to show respect to the mortal people, if not to protect them.

The artist was inspired by an engraving discovered by Marco Colombo during one of his travels in Lustria. The temple of Tixoco housed an immense relief painting in the same scene, except that there were no Humans, but Lizardmen. In addition, the head of the Horned Rat, god hated by the followers of the serpent-god Sotek, was not there either.

In Vereinbarung, the cults followed by Humans were practiced as in the Empire. The law permitted the veneration of the gods of friendly peoples, such as Grungni, Kurnous or Esmeralda, although there were not yet enough faithful prayers to give them an official presence. On the other hand, it was forbidden to follow the word of other gods decreed as “evil”. The four gods of Chaos, in particular, were the subject of an as ruthless anathema as within the Empire. And the Horned Rat was forbidden, too, because he was filled with rage and hatred towards Humans, according to the testimonies. This god was also an aberration for the inquisitors of Sigmar, he proved that the “Beastmen” could have a “grotesque parody of religion”... and question the authority of the Grand Theogonist.

The Master Mage’s gaze lingered for a moment on the masked figure. It was Cuelepok, the first known White Skaven to have been educated differently than by the brutal and selfish way of the Feral Skaven. Cuelepok had lived two thousand years earlier in the city of Capatec Hanahuac. Collected by the priest-mage Slann when he was just a new-born, this White Skaven had been the symbol of a hope, that of a society where the Skaven would live in harmony with another people. Such a personality had unfortunately troubled the powerful Slanns who condemned him. Cuelepok
was also a Skaven definitively in total contradiction with the sermons of the imperial churches.

The stained glass also contained a secret that ended the chapel as an unspeakable heresy: the two green eyes of the Horned Rat were actually two small splinters of warpstone. The only two fragments of warpstone in the whole area, indeed the whole country. Psody knew it. At least, he hoped.

This work of art thus constituted a blasphemy, a crime which would quickly precipitate on the pyre the craftsman, the Prince who had made the order, and the Master Mage, only practitioner of the cult of the Horned Rat of the kingdom. Psody had been very clear about this when his adoptive father asked him the question. Yes, he was still faithful to the Horned Rat. Yes, he would continue to pray this god daily and listen to his delivered messages through visions. No, he would never pass on this belief. The White Skaven was convinced that the tutelary deity of the Under-Empire was addressing him differently. Or was it him, Psody, who was misinterpreting? No. The Horned Rat had shown him Capatec Hanahuac, and had permitted him the communication with Cuelepok, through space and time. To his knowledge, Psody was the only one to have a peaceful interpretation of the Horned Rat’s speech. He had no support from anyone to support this extravagant practice of the Feral Skaven religion. Moreover, the idea of creating a new religion didn’t please him at all.

So, he had agreed with Prince Steiner to keep the exclusivity of these beliefs. He didn’t hide his loyalty to the Horned Rat, but didn’t display it either. He was also the only one to frequent this little chapel, forbidden to anyone other than him. Anyway, this prayer room had been built in secret, and it was impossible to access it other than through a secret passage concealed in his office, in the middle of his private apartments. It could not be accessed from the outside, the stained-glass window led into a small concealed courtyard in the middle of the building, and the various rooms and corridors were arranged so as not to raise suspicions about the configuration of the building.

The religion of the Feral Skaven remained his exclusivity. He had formally forbidden his own children from listening to the Horned Rat in any way.

He lowered his eyes slightly to the tabernacle, and saw a slight golden glow escaping from the gap between the two shutters. The last secret, the biggest treasure of the White Skaven, was stored in this box. This treasure had allowed him to win a definite victory against Grey Seer Vellux, and since then was preciously stored in the handiwork box.

He closed his eyes, and meditated. He murmured his gratitude in his native language, not without taking pleasure in it. Although he had lived alongside humans for six years, even though he had rejected the way of life of the inhabitants of the Under-Empire, he had not completely denied his identity.

After a moment, he felt his heart lighten, as if, unconsciously, he had felt the approval of the Horned Rat. He raised his eyelids, got up, extinguished the candle under the stained glass, and left the place of worship.

* Heike Steiner enjoyed the last rays of sunshine on the stone bench facing a large pool in which stood proudly a large ornamental fountain, with statues of deer, fish and other animals. The monument, which had its own water circuit, was the favourite place of the young woman. It was a gift from her father, who had tapped into his personal funds to hire one of the most renowned Dwarf engineers. The result was neatly amazing. Every time she passed by, Heike could not help but stop for a few moments in front of the building.
Mixed feelings still made her heart sway. The relief of seeing her companion and her two older sons in good health, the fear of thinking about the risks involved, the joy of thinking about the happy couples who would take care of the little Skaven, and a hint of anger at her father and the White Skaven, feeling she considered purely selfish.

- Well, my friend, here you are!

Heike gave a little start, and turned to the voice.

- Oh, sorry, I did not want to scare you.
- It... it does not matter.
- You seemed lost in your thoughts.
- Nothing worthy to be mentioned, Franzseska.

Franzseska Gottlieb was the mother of Jochen and Marjan. Widow of Wilhelm Gottlieb, a local lord of Middenland slaughtered by a Feral Skaven – she had never known it, but the knife had been held by Klur, one of Psody’s litter brothers, she had almost shot him down – this Human had the same features as her daughter, more accentuated. She was very large, solidly built, with eyes sparkling with a cold sapphire blue to freeze flames, and a long, golden mane.

This imposing Human had a particularly strong personality, and knew how to be respected as well as a war chief. Prince Ludwig the First had made her his intendant. As a former lord’s wife, she had all the qualities to assist him in his reign. The Prince had not neglected his adopted daughter, however, and Heike had his share of responsibilities in the princely hierarchy. In truth, the two women regularly attended each other.

The character of Lady Franzseska had changed a lot since the death of her husband. At first, like a vast majority of Humans, she tolerated the representatives of the three friendly peoples, and didn’t hide her contempt for other races. When she first met Psody a few months before the murder of her husband, she had firmly positioned herself in the camp of those who wanted to execute him. But in contact with Heike, met in a cage where she had been locked up with her children by Grey Seer Vellux, she understood that the children of the Horned Rat could be Humans too.

And so, Franzseska and Heike became very good friends. Like Magdalena, the housekeeper had also helped the young ratwoman in her role as mother when she had her first child, as well as the two following ones. Since their installation in Vereinbarung, no secret had been erected between them. And Franzseska had no trouble seeing the emotional state of her Skaven friend.

- Is something wrong? Are you crying?

Heike ran her fingers over the fluff that covered her cheek, and felt embarrassment kindling her face.

- Is it... is it all over?
- What? Ah, you’re talking about the Harvests?
- Psody told me he would not leave anymore. I didn’t dream it, did I?
- Jochen and Marjan assured me the same thing, just like Romulus. There are enough kids now. I assure you that Psody’s words could not be more real.

Heike hugged the Human.

- It’s really finished. It’s about time! I couldn’t bear it longer!
- You have stood firm, and now we have no more reason to worry.
The Skaven woman wiped her eyes.

- You know how I felt. Your children too risked their lives.
- And I’m doubly happy to see them again, now that I know they will not take any more risks. We have no reason to cry anymore.

She made a small sign of the chin, with a smirk.

- Here! Your man is coming!

The little horned ratman was approaching the bench.

- Lady Franzseska! You seem to be in good shape-shape!
- You too, considering your last getaway!
- Oh, it was easy! Thanks to your children and Gab’s weapons!

Lady Franzseska’s smile faded. She could not help a reproaching tune alter her voice.

- It was not easy for us, you know.
- That’s what I understood, my lady. But I promise you that we will do everything to make up for lost time, he hastened to add to the attention of his companion. We will spend more time together. Besides, I really want to allow Teresa to join us!

The young ratwoman had a slight hesitation.

- Hum... after all, why not? She too was yearning for your absence. And any activity that will stimulate her brain will benefit her.
- No doubt, but why absolutely want to take care of Teresa in particular? Still this feeling of culpable responsibility towards him?

Franzseska knew the nature of the relationship between the White Skaven and the young cripple. Accustomed to his franchise, Psody didn’t react to this question.

- By Ulric’s beard, you should go ahead, Psody! What happened to this girl is not your fault! You couldn’t take her with you when you fled your burrow, it’s a fact! You wouldn’t have been able to take care of her, anyway!
- I’m trying to convince myself, but I still feel that I didn’t manage to save her when it was time. If we had intervened earlier, Teresa would not have suffered such treatment.
- That’s true, but it was the first time Kit and Siggy had been involved in a colony attack, Heike said. They had to be well prepared, without haste. And then, the women take good care of her, too.
- Your daughter Bianka, in particular, has a lot of patience, Master Mage. This experience will train her to when she will have her own children. I’m sure with attention and love, Teresa will eventually progress. We cannot save them all, you say it regularly. But in my heart, I feel that we can save her.
- May your Shallya give you reason-reason, Dame Franzseska.

Meanwhile, Kristofferson and Sigmund had rested, washed, and dressed in fresh clothes, before finding their younger sister, at the study of Verena’s temple, accompanied by Isolde, who had wanted to make the journey with them. Bianka welcomed with the same relieved joy that her mother’s her two older brothers. She hugged the tall Black Skaven longer. Indeed, by their twinnness, a special bond united the two children of the Master Mage. Unlike any other person in the Rat Kingdom, Bianka could say anything on any tone to the Black Skaven without the slightest
embarrassment, and without risking anything from him.

- So, big ninny, finished playing heroes! It will be the last Harvest!
- Eeyup! No need to worry, sis’. But I feel that I already miss the action. I’ll leave tomorrow.
- Are you kidding me? yelled the Skaven girl, half amused, half serious.

Sigmund didn’t answer. Bianka looked questioningly at Kristofferson, who remained silent, then at Isolde. The little girl was wringing her mouth in a tight pout to help laughing. Bianka looked up at Sigmund. He looked marble, but his sister saw that he was biting his lips.

- I was sure of it! exclaimed Bianka, slamming Sigmund’s neck. Dumbass!

The Black Skaven replied with a loud burst of laughter, immediately imitated by Isolde. Kristofferson looked falsely sorry.

- Well, are you done? Father and Mother are waiting for us for dinner.
- Let’s go!

Bianka quickly put away the few books she was holding on her desk, adjusted her clothes a little, and all four left the room. Sigmund brought little Isolde up on his shoulders. Along the way, they continued the conversation. The researcher mumbled:

- I didn’t believe you for a second, Sigmund.
- What?
- Did you really think it would work? Don’t give me that bullshit! Every time you go on a mop in the Empire, you sulk! So you would never have been in a hurry to leave unless you took a head trauma, which doesn’t seem to have happened.
- That’s right, it’s true, sis’. I have no excuse.
- So, you should be glad to be back, and not to leave.
- I am glad, sis’.

Bianka hurried to walk on the same pace that the tall Black Skaven.

- Still, you don’t look like someone happy and relieved! Looks like you swallowed a whole Goblin vomit pâté!

Isolde burst out again laughing as she visualized the image. She was the only one.

- I have the feeling not having been to the end, sis’.
- What do you mean? We got enough kids, right? All requesting parents are satisfied, and the "extra" children will be entrusted to the Shalleans. Everybody is happy!
- I’m thinking about the mothers... the real mothers.

Kristofferson spoke.

- Sigmund, you know that’s the way things are, and we cannot do otherwise. And do not forget that we were able to save a girl or two from time to time.
- When I remind the unfortunate prisoners we had to leave on the spot, that makes me really sad.
- Why not save all the girls? asked the little last one of the siblings.

The tall Black Skaven sighed.

- I really want to, sweetie belle, but it’s not possible. We could only board the youngest. First because the breeders are so fat, and weigh several hundred pounds. Five hundred, six hundred, sometimes more. Evacuate one of them under the nose of the Feral Skaven and transport it to home
would be very difficult and dangerous. We even saw burrows where the females were put in cellars with exits just large enough to let pass thin ranuques only. It was Nedland who could find them, given his small size of Halfling. They had been put there, then fattened and treated with warpstone, and had become too big to get out! If the burrow crumbled, they were doomed to be buried alive!
- How awful, muttered Isolde.
- How stupid, especially! exclaimed Bianka. How can they hope to have decent descendants if the strongest and most enduring males cannot join the layers and mate with them? Unless they have found a way to fertilize them by implanting the seed artificially, of course. Well, I prefer not to imagine the methods of extraction or insemination.

A short embarrassed silence followed this statement. Bianka didn’t mince her words, and sometimes used very graphic expressions without taking care of young ears like those of her younger sister. The entrance gate of the family home was now in sight. Kristofferson continued:

- Anyway, it would not have changed anything. Feral Skaven do not hesitate to abandon their females behind them if they are forced to flee, and even without being tied, the layers are not able to go far on their own.
- And then there is another problem, added Sigmund. Even if we managed to bring one here... what would we do with? At such a dose, warpstone has irreversible effects! The brain of these poor girls is nothing but compote, in addition to being completely amorphous. Have you seen Teresa? It’s only the first phase! The ones we saw went much more gaga than she does! Only miracles that would be Shallya’s direct interventions would do anything about it. But we could not possibly treat them at this stage.
- Yes, but at least they would be free.

As they crossed the park, they saw their mother waiting for them near the gate.

- It is not said that they would stop suffering among us, considering the fact their bodies are completely upside down, Bianka explained. Their bones and organs are crushed under the weight of their fat, their bowels make knots, their lungs are completely shrivelled, and only the warpstone prevents them from feeling the pain!
- What are you talking about? The mother Skaven asked, taken aback.
Bianka cleared her throat.

- We were talking about breeders in the burrows. I was explaining that it was unfortunately not possible to treat them completely yet.
- The only way to end their suffering would be to finish them off, but I do not dare, said the brown Skaven with bitterness. As weak and impotent as they are, they are innocent living beings, and I am not an assassin.
- And that’s what makes the difference between them and you, you must never forget it, my children! said Heike in a peremptory tone. Well, it’s getting late, we’ll have supper soon. This will be an opportunity to celebrate your return! Your grandfather has planned everything.

For this evening of festivities, the Prince had organized a party to which all the Harvesters and their families had been invited. All those who had participated intensively or episodically in the great population operation of the Rat Kingdom would therefore be thanked as they deserved.

Several large tables had been erected in the very garden of the Steiner property. The cook had to ask the hiring of half a dozen clerks to help him prepare for the banquet. The meal was hearty: roast beef, poultry, sausages and seasonal vegetables delighted the guests. Beer and wine flowed several times into the glasses, and the name of the monarch Ludwig the First was continually
honoured.

Some stomachs had to pause when the cheese platters were brought, cheeses all more tasty than the others. Finally, the desserts were served. Men and rat-men tasted fine pastries, of the kind rarely seen more than once a decade. Many guests discovered new sensations by tasting sweets for the first time.

During the whole supper, a complex platform, made of carved wood and provided with velvet curtains, had been built by the Prince’s servants. And when the first stars began to twinkle in the night sky, a girl lit, one by one, small candles aligned at the edge of the removable stage. A drum roll sounded, immediately catching the attention of all the guests. The curtains, however, remained closed despite the copper cymbal strike.

There was a surprised silence in the audience. Silence broken by a clear voice that burst among the guests.

“It is often said that life is an endless dance. A comedy played from cradle to grave, a huge joke that would not stop making us laugh. If that were the case, then I would rejoice, because it would mean without a doubt that I would be doomed to have fun, to laugh at everything with everyone. I would be chained to amusement. I would be prisoner of joy and good mood. Can we imagine a better cage?”

The clear voice belonged to a curious, tall and thin individual. Standing between Nedland and Jochen, he had slipped noiselessly between the two men, during the drum roll, thus sparing his entry and the beginning of the show. He was dressed with a motley costume, decorated with checks of all colours, and a soft feathered hat. His face was covered with a white mask adorned with silk, with a long straight nose, and two small disks of smoked glass hid his eyes.

Heike felt her heart beat wildly as she recognized the character. Without needing to know his face. This voice, this presence, this particular physics, so many features that, once gathered, could only define no one but a particular person.

Yavandir!

Yavandir Palebough was an Elf. He didn’t correspond so much to the general idea that Humans made themselves of this people. Far from the tribes inhabiting the forests of the Old World, this eccentric man had spent his whole life in big cities. The Skaven woman knew nothing of his youth, even less his family. His fine manners and phrasing, however, foreshadowed a well-groomed education in a comfortable environment. She suspected, with the touch of romanticism that characterized her, that he was the bastard child of a merchant prince of Ulthuan settled in the Old World. Or was he from a wealthy family he had voluntarily got rid of to live a carefree life of itinerant artist? Unless he was the disappointed hope of a lineage crushed to ruin? Maybe the answer was under his mask. She had never been able to see what the artist really looked like. He always took care to conceal his face in a more or less elaborate way. Currently, the mask he wore covered his entire head. Small holes in the mouth let pass his clear and cheerful tone.

The mystery remained for everyone, especially the young ratwoman. Why such a secret? Had he been horribly disfigured by accident or torture? Was he born so ugly? Or on the contrary, did he have the face of an angel? Maybe he was the look-alike of someone important? Was this face, never to be seen in the open, the key to an incredible enigma?

Yavandir Palebough had not only a mysterious face and a remarkable voice; dozens of years of training had made him a seasoned contortionist, able to leap like a cat over long distances, and in general, he always moved with grace and lightness.
In an instant, he was standing on the table. He jumped from one foot to the other as he walked towards the stage, and stopped half-way to lean toward the crowd. He resumed his tirade in a grandiloquent tone, his hand raised to the stars.

“Of course, life always has its painful moments, and myself, I happened to wish to see it finish. Admittedly, yesterday’s enchantments too often give way to today’s disillusions, and end in the sorrows of tomorrow. But the sum of all these tears is far from equalling the value of the intense pleasure I experienced while living, especially during this strange day that I will now talk to you about.”

Once again, the artist balanced to the stage. He was so agile that he allowed himself to perform a few pirouettes without touching any cover, or hit a guest. When he was standing on the boards, the curtains opened on a set. Other comedians were in place, and the show began.

It was an intense, wonderful, enchanting moment that lasted an hour and a half. The play was the last dramatic comedy of the famous author, Detlef Sierck. The Prince knew that his daughter loved works by this playwright, so he hired the Elf, who in turn had assembled a troupe to perform this show.

Like most of Sierck’s works, the story fused family tragedies, suspense, romance, action, and finally concluded in a happy ending, and the artists showed such talent that the most sensitive people were still crying with emotion when the artists saluted, under the loud applause of the assembly.

Gradually, the guests withdrew, some alone, others in small groups. Yavandir Palebough approached the Prince.

- Your Highness was too good to allow a vulgar low-level artist to perform before such an honourable public!
- Come, my friend, no false modesty. We both know that you are an outstanding artist, capable of entertaining princes! And you proved it, once again.

Steiner gave the comedian a big purse, heavy with gold crowns.

- Here, it is up to our appreciations.

Yavandir weighed the canvas bag. He had no trouble understanding that it contained at least five times the initially agreed remuneration. He greeted with a bow.

- I will spread the word that Prince Steiner is fully worthy of his title.
- Your talent will always be welcome here, Palebough. Come back when you want.

The Elf wanted to take leave in his own way. He took out a whistle from his pocket, climbed on one of the lampposts, and blew in with all his might.

- Ladies, gentlemen! Under applause, it’s time to break up!

Immediately, the other actors and musicians of the troop rushed and gathered at the foot of the lamppost. Yavandir fell back, arms outstretched, and his friends caught him up. They led him to the exit, singing a short chorus.

From Nippon to the Empire,
We sing, we laugh for you, sure!
From Norsca to Arabia,
We serve you the best comedia!
And so the little band soon disappeared from the sight of the remaining guests.

Once near the entrance to the estate, Yavandir dismounted.

- Well, a good thing done. Come on, we’ll leave tomorrow morning at the first hour. You will find me at the market place.

The artists separated on these words. As the Elf returned to the nearby inn where Steiner had reserved a room for him, he heard Heike’s clear voice calling him back.

- Yavandir, wait!

The comedian turned on his heels.

- Well, little mouse, not sleeping yet?
- I wanted to say you goodbye.

The Elf approached. Heike saw that he now wore a simple mask, which hid only the upper half of his face. The young ratwoman was able to distinguish in the semi-darkness of the night the sparkling brilliance of his smile.

- It will always be a pleasure to see you, Heike. I’m leaving tomorrow, but I’ll be back one of these days.
- Are you going on tour?
- Yes, my reputation has finally reached the ears of the princes around. They want to discover the show. But I guarantee you were the first to see our version of this play. And as it has not been played out of the Empire yet, to my knowledge, you were the first to discover it in this part of the world!
- It’s been a long time since we had party like that, Yavandir. It was truly a magical moment. You and your comrades are enchanters!
- This magic would not have acted without the participation of the spectators. This is the alchemy that composes a successful show: the most important ingredient is trust, which creates an exchange between the artists who give and the spectators who receive. Spectators give in turn when they react, and artists receive these reactions, whether positive or negative. And tonight we only felt joy and wonder.
- And our gratitude, Yavandir, be sure of it.

The artist then made a gesture with his right hand. A second later, he was holding a large bouquet of flowers that he offered to Heike.

- Reciprocal gratitude, little mouse.
- Yavandir, please ... before leaving, can you... could you tell me... why? Why are you hiding behind these masks?

Yavandir’s smile curled into a small pout.

- This is the first time you ask me this question, Heike. Why now?
- Because you may never come again? The Renegade Crowns are dangerous lands, it is not advisable to walk long distances.
- So you worry about me? That’s nice of you, but useless. I’ve spent decades on the roads, I’m used to it. I recognize that the roads of the Renegade Crowns are full of new adventures, but I have no problem with this.
The spleen-woman gave a little sigh, and confessed with a sorry smile:

- I have no doubt about it. Okay, you’re right, it’s not worry, but... a selfish curiosity. You have a wonderful voice, a poet’s soul ready to laugh and make the others dream, so why hide your face? I’ve known you for a long time, you saw me naked, you took care of me while I was a terrified child, I have no secrets for you. I’m not asking you to reveal me all your life, but can you at least show me, once, how you really are? I promise you that I won’t do anything disobliging!

Yavandir gave a benevolent laugh.

- I don’t have any doubt on it, little mouse. You have all my confidence. But my face is the only thing I cannot show to anyone. I assure you there is nothing awful to see, or anything like that. It’s just that it’s been so long since I cover it according to my fluctuant mood that it translates less my personality when it’s exposed. This is the way. Can you respect that, even if you do not understand?

- I think so. I’m sorry if I thought you were indiscreet, but... I had to ask. I will not ask you that question again.
- Don’t worry. One day, maybe I’ll explain to you. In the meantime, live your life. I had a lot of pleasure to see again your father and your husband.
- I talked a lot about you to our children, too. They were delighted to meet you!
- I’ve been too, they were all very nice, the four of them.

Heike felt his muzzle frown with perplexity.

- Four? But... ah, I see.
- I promise you I’ll come back sooner than you think!

The ratwoman kissed the artist one last time, then they parted.

When she returned to the property, the workers finished dismantling the platform. She looked for her companion, and finally found him.

- Psody?
- Yes my darling?
- Yavandir has just told me that he only saw four children. I don’t understand. Where is Gabriel?
- Hum, that’s right, I did not see it in the evening! Hold on…

The White Skaven hailed in turn his younger son.

- Siggy! Where is your little brother-brother?
- Well, wasn’t he with Mother?
- Nobody saw him!

The Black Skaven saw his sister. He asked her:

- Bianka! Do you know where Gab is?

She answered with a slight sigh of contempt.

- What? You’re not aware?

The White Skaven felt a slight unpleasant tickling titillate his stomach.

- Aware of what? he whispered.
- He had another crisis last night. And he started designing a new machine. He has not left his
laboratory since. Well, just a moment, the time to take a piece of bread and a bowl of soup.

It was the turn of the Master Mage to utter a sorry sigh.

- I’ll go talk to him. Perhaps he didn’t even realize that we came back-back!
Confessions

The property where the princely family lived was huge. Built on the highest hill on which Steinerburg had developed, it had little to do with the ruin that the Prince and his subjects had found on their arrival six years earlier. The Steiner Mansion consisted of three large adjoining buildings, each of which was four floors high. The central building was the largest, and the most important: it was there that the Prince had installed the throne room, as well as the large refectory where the banquets were served.

The Prince had then proposed to the Skaven couple to build for them a small house apart, where they could live. This idea was quickly abandoned. The facilities had made a manor much larger than expected, and everyone had his apartments, which was to everyone’s taste. The private apartments of the Prince and his family were all gathered in the West Wing, between the second and third floors.

The White Skaven crossed gates and corridors to reach the east wing. Specifically a place at the very bottom of the wing, at the edge of the building. The place whose eventual destruction would have the least unfortunate consequences. The surrounding rooms were hardly inhabited, and were essentially used to store the collections. There were also the offices of the Prince, the Master Mage, the Intendant, and other close collaborators of the Crown. The library was also on the first floor. Psody climbed a spiral staircase to reach the attic. He stood in front of a heavy steel armoured door.

His youngest son, Gabriel, had quickly learned to read, write, and count. But above all, he had shown a vertiginous creativity. As soon as he was able to hold a feather, he drew everything that went through his head: strange symbols, then vehicles, buildings... he spent months reading engineering books more and more complex, before embarking on, and elaborating his own inventions. First, he created a small mechanism to facilitate the driving of the ox carts, then an invention intended to use the energy of the steam to advance a cart, in the manner of the technology of the Dwarves, then another invention, then another one. Soon, his small office could no longer suffice him. His grandfather had then allowed him access to a part of the attic of the east wing, then unused. Thus, the damage would remain controllable in case of an accident – that was what everyone hoped for, anyway.

The White Skaven knocked on the door, but no one answered.

He may be too drowned-absorbed in his formulas!

He allowed himself to pull the handle. The door opened to a large, dimly lit room. It was not easy to move inside; shelves bursting with bound parchments piled up along the walls, tables, workbenches, and other furniture crumbling with tools were arranged here and there without the slightest harmony or attention. The windows were blocked by the closets. A single wall was not obstructed by the furniture, it was entirely covered with leaflets of all sizes. The pages were blackened with formulas that seemed him nonsensical, and schemes of incredible and mysterious machineries. This sight made Psody have a slight apprehension.

He knew that the author of these plans was not a bad person, and had all his love, and yet he couldn’t help feeling a little pique in his chest in front of such a spectacle. He knew that when Gabriel was working on these plans, his mind was in a feverish state. He could draw the lines on the paper like dagger stabs. Some leaflets were even punctured in places. The excitement had been too strong. Usually, his son was an introvert, who had trouble for expression in front of an audience. When he was under the slightest stress, he quickly lost control, began to shake, stutter,
and could not do anything coherent before long minutes of decompression. And when he had an idea of invention in mind, he changed completely, and became excited, even going so far as to burst in a hysterical sneer when he obtained the smallest positive test.

The White Skaven looked at one of the patterns. He saw the plan of a ship with huge leather bladders as sails, to move in the air. If the absence of his father and brothers had degraded his mood, it had not undermined his creativity. This invention seemed perfectly feasible. The drawing even reminded him of one of his previous visions, of which he had spoken with Felix Jaeger, years earlier.

*Well, what was the name of this machine? Ah yes! The Spirit of Grungni! If I remember correctly, this thing worked with steam energy. It seems that Gabriel relies more on the strength of the hocks of the manoeuvres.*

The Master Mage’s ear jerked up reflexively as he heard the sound of a pile of books hitting the ground, followed by an irritated exclamation. He turned his head, and called:

- Gab? Gabriel?

A shrill voice asked in the shadows:

- Huh? Oh! Father! I… Come in!
- Already done. Where are you?
- Coming!

A candlelight flickered behind a closet, and a small figure floating in a finely crafted jacket appeared to the eyes of the White Skaven.

Gabriel Steiner had recently entered his fourth year, yet the signs of adolescence seemed to be slow to appear for him. Physically, he hadn’t been spoiled. As soon as he was born, the little Skaven had presented physical deficiencies, so much so that his parents had been afraid to see him die prematurely. Unlike his two older brothers, he had absolutely nothing of a great sportsman. He was rather small, barely taller than his sister Isolde. His coat was light grey, with a light hint of brown. He had a rather broad, short nose, two small brown eyes, and slightly bushy ears.

Psody’s third son was in poor health, and often got ill during the snowy season. He had been in such bad condition two years in a row that it took all the prayers to Shallya and all the best resources of Romulus to keep him alive. According to the prior, it had not helped his development, quite the contrary. On the other hand, he was getting tired quickly, and it was difficult for him to exercise an activity using his physical abilities more than a few minutes, even with all the goodwill of the world.

His weaknesses were also social: apart from his parents and siblings, it was difficult, if not impossible, to speak to someone without stammering. Talking to an adult was impossible. Even his grandfather, even the prior Romulus, long-time friend of the family, intimidated him.

Psody and Heike had never dared to admit it publicly, but they had more difficulty managing his education. According to the Prince, fortunately, they had done remarkably well, considering the special character of the little Skaven. These days, if not fully beaming, Gabriel lived without too much anxiety. And every time he needed to unleash his frustrations, he let off steam by inventing things.

- We didn’t see you all the evening long, Gabriel.
- Huh? Ah! Oh... I...
Kit and Siggy were disappointed not to have you with them, so was I. And you missed a wonderful evening, with a big banquet and a nice show.
- I... I didn’t want to.

Psody’s brow deepened in puzzled furrows.

- Didn’t want to see us again?
- No! No... but I... a plan that couldn’t wait.

The White Skaven wanted to get closer to his son to put him at ease. He pretended to be interested in his work.

- What kind of plan?
- It is a device that should be able to make a boat moving without sails. Of course, the Dwarves have already invented a lot of engines that work with steam, but I don’t know if they designed a lot of ships. After all, they never needed it, as they refuse to leave their mountains! And then, anyway, the steam technology remains very marginal, outside the Dwarf strongholds. You cannot blame me for wanting to steal their inventions!
- I definitively can’t.

Psody hesitated. How could he break ice?

- Gabriel, do you realize that our mission is over?
- Ah... sure, this time?
- Yes, that’s sure-certain.
- Good... very good.
- Curious. You don’t look very comfortable with this fact?
- Oh! Well, actually... I...

Suddenly, the Master Mage clearly perceived characteristic effluvium emanating from Gabriel. The bright-grey Skaven was more and more embarrassed, as if he was ashamed of something.

- Gabriel, is something wrong? I feel that you have a weight on your heart.

Finally, no longer holding, Gabriel gathered his courage and asked in a whisper:

- Do I... disappoint you?

Psody frowned, sincerely taken aback.

- Of course not, my son.

Suddenly, he had a very strange feeling. Something that had not happened to him for a long time. The world seemed to be unhinged around him, he was seized with a violent dizziness as he recognized the sensation he had felt every time he had a vision.

**Black.**

*Dim grunting, more and more distinguishable. A small, chilly wind makes him shudder. He finally distinguishes the details around him, more and more clearly. He’s in a humid, poorly ventilated and dark cellar. From the corner of his eye he sees something moving: he recognizes with astonishment his own brother-in-blood, Chitik. Chitik, the eldest of his five brothers. Chitik, the firstborn of their litter. Chitik, the largest, sturdiest and most impressive Black Skaven of all the*
burrows. He’s lying lengthwise on an enormous mass of flesh even bigger than him, and who resists his weight. This is a Feral Skaven breeder. Chitik is riding it, and yet it doesn’t seem to be in pain, so stunned with drugs.

Looking down, Psody notices that he is completely naked, and that his body is more sickly, his limbs more slender, on the other hand, his throat irritates him, and he’s obliged to cough. Old black clothes are lying at his feet. He raises his head, and sees before him a particularly disturbing sight. It’s a huge Skaven female, a little smaller than the one on which Chitik is taking pleasure, but it’s still a lot bigger than himself. It looks at him weirdly, and a small smile floats on its facies. The incense of warpstone keeps it in a euphoric state.

Psody understands what he’s doing here, what is expected of him. This is the first time he has been allowed to enter the wards where the females are kept. The first opportunity for him to live such an experience. And this layer looks healthy, and sturdy enough to spawn at least a good half-dozen puppies... provided a Skaven gives it its contribution.

The latter, aware of this, seems ready to fulfil its role. It slowly spreads its thighs, offering itself completely to the White Skaven. The latter cannot prevent the excitement warming his crotch. Driven by this outburst of desire, he takes a step towards the layer, then another. The smell exhaled by the breeder further panics his senses. He advances faster, and finally arrives right in front of it. The breeder is so huge, must be at least three times his size, and six times his weight. He does not know how to go about it. His instinct pushes him to mate with it, but without explaining exactly the way how. He holds out a hesitant right hand, and places it on the thigh of the creature. On its flanks, the huge breasts of the layer undulate slowly on the rhythm of its breathing.

He puts his other hand higher, hoping to reach the hip of the female. Under his knuckles, he feels a moist, short, almost pungent fur. Given his own size, and the stature of the breeder, if it decides to join its knees or kick him, it will knock him out, for sure... or worse. He decides to act very gently. He gradually squeezes the fingers of his left hand, to firm up his grip. It doesn’t react, just gently stir its limbs. He leans on his toes, and pulls on his arms, hoisting himself so painfully on the belly of the beast. When he puts his right hand on one of the rubbery breasts, the breeder chuckles. The contact of the elastic flesh under his fingers electrifies him. He goes up on all fours on the breast of the layer, so that she can see who is about to give him his seed: a true chosen one of the Horned Rat.

Their eyes meet. There is no intelligence in the female’s eye. Just a kind of animal passivity. However, the little ratman perceives a hint of mockery, as if it was doubting his abilities. Stung, Psody wants to prove to it that it is wrong. He stretches out all the way on the breeder, his cheek to its shoulder, and spreads his arms cross as far as he can. His skinny forearms are almost stuck between the huge balloons of pink flesh. He puts his hands on the dark nipples, and begins to knead them, to make them roll between his fingers. He feels the excitement up another notch when he hears a hoarse groan near his ear. No discontent or pain, otherwise it would have already knocked him off with a paw.

He continues to caress her, more and more frankly. Suddenly, he realizes a very embarrassing detail: in his position, given his small size, he won’t be able to fertilize it from where he is. His desire doesn’t weaken, on the contrary. He stands up, backs up hastily, and slides on the belly of the breeder, to fall right between its huge thighs. Then he leaps forward, clings to the fur of its abdomen, and penetrates it.

An irresistible feeling of vertigo literally makes him lose his head. The beating of the blood in his temples is deafening, yet he hears the groans and laughter of the breeder, louder and louder. His breathing is hoarser, he gives more kidney thrusts, which further increases the pleasure both for
him and for the female. And then, his entire body is shaken by a powerful intoxicating sensation, a real explosion that starts from his crotch to ignite each fiber of his body. The ecstasy lasts a few long seconds, his heart is about to jump out of his chest so he beats frantically. Tears of ecstasy come to his eyes. Then he has a spasm that throws him back. He collapses on the straw, and passes out quickly, overwhelmed by emotion.

Psody clenched his eyes and shook his head. In a heartbeat, he came out of his torpor. Fortunately, Gabriel didn’t seem to have noticed anything, and sat at his desk. Psody took the opportunity to cough, to quietly catch his breath. He poured himself a glass of water to finish clearing his dizziness.

- Where does this idea come from?
- In fact... I feel I don’t invest myself as much as you, Kit and Siggy, on the plan. You all are in the front row, you face the Feral Skaven, and you get the pups. You take all the risks. But I’m staying here, and I’m waiting, wondering if you’ll be back home. And I don’t do anything to help you.

Making every effort to contain his own disorientation, the White Skaven smiled benevolently.

- You’re wrong, Gab. First, there will be no more raids. This one was the last one. From now on, we will all stay together, and you won’t have to be afraid for us anymore. Then... you had your role to play, my tiny boy.
- “Tiny”... I know it well, Father. I don’t have Siggy’s muscles, or Kit’s courage. I am tiny, and skinny...
- I was the youngest in a litter of six, and I was the most tiny-skinny, too. It never stopped me from doing what I wanted.
- Yes, but you have magic.

Psody bit his lower lip.

- I never used it without violence. When I was your age, I had already killed a lot of people. Skaven, Humans, some Dwarves... But I didn’t have something in particular. Something I still don’t have, neither your brothers, nor your sisters, nor your mother, nor anyone in our country.
- What then, Father?
- Your intelligence. As a child, you have assimilated at a prodigious speed the principles of the science of Humans, and your Skaven instincts have led you to modify them to create extraordinary inventions. And your devices were more than helpful to us! Your anesthetic gas globes to neutralize the guards allowed us to fulfill our goal without shedding blood. Your substitute milk, stored in artificial breasts imitating those of the rat mothers, feeds all these little pups in a healthier way, waiting for the moment when the girls can take over. You understand? You bring more than your contribution to the foundation of our city. We take a lot less risk, thanks to your inventions!
- Father, would you have liked... to have a son with... your inheritance?

Psody was now back in full possession of his means, and silently thanked the Horned Rat. Glad to be able to focus fully on the conversation he sat down next to his son, and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

- The only family I really wanted to have was the one I had, Gab. I have a divine wife, five wonderful children I love as much as each other. I don’t want anything more. That’s right, I could have had a son with white fur and horns, maybe you. But, honestly, even though I would have loved him... it would have complicated things. You know, to be a White Skaven is a burden that you have to be able to carry. Once in adulthood, a White Skaven starts having visions, hallucinations. I would have had different connections with a White son, because we would have
exchanged things that no one else could understand; impressions, concepts... I would have had to
concentrate more on his education, and I would have neglected all the others.
- Would you have taught him to master the magic of Warp?
- Only to prevent him from using it wrongly and hurting someone. I vowed never to use it again,
and learned another magic instead. The magic of Warp is inherently unhealthy, Gab. It rots
everything it touches, Grey Seers first. Besides, its learning is painful. My teacher imposed a
severe, violent education on me. He was cruel and perverse, he pretended to understand me, while
he was only trying to control me. And the studies that I could lead taught me that it was the only
way to master this magic. Being soaked with fear, paranoia, and deceit helps to contain the
overflows of magic energy related to Warp. So yes, I have this knowledge, but it will die with me. I
refuse to transmit it deliberately to anyone. That’s why I applied myself to using another form of
magic authorized by the Empire. Besides, you have been told the story of the foundation of this
country, right? Do you know what happened at the Battle of Gottliebschloss?
- Yes! You used the mask of the priest Willhepoke to chase the demons!
- Cuelepok, sonny. And yes, that night, I used a magic linked to the sun. And I think since that day,
I cannot even use the magic of Warp anymore. The magic of Cuelepok drove it out of my body,
and replaced it. That’s why I didn’t have much trouble learning the magic of Jade.
- Ah... But... so, you don’t miss... the magic of your blood?
- Absolutely not, because it is evil-destructive. As for you...

The Master Mage cleared his throat again.

- I guess you’re a little in the same situation as me, compared to my brothers. In a certain way, I
think we all received the blessing of the Horned Rat. I was a White Skaven, but the others also
showed some rather exceptional skills. And I think my children have all received a little something
more, too. Your true strength-might is not in your muscles, it is in your head.

The look of the young light gray Skaven became dreamy.

- You never told me about your brothers... well, I mean, I never had the opportunity to talk about
them with you. No, I never took the time to talk to you about them when I could.
- It can work out, Gab. What do you want to know?
- How were they?
- I had five. The less interesting was Skahl from Clan Moulder. He was a fool who let himself be
trapped by his animal cravings, as soon as our first outing. He didn’t pass his test of passage to
adulthood. Then there was Klur of Clan Eshin. I must admit he was quite talented in this function.
My third brother was Moly from Clan Pestilens. But I had more connections with the other two:
Diassyon of Clan Skryre and Chitik, the Stormvermin. You probably would have been happy to
know Diassyon. Like you, he was an inventor, with very bold ideas, who made exceptionally stable
machines. As for Chitik... he saved my life. He was always there to protect me when I was at the
colony. Really, he was devoted, intelligent and faithful, for a Feral Skaven. I heard that Black
Skaven were naturally more disciplined-loyal than others.
- You seemed to get along well, actually!
- Not sure. Yes, I loved Chitik a lot, and I recognize that Diassyon was a good brother too. But for
what I could see from your other Uncle, Moly, he was not very friendly. Oh, I presume it was
because of his poor health. Pestilens are so devouried by diseases they have to take drugs all day
long to keep up. Chitik told me that, in fact, he was not mean, only very unhappy. And most
importantly, I don’t forget Klur. He was bad. When I became Grey Seer, he flattened himself at my
feet, but it was to better bite my toes! On the orders of Grey Seer Vellux, he tried to kill-stab me
with a dagger between my shoulders before drowning me in a swamp! For the Feral Skaven, the
notion of brotherhood doesn’t exist, Gabriel.
- Yet you knew that you were brothers, all six.
- It was exceptional. Our litter was exceptional. In a small colony like the one where I was born,
having a Black Skaven was not commonplace. Having a White Skaven was a blessing. So you imagine, with a White and a Black at the same time! In fact, Vellux explained it to us when he gathered us for the first time. He wanted to know if we would be more efficient, as “blood brothers”. It was not his idea, however. It was the idea of Plague Deacon Soum, the leader of the Pestilens of Brissuc, and Vellux’s right arm. But there was never anyone else to do that again, all over the Under-Empire. In any case, not to my knowledge. For Feral Skaven, no blood ties, no pity.

The light grey Skaven scratched his head nervously.

- So, if I had been born in Brissuc, I would not have lived so long?
- I can even tell you that you would have been quickly eliminated by the ratwife, or by the others of the litter. And it would have been a huge loss for the burrow!

Finally, Gabriel allowed himself a small smile. Knocks rang out on the iron door.

- Come in! the little Skaven invited.

The door opened on the two eldest sons of the Master Mage.

- Hi, Gab!
- Hey, bro!

“Gab”... That was the name that Psody’s other children had found for him. Indeed, Gabriel had learned to speak more difficulty and later than the others, and because of this, had had a hard time pronouncing the names of his siblings, stammering clumsily “Kitovson” and “Sigu”. So he was at the origin of the nicknames of the two other boys, “Kit” and “Siggy”. They kindly baptized him “Gab” in return.

The two big children of Psody surrounded their brother. Sigmund rubbed his head vigorously.

- So, the real world is so inconvenient to you?
- Indeed! It’s a pity you did not come.

Gabriel lowered his head.

- I ... I do not deserve recognition.
- What? exclaimed the Black Skaven, sincerely disconcerted. Why do you say that?
- Well... you guys, you took risks for the plan. I didn’t do anything.

Kristofferson spoke:

- I guess you’re kidding, aren’t you? Do you know how many lives have been spared in this burrow?
- Dozens! Ours, and theirs.
- Must say what is, brother: your new gas is a real wonder!
- Undetectable, fast and effective! These suckers didn’t see anything coming!

Gabriel opened wide eyes surprised, and turned to his father. Psody just gave him a little wink.

It was two o’clock in the morning when Psody opened the door of his bedroom. His companion was waiting for him, lying on the mattress of the big four-poster bed. Since arriving at the Steinerburg Manor, they had never changed their private room. Of course, everything had been refurbished from floor to ceiling. The window looked out onto the garden, and further down the
streets of the beautiful neighbourhood it was a sight Heike never tire of. The White Skaven hesitated when he saw the ratwoman. Six years they knew each other, and she was still beautiful. Carrying five children had only lightly plumped her out. Her cream-colored coat was fine, delicate and soft. Her smile, punctuated by two small incisors, barely visible under her upper lip, illuminated her delicate face. The White Skaven had always found that the dark spot that appeared on the coat of her right hip, distinguishable through the fabric of her nightie, gave her a small feature that was not lacking in charm either. Besides, he was not comfortable; the green light of Morrslieb moon, at its peak, gave the painting a rather strange atmosphere. Heike chuckled, which Psody could barely answer.

- It was a very long day, my love, but now we finally have a moment just for us!
- Hmm... Yes, my heart-heart.

He quickly went into the small bathroom next to the room, taking his nightgown in passing. He undressed, spent a few minutes refreshing himself, then put on his bedclothes and sat on the bed, without saying a word. Heike straightened up to sit at his side.

- You seem anxious, my love... Is there a problem?
- Uh... I thought back to my conversation with Gabriel.
- What happened? Have you quarrelled?
- Not at all. But he is not very good about himself right now. He told me that he felt less useful than his brothers.
- What a sad idea! I hope you have assured otherwise!
- Of course I did. In fact, as physically, he is not very strong, and he did not participate in the Harvests, he feels weak, and therefore good for nothing. I think he regrets not carrying the legacy of the Horned Rat.
- Perhaps you should explain to him that it is a very heavy legacy to take on.
- That’s what I did. And I told him that his intelligence had allowed us to succeed all our plan with a minimum of casualties. And when his two brothers confirmed, he looked reassured.
- Well, then everything is fine!

She gave a small laugh in front of the folded face of the White Skaven. She gently pinched his cheeks.

- No need to be grumpy, my horned knight!

Psody decided to be honest and talk about real concern.

- In fact, there is... there is something else.

Heike released her hold, and looked at his companion with an interrogative stare. He continued:

- Oh, maybe it’s nothing. I do not even know if I really have to upset you with this story.
- You are my man, Psody. Certainly, we are not married before the gods, but I fully assume my role of wife. I want to listen to you and ease your pain.
- Even if it could hurt you?

The Skaven girl felt a twinge tickle her heart, but she nodded without a word.

- Very good. You’re right, I do not want to hide that from you, either. As I spoke to Gabriel, abruptly, I... I had a vision. Fortunately, he didn’t notice it, but I was a little embarrassed to continue talking as if nothing had happened, even though I was perhaps even more disturbed-stressed than him. I played him a bad comedy.
- You played your role of father. He needed you to listen to him and reassure him. If you had
cracked in front of him, he would have taken it badly.
- I know-know. But it was so... destabilizing!
- So, what did you see so “destabilizing”?

Psody cleared his throat, and told everything. At first, he wanted to be as vague as possible to avoid disgusting her, but she insisted on having all the details. His story finished, he looked her companion in her eyes. She did not say a word. She did not look particularly shocked, but he felt a tension in the process of crisper.

*Looks like she’s less embarrassed than I am! She does not seem to have taken pleasure ... maybe she wanted to put me to the test or punish me?*

He continued:

- I have a rational explanation, if that can reassure you.
- I am listening to you, replied the young woman in a hollow tune.
- I told you that during my first night with a breeder, when I passed my test of passage to adulthood, I was dizzy. I saw fleeting, but very clear images. The Lizardmen, Cuelepok, then I saw the future: the Vereinbarung flag, the people, and then one of my future children who was talking to me. It was Gabriel. Of course, I did not know it at the time.
- Yes, you told me. And so?
- With time, I forgot the details of this vision. But today, when I went to see Gabriel and talked to him...
- You found yourself at the exact moment you saw years ago, Heike finished.
- Everything was the same. He told me exactly the same thing, and I answered him the same way. And I saw... everything I did that night, which I did not remember. It’s as if... as if my mind had been briefly catapulted into the past, while the spirit I had in the past had lived this present moment. It was really confusing!

Heike blinked nervously.

- How long ago was the last time you had that kind of vision?
- Since we arrived here, in Vereinbarung. Of course, at night, I make dreams like everyone else, but it’s no longer about communications of the Horned Rat. Today was the first time in years that I had a vision while being awake.
- Do you think that means something special?
- I don’t know. But why? Why did I see that? It was six years ago! It’s a life from which I freed myself-rid! I acted badly during the beginning of my life, I know it! This poor girl...
- You don’t have to justify yourself, Psody. I know all that. But I’m worrying about you. You know... you may not realize it, but lately have been really hard for you, more than you think. You had to endure being among their people again. But we are not like them, Psody, you know it. Physically, we share the same characteristics, but that’s all. We have nothing to do with the Feral Skaven. And the first generation that is beginning to prosper continues to show it to us.

Psody did not answer, but felt a small tear bead in the corner of his eye.

- Oh no, you must not cry. You are a hero, Psody, you know it. And now it’s over, you do not have to leave anymore. And we don’t need to be afraid anymore.

Psody whispered slowly, with all the weariness of the last weeks weighing on his vocal chords.

- I’m tired of being away from you, the girls, Gab, my Human friends. It’s been almost six years I wade regularly in this mud. Every descent into a burrow reminded me of why Humans hate-us so much. And that I myself was one of them. And all this time, you were away from me. Every day
I missed you a little more, and you were afraid for us. I made you suffer. I *hurt* you badly.
- But today, you came back. And thanks to you, thanks to all of us, it is a whole generation of Skaven who has been able to receive a Human education, and who is grateful to you! The first ones have already started to have children themselves! It would never have happened without all these efforts.
- Romulus told me that you were all very sad. I should have realized it, and stop going to the four corners of the Empire!
- That’s right, I was sad and scared, and our children too. But it all ended, and it was all worth it, I assure you! Future generations will be eternally grateful to you.
- So why don’t I feel good? Why can’t I sleep at night? There even are moments when I feel like... a big void.

Heike felt an opportunity to talk about the real problem.

- Psody, it’s been a long time since... we have not had a special moment. Even while you are back now, your mind is elsewhere. And for some time, it’s like that every time you come back. I cannot really talk to you. I am happy to see you, but you speak to me only with your mouth, and not with your heart. It makes me sad. And when we are alone, we do not... you do even not touch me anymore!

She had spoken in a tone mixing reproach and sorrow. Psody got scared. The last thing he wanted was to see the flame that animated their relationship weaken and go out. He moved closer to her, and stroked her back gently.

- I am sorry. I want to stay close to you. I want that to change. I want to make you happy as you deserve. I will never leave the Rat Kingdom again. Never again-ever.
- I believe you. Besides, there is no reason for that now.

The White Skaven then uttered a sentence he had not said for far too long.

- I love you, Heike
- I love you, Psody, his companion answered immediately.

They snuggled against each other for a long time, without saying a word. The Skaven woman then smiled. Her eyes suddenly lit up with a mischievous spark.

- This vision may mean something else... I think the Horned Rat sent you a message.
- Did he? And what message? asked the White Skaven.
- In my opinion, he wanted to make you understand that you deserved a reward. After all these trials, you need comfort. And your god believes that you have won the great privilege of honouring one of his daughters.

Psody smiled in turn. These words could only mean one thing.

- You are right. And I think there is only one daughter of the Horned Rat worthy of me, and of whom I am worthy. Only one person can give this comfort to me. A daughter-girl who is close, so close to me... right next to me.
- And this daughter-girl has only one desire, Psody Steiner: to comfort you!

She had already untied the cords of her nightgown. The White Skaven undressed quickly, and a moment later the two children of the Horned Rat were passionately entwined on the bed. And nothing else counted until slumber came.
The Visitor

The clock in Verena’s temple rang nine times. The sun was already high in the sky, and was lighting up generously the city of Steinerburg. The citizens were already circulating in the streets, the tradesmen baited the customers with loud and sought slogans, and the militia patrolled.

The city was awake and working. It was at this hour that the Prince used to receive in his cabinet the personnel in his service. In this case, he listened to his most ancient employee.

- So, your Highness, this is an opportunity that I want to exploit. It was a great privilege to work for you, but I think I can do something more for the Rat Kingdom. My brother-in-law is cleric at Verena’s temple, and he recommended me to Prior Tomas.

The full title of Prior Tomas was “High Priest Tomas”, or “Provost Tomas”, as he combined both functions, and therefore represented order and justice in the Rat Kingdom. And so, his authority was the highest in the hierarchy of Vereinbarung after that of the Prince.

Ludwig Steiner scratched his chin.

- Well, I understand your decision. You’re right, life is short, and everyone has not such an opportunity to change way of life, like you are about to. You have been a very good servant, Samuel, you are smart, you are well-educated and you have instruction... and then, it will be a better situation for you, and later a better setting for your family.
- I swear, your Highness, that I have never had to complain about my situation while I served you! Whether it is a question of wage or treatment, I am perfectly aware of having been privileged over others. It’s just that I would like to experience something different. Before entering your service, I wanted to be a lawyer. I really enjoyed working for you, and meet your children was a pleasure, too, but I want to think first of all about my life, and my future.
- Which is quite normal, Samuel. Well, you will see with Langeneus the terms of the end of your engagement here. I wish you a great success and a lot of happiness in your life.
- Thank you a thousand times, your Majesty.

Samuel Heifetz bowed respectfully and left the throne room. Conscious of the heavy burden of the monarch’s timetable, he was not much offended by the brevity of the interview. This dark-haired, medium-sized man, who was quite abdominous, had followed Steiner into his forced exile from Altdorf. With Magdalena, he was, moreover, the only servant who had been engaged before this escape still alive; all the others had been mercilessly slaughtered in one night by the Feral Skaven of Grey Seer Vellux.

When the first inhabitants of Vereinbarung had taken up their quarters in the new kingdom, the Prince had made Samuel his chief steward. In time, he had more and more servants, grooms, and others. He was leaving with his mind in peace, knowing that his departure would not interfere with the inhabitants of the Steiner Manor.

Once the arrangements were settled, Samuel left the estate for the last time with a trunk for all his luggage – he had already moved the bulk of his belongings into the house of the Libra Quarter, where were the homes of the wealthiest citizens and the big tribunal. He turned one last time, looked at the double door being closed, and gave a little sigh before leaving.

The whole town of Steinerburg was built on a high hill, the residence of the Prince set on its summit, and the surrounding estate thus extended to the heights of the hill. That represented about a quarter of its surface. All the rest and the surroundings were occupied by the city itself. The Libra
Quarter was adjacent to the estate. Then came the Crown Quarter, where the merchants lived, next
to the Hammer Quarter, which gathered the signs of the craftsmen, as well as the barracks of the
guards of the city. The more modest dwellings of the Dove Quarter were near the Chalice Quarter,
where one could find one or another of the great temples. At last, at the foot of the hillock,
extended the area of the peasants and labourers homes. That district was affectionately nicknamed
“the Mousetrap”.

There was no river flowing through the city, or even nearby, and the nearest spring was a half-hour
walk away. Fortunately, a few years earlier, the famous Dwarf Slayer Gotrek Gurnissson, then on a
reconnaissance mission for the Prince, had drown the plans and started the construction of an
aqueduct. The hill had been thus irrigated, and several reservoirs had been built, in order to leave
a little reserve in case of siege. This had never happened, but the people of Steinerburg remained
cautious, and this possibility was never completely neglected.

A single rampart built with about twenty towers equipped with guns surrounded the whole hill.
The highest portion of the wall led directly into the park of the Steiner mansion. While the Prince’s
residence was therefore quite close to the rampart, but as it was near a particularly steep slope, it
was not possible to reach the manor without passing through the village, unless the invader was a
well-trained climber. It was hardly conceivable to fear the attack of a cohort by this side.

Defence was provided for the outside, and militia guarded the security between the walls.
Steinerburg was not yet gangrened by crime, not even in the “Mousetrap”, and the Prince wanted
tings to stay the longest as well.

As Samuel prepared to leave the wide paved street leading to the princely domain, he saw an
important procession. It was a carriage decorated with precious ornaments, firmly escorted by
human horsemen in armour.

The arrivals, all Humans, were men heavily armed and protected, riding around a carriage
decorated with precious ornaments. The coachman told the guards:

- Hey! Make way for Master Eusebio Clarin, ambassador of his Grace, Prince Roderigo Calderon
  of Sueño!

The abdominous Human then remembered; one of the neighbours of Prince Ludwig the First,
freshly arrived in the Renegade Crowns, had indeed proposed to send an ambassador, for a possible
establishment of commercial relationship. The guards, forewarned, opened the gates, leaving the
way open for the cortege.

The coachman stopped in front of the house. Three grooms approached to take the horses to the
stables. The valet who remained behind the carriage hastened to open the door and place a little
stool under the foot of the ambassador who came down.

Before leaving, Samuel wanted to see what the Prince’s guest looked like.

The ambassador was a man of medium height, thin, with a swarthy complexion, an aquiline nose,
and eyes sparkling under his jet black hair, carefully cut and styled. A small, well-trimmed
moustache finished making him elegant. He wore a brightly coloured suit, sewn in precious stuffs.

Eusebio Clarin couldn’t repress a small pinch in the heart as he got off the coach. He definitely
couldn’t get used to the idea of facing these ratmen. One of them, huddled in a livery, was drawing
near to him.

- Welcome to Steinerburg, Excellency. You are expected. Was the trip peaceful?
The man didn’t want to appear aggressive in any way from the start. He surprised himself when he heard his voice speak without contempt or embarrassment to the creature in these terms:

- No problem, thank you.

The rat-man – or “Skaven”, as they called themselves – smiles with all his incisors.

- Perfect! If you will follow me, I will take you to your apartments. Let me take care of your luggage.
- Would be kindly.

Clarin wondered with a small smile how this Skaven dressed with this livery would carry the trunk that contained his belongings. The ratman whistled, and two other very large, black-furred ratmen arrived quickly. The Human no longer smiled, impressed by the build of the newcomers.

- Do not worry, sir Clarin. They are much more agile than they look. Please, follow me, if you want to.

All four entered the building. The diplomat observed the wealth of the place: luxury carpets, crystal chandeliers, paintings with gold powder let appear the taste of the Prince for the arts of the different countries.

- Your monarch seems to have acclimatized well.
- Indeed, Sir.
- I feel that the decoration has themes on nature, trees... there are many precious pieces that represent them.
- His Majesty is born in Talabheim. You know?
- I’ve never been there, but I know it’s a much forested place, isn’t it?
- It is, sir. And Taal and Rhya are prayed in our kingdom.
- Prince Ludwig Steiner favours these gods?

The servant allowed himself a few seconds of reflection before answering:

- Although born in the Eye of the Forest, his Highness is more related to Verena.
- Oh, I see.

The livery Skaven stopped at a door, which he opened.

- Here is your bedroom, sir. You will occupy it during your stay here. This is the Daffodils room.
- The Daffodils Room? Clarin repeated.
- Flower names have been given to the guest rooms, this is a little reminiscent of Talabheim.

The emissary noticed on the door an engraving representing a flower arrangement with daffodils. The two Black Skaven laid the trunk in the room, and withdrew without a word. Clarin pouted.

- Well, with the permission of his Highness, I’ll take care of my presentation before meeting him.
- The Prince’s granddaughter will take you to the courtroom. When do you want her to pick you up, sir?
- Hum... let’s say in half an hour?
- As you wish, sir. I have now to take leave of you.
- Wait a moment!

The diplomat searched in his pocket, and congratulated himself on having kept imperial crowns on him, the only valuable currency in the Steiner principality.
What is your name, young fellow?
Gerd, Sir Clarin. On your service.
Well, Gerd, thank you for giving me such a positive image of your people.

He slipped a handful of coins into the servant’s hand. The latter bowed politely.

It’s up to me to thank you, sir. I wish you a very pleasant stay with us.

Then he left the Human by closing the door behind him.

Clarin heaved a sigh of relief. For the moment, everything had gone well. He had imagined this first contact with a certain apprehension. The Skaven people were not associated with good memories in the spirit of the gentleman. When his monarch had charged him with this mission, he had asked the reason for this choice. Why him? He had no answer. And yet Clarin didn’t hide his dislike towards the ratmen. Had Prince Calderon wanted to test him? Or have fun to his detriment? He couldn’t have deliberately sent the least comfortable with these creatures of his whole court by chance. What about the risk compromising an important diplomatic mission?

Maybe I’m having twisted ideas... Calderon probably wants to prove to me that I’m conscientious enough to carry out this mission without letting my own emotions overwhelm my reason?

He decided not to think about it anymore. Seeing the big wooden tub filled with hot water, the soap, the perfumes and the towel, he smiled happily.

Half an hour later, Eusebio Clarin was ready to appear before the Prince. He repeated internally the procedure he had already followed dozens of times.

So, he comes from Talabheim, I’ll put a couple of words in favour of Taal and Rhya. Avoid allusions to the disappearance of Graf Feuerbach. To inquire about the riches of this kingdom once the ice is broken...

He was interrupted in his thoughts by three knocks at the door of his room.

Yes, what is it?

A clear voice echoed through the woods.

Sir Clarin? Are you ready?

Surely the girl who’s coming to pick me up.

I am. Coming, good lady, coming.

He stood in front of the mirror hung on the wall, quickly combed his hair, smoothed his moustache, anxious to look impeccable. But when he opened the door, his smile twisted, and he could not help but raise his eyebrows, surprised.

Good morning, Sir Clarin.

A young ratgirl, with a coat of wheat colour, was before him. She wore an elegant dress, a gold necklace, and the diplomat recognized the characteristic essence of a Tilean perfume.

I’m Bianka Steiner. I will introduce you to my grandfather, Prince Steiner.

But... I’ve heard that the Prince was a Human?

He is, my lord, replied the girl instantly. He adopted two Skaven, and by the will of an amusing
good luck, these two Skaven are my parents.

Suddenly, the diplomat remembered this detail, and blamed himself for not having understood all the implications earlier.

- I follow you.

And both went to the throne room. On the way, the Human wanted to continue the conversation. Frustrated by the fact he was not walking at the side of a pretty Human woman to seduce, he let more and more trivial questions jostle in his mind.

I wonder if she’s cold feet? All the ratmen I saw here do not wear shoes, boots, or anything else. Is she embarrassed by this... tail? Come on, Eusebio, pull yourself together, old boy! These are not suitable questions!

- You look very well installed. This manor is superb.
- Isn’t it? My grandfather has always enjoyed Tilean art. He hired a renowned architect from Miragliano in order to restore the premises.

Clarin was more and more perplexed. He couldn’t possibly believe he was talking to a Skaven as if nothing had happened between him and this people. He didn’t know whether that satisfied or revolted him. Finally, he couldn’t help but talk about a subject that had bothered him since he had remembered the identity of the father of this girl.

- I’ve heard your father venerates a deity whom the Four Peoples of the Empire regard as highly evil. He even has been already heard swearing in the name of this deity.
- I know.
- Do you? So it’s not a secret?
- No, it’s not secret. It’s discreet. Everyone has their own eccentricities. The people are happy, my father’s beliefs don’t matter.
- What about you? Do you mind?

Bianka pinched her lips.

- He does what he wants. I believe in Goddess Verena.
- You? A Skaven?
- I learned to trust the powers of the gods worshiped by Humans. I also believe in Shallya, the Goddess of Compassion. She forgives everyone except those who destroy by disease. The Horned Rat is not the Lord of the Flies.
- The Skaven spread the disease over the world, my lady. I know something about it.

They were now in front of a large double wrought-iron door, each pan was provided with a heavy bronze hammer.

- They are not demons of Nurgle, and I know that they feel more suffering than destructive frenzy. Besides, you know that here, the Skaven are raised differently. We are citizens, just like Humans. And we are different from those you’re talking about, that’s why we call them “Feral Skaven”. If I was a Feral Skaven, I would be locked in a cellar, and serve as a breeding machine. Their females have no other role in their society. And as for the Master Mage, he has always followed the Horned Rat, but in a very different way.
- Has he ever offered you to follow the teachings of his god?
- No, said a voice as sharp as a blade.

Clarin startled. He turned around, and found himself facing the White Skaven, discreetly come by
an adjoining corridor, looking at him with an annoyed eye. The Human remained a few moments to contemplate him, fascinated. In his whole life, he had never seen a White Skaven, and knew although how dangerous they could be, dark wizards manipulating the winds of magic to turn them into corrupting miasmas or acid rain storms. And yet this one didn’t inspire him any fear or disgust. He shuddered in surprise, realizing that, too absorbed in his thinking, he had almost not heard him explain:

- As my daughter just told you, I have my own version of the Horned Rat holy word. But I never imposed anything to my children. I left them the choice of their own beliefs-beliefs. I even asked them not to follow me on the path traced by the Horned Rat. I have seen and experienced things that made me think and see the will of my god in a different way than the one taught by Grey Seers. But if you follow his word literally, it only brings ruin, and I don’t want to take the risk of seeing my children go wrong. I even intend to ban this religion the moment I’m not there to practice it.

- That is a right decision from you, Sir Prospero Steiner, Master Mage of the Rat Kingdom, and adopted son of Prince Ludwig the First.

- So, I don’t need to introduce myself, sir Clarin.

- Indeed, your reputation has preceded you.

- And what makes this reputation?

- You seem rather nice to me, but this is not the case for everyone in my principality. Some think that you are in cahoots with your peers left behind.

- Skaven “left behind” are no longer my peers for a long time. I stopped seeing them as such the day my own blood brother tried to kill me with a backstab at the behest of my master. And considering the damage I’ve done in their ranks since, I’m pretty sure that the Council of Thirteen has ordered a strong reward on my head!

- What would interest a Skaven to the point of dislodging you here?

- The management of a city, a place in the Council, a whole harem, the options are not lacking.

The White Skaven knocked on the door. It opened on another Skaven, younger, and rather tall, with black fur.

- Sigmund? Isn’t your grandfather in the throne room?

- No, he had some business to settle. He asked me to wait for you, it won’t be long.

- I’ll go get him, Bianka said. Master Clarin will wait with you.

- Thank you darling. Come on, Maitre Clarin, come in.

During his career, Clarin had the advantage of meeting a dozen different monarchs. With rare exceptions, they applied themselves to presenting to every visitor a particularly sumptuous throne room; such was the impression that permeated the eye of the people welcomed by Prince Steiner. A precious rug insulated the feet of any walker from the floor of waxed wooden slats, a large crystal chandelier was fixed in the middle of the ceiling, and behind the wooden carved adorned with gold leaves throne was spreading a monumental tapestry, on which was embroidered the coat of arms of Vereinbarung.

- Sigmund, bring a chair to our guest, will you.

- Right, Father.

The White Skaven went to a small commode, and picked out a bottle of wine.

- Would you have a little elven tear, to wait?

- Well, willingly.

Clarin was not worried. Unless you were dealing with berserks like Orcs or vicious and cruel
calculators such as Dark Elves, no leader, no monarch had any interest in attacking the life of a messenger. So it was with confidence he tasted the wine, followed by the White Skaven.

Psody settled on another stool.
- May I know exactly what brings you here, Master Clarin?
- In fact, my monarch wants me to talk directly with Prince Steiner.
- He’s coming, and in the meantime, remember that I am his son-boy and his main assistant. Everything concerning him about the political point of view of the Kingdom concerns me just as much.
- Good. Well... His Majesty Prince Roderigo Calderon has noted with some bitterness that two of the isolated villages of the Sueño Principality have been attacked and invaded by ratmen. At their head, there was a Skaven that had two distinctive signs: its fur was entirely white, and a bough rose on its head.

Psody didn’t react. He was not surprised any more.

- You think-insinuate that I would be this White Skaven?
- I don’t have any bias. Nevertheless, I have some knowledge on the Skaven colonization methods. I witnessed a massive invasion a few years ago.

The Black Skaven made a face.

- You’re alluding Nuln’s, I guess? All the Humans who fear us are rehearsing this tragedy. It happened more than fifteen years ago, Master Clarin! The Storm of Chaos stroke the Empire since, so more violently, and you saw that demons were far more dangerous!
- You are right, young man, but I meant Ubersreik’s. It is more recent, and took place nine years later, in 2523 according to the imperial calendar. One year after the Storm of Chaos. The city was already well wounded, before this ratmen rise. I was there.
- I’ve been taught it was the work of Clan Fester, specified Psody. This Clan was moribund, because of breeders-breeders becoming infertile. This invasion was a “double or quits” for Grey Seer Rasknitt.
- And we obviously have felt this “double or quits”. Seven years have passed, but the memory of the Skaven coming out of the sewers and destroying everything in their way has remained intact. So, when I see that the adopted son of the Prince of the adjacent Kingdom to mine is a White Skaven, I admit that I have a little apprehension. I think back to the few stories I heard about them. Everyone knows that the Skaven can be enraged when they cannot afford to flee, but I also know more precisely what their leaders are capable of.

Sigmund felt his patience lessen.

- Why do you consider us like ferocious animals? We are citizens of Vereinbarung, and my father is a hero! We are not invaders, and you know it!
- I do, perhaps, my monarch, certainly, the members of the Court, maybe, but this is not the case of the common people of my country. Skaven attacked small isolated villages, led by a White Skaven wearing horns, it’s a fact. And you are not only known as the only Skaven of the Renegade Crowns, but you claim it!
- We claim-claim to be the citizens of the Fifth People, unlike the Feral Skaven, who those who attacked your principality are no doubt among, master diplomat, Psody calmly explained.
- Your accusations are far too ridiculous to affect us! spat his son, much more touched by the words of the Human.
- I don’t try to affect you, young man. I wish to understand what happened, like all the citizens of my principality. You would do the same for me, right?
- I would avoid accusing the first comer who vaguely resembles a culprit whom I didn’t see with
my own eyes!
- Easy, Sigmund. Master Clarin didn’t accuse anyone.

Clarin turned to the White Skaven.

- Listen, Prospero...
- “Master Mage Prospero Steiner”, I beg you, cut off the scholar.
- I’m trying to be a little less formal, Master Mage. Friendlier.
- Do you do that with all your interlocutors of a higher social rank than yours, or my father is the only one who impresses you so much?
- Calm down, Sigmund.

Clarin wanted to answer the young Black Skaven.

- No, your father doesn’t impress me, young man. And I’m not sure of belonging a lower rank. I am a Prince’s representative, Prince Roderigo Calderon, your father is not, you neither. Your position is not worth that of a prince. In fact, as I told you before, I should not even talk to you.
- And to me? asked a loud, deep voice that made the messenger jump.

Clarin faced the newcomer. If he felt a slight apprehension hugging him, he gave no sign of it. He murmured calmly:

- Prince Steiner...

Prince Ludwig Steiner the First had remained in the doorway. The self-proclaimed monarch of Vereinbarung was a centre of attraction wherever he went. He was a tall man, about six feet high. He was broad-shouldered and had a prominent belly. Under his love for good food, muscles having served a lot but still good to win a duel could be guessed. He probably weighted more than two hundred and fifty pounds. He had sparkling eyes, a sturdy, protruding shaven chin, and a small moustache rippled under his huge, reddened nose. His face was framed by long greying hair. As a monarch, he was dressed in a suit with the most precious stuffs, and wore on his neck, wrists and hands many jewels that Clarin’s professional eye estimated very expensive. Sturdy, well-built waders clasped his wide like two little twin tree trunks legs.

No crown. He must wear it on ceremonial days only.

Clarin bowed respectfully.

- I am Eusebio Clarin, emissary of His Majesty Roderigo Calderon of the principality of Sueño.
- I welcome you to Vereinbarung, our kingdom, Master Clarin. I heard the end of your conversation before entering. I recognize that the tone was respectful, but I have the impression that you annoyed my grandson.
- Let’s say I tried an approach that has already made good contact in the past.

Clarin discreetly looked at the two ratmen, standing on either side in front of the Prince.

- I assumed that these gentlemen are similar in character to us. I hope I have not been wrong, Your Highness?
- Absolutely not, Master Clarin.

The Black Skaven grumbled something unintelligible. The White one answered sharply in a language that the emissary didn’t understand. Steiner cleared his throat.

- Sigmund, Master Clarin will talk to your father and me. Dismiss.
- I understand, Opa. I have stuff to do.
The young Black Skaven walked to the exit of the throne room, without taking his eyes off the messenger, who was thinking.

*He spoke with the tone of an order. I do not know what this young black-furred man mumbled, but I guess it was an insult in their language? I’ll pretend I did not hear anything.*

Prince Steiner took his time to settle on his throne. He made a small gesture towards the White Skaven who served him a glass of wine. The monarch drank a few sips, snapped his tongue, and addressed the emissary.

- Before starting this conversation seriously, I would like to ask you two things.
- I am listening to you attentively, your Majesty.
- First: did you feel treated well so far?
- I have nothing to say about reception, lodging, or your servants, your Highness. From one end to the other, I didn’t feel any difference from the other diplomatic missions that were entrusted to me in the past.
- Perfect. Prince Roderigo Calderon is the first to have had the courage to reach out to us. It is important to assure his agent the best reception. And here is my second question, the most important one. Above all, do not be afraid to answer me with the maximum of honesty that you can deploy. If it reassures you, I remind you that as a diplomat you are absolutely untouchable.
- I am listening to you, Your Greatness.

The Prince paused, then articulated slowly and distinctly:

- What do you think about the Skaven people, Master Eusebio Clarin?

*Here we are,* thought Clarin. The ambassador glanced at the White Skaven. The latter smiled kindly.

- Do not be afraid, speak frankly, dear guest-guest. Whatever you may say, I’ve heard ten times worse.
- I don’t want to see my personal opinions jeopardize the attempt of communication of my sovereign!
- As I told you, you are the first of another kingdom to come to see us. I am curious to know your feelings. I am perfectly aware of the importance of your mission, but I am really curious. Please, sit down again. Relax, and speak with confidence.

Clarin sat back on his chair, inhaled, thought a handful of seconds, and answered:

- Excellency, Master Mage, I will be frank: until today, the only contacts I had with the Skaven were the attempted invasion of Ubersreik about seven years ago. I worked for a major trader from Estalia, Cristobal Mendoza.
- I have not yet congratulated you for the quality of your Reikspiel, by the way. Listening to you makes it hard to believe that you are an Estonian.
- Thank you, your Grace. I studied at Nuln University, that’s why Mendoza sent me, I was the one who knew the Empire best among his employees. My job was to conclude a contract on his behalf to open a trade post in Altdorf, and our escort had to make a detour to Ubersreik.
- So it was really bad luck, Master Clarin.
- Question of point of view, your Highness; if I spent the worst week of my existence, I came out alive and almost in good physical health, which was not the case of many people. I think I was lucky in my misfortune. And during this siege, the Skaven tried to destroy the city by submerging us under number, sending us diseases, poisons, and abominable monsters. They were finally repulsed when their leader, Grey Seer Rasknitt, was defeated. I was informed by Master Christoph Engel, the Mage of Grey College where I had taken refuge. Once the Skaven routed, we fled as
quickly as possible to the capital.
- Alas, Rasknitt had not said his last word, Master Clarin. A few weeks later, he attacked Helmgart.
- I know it well, your Highness, that’s why I stayed longer than planned in Altdorf. I returned to
my country when things settled down, and I promised never to leave it again. Finally, I went back
on my promise when a family relationship founded a kingdom in the Renegade Crowns and offered
me to join him.
- So, you have a parental link with Prince Calderon?
- By marriage, it’s a distant relative. I escaped Ubersreik, I didn’t assist to the invasion of
Helmgart, but every time I hear about the Skaven, I get nervous.
- What is very understandable-acceptable, said the Master Mage. You’ve only heard abominable
stories about us, the kind you talk about to frighten-scare children. Then when you have seen these
creatures come out of the sewers, the undergrounds, the burrows, to kill everything with such rage,
such hunger for violence, you have seen your childish terrors crystallize to become real. But today,
are you better?
- I will never forget what I lived in Ubersreik, Master Mage Prospero Steiner. And that may be why
Prince Calderon chose me to come and see you. He knew that I would fulfil my mission with
dedication and determination.
- Yes, then, it’s a case involving Skaven that brings you here, said the Prince. We will come there.
Currently, you don’t mind talking to my adoptive son, do you?

Once again, Clarin briefly looked at the White Skaven.

- All Skaven who have spoken to me since I crossed the border of your kingdom have shown
respect, politeness, and have inspired me with sympathy. Your servant Gerd, Miss Bianka… Even
your son, Sigmund, didn’t seem less pleasant than another.
- My son is young-passionate, he’s a good boy, but he tends to speak faster than he thinks. Much
faster, often too much. Anyway, he has benefited from a Human education, like all my other
children, my wife, and myself. Like all the Skaven of our principality. We strive to make the
difference between the Sons of the Horned Rat and the citizens of Vereinbarung. That’s why we
call the Skaven like the ones you faced “Feral Skaven”. Because they only listen to their instinct,
their animal side. The little resemblance they have with Humans only serves them to manipulate
Humans.
- I agree, Master Mage. For the moment, I enjoy talking with you.
- Good, said the Prince. You are also nice to me. I will gladly accept exchanges, commercial or
otherwise, with Prince Roderigo Calderon, but it is important that we are in good harmony. What
may be rather complicated at this time, is not it?
- Well... you’ve heard it, it’s not just trade that brings me. I would like a lot, sincerely, but the
circumstances are completely different. Skaven led by a White Skaven attacked and completely
razed two nearby villages on the border between Sueño and Vereinbarung. To be more precise, one
village was destroyed, the other just had time to send an alert missive to the local barracks. When
the soldiers arrived, the village was already nothing but ruins. Some survivors, however, were able
to testify. They affirmed by swearing an oath of truth on the altar of Myrmidia that their aggressors
were “rat-headed beasts”, led by a “white rat with horns”.

Psody and Steiner looked at each other, and the Prince spoke:
- I have no doubt about what these unfortunate villagers are saying, Master Clarin. Nevertheless, I
fear they are mistaken. If I try to defend myself against any invader, I have no ambition to conquer.
Vereinbarung must be a haven of peace, that’s why we created it. These Skaven cannot be citizens
of our kingdom.
- You think they are Skaven from below? These… Feral Skaven?
- Yes, most likely.
- Yet, I have been in Sueño for years, and we have never had to suffer from their attacks so far. His
Highness Prince Calderon fears that it was you who drew them to this corner of our world, accidentally or... *voluntarily*.

The big man’s face darkened.

- Would you please be more precise, Master Clarin?
- If you are not directly responsible for these attacks, maybe your presence attracts these foes.

Prince Steiner grumbled.

- It could be, but I don’t fit this thesis. And the fact that you suggest it makes me more uncomfortable! My fellow citizens are people as respectable as yours, and there is no question of us causing you problems, let alone sending you Feral Skaven!
- Do not worry, Father, said Psody. I am certain that the emissary Clarin doesn’t speak thus in spite, but in ignorance.

Then, addressing Clarin:

- Why don’t you see with your own eyes the Skaven of our country-land? That would dispel all the suspicions you can have, right?
- No doubt, if I had the guarantee of seeing your people without artifice?
- I have little more than my word to give you, but I hope for your Prince that the word of one of his equals will be sufficient, said Steiner. Prospero, you had a very good idea. Go take a walk in the city and the fields. Take the day, maybe an evening, also, the time it will take our guest to understand that we do not play a masquerade to coax him. You will see that the Skaven of Vereinbarung are miles away from the infamous creatures who have dared to penetrate your province, and at that moment, we’ll do everything to help you stop them. Your Skaven issue is ours. After all, that’s why Prince Calderon sent you, is not it? Because he knew that your opinion would be the most convincing, given your contacts with the Sons of the Horned Rat?

Clarin looked at his two interlocutors, then nodded with a small smile.

- It’s a possibility, and I admit that I start to appreciate it. I say, I cannot wait to meet the real people of Vereinbarung since I left Barca.
- You mean, the capital of Sueño, don’t you, said Steiner, anxious to make the emissary understand that he knew his neighbours.
- Well, I assure-assure you the trip will not disappoint you! declared Psody.
The Prince accompanied the diplomat and the White Skaven to the gate. They were awaited by a large coach decorated with the coat of arms of Vereinbarung, led by two beautiful and distinguished stallions. A valet man was holding the door open.

- My friend, I propose to let your men rest after the journey. We will take care of your safety and your comfort. However, we invite you to choose two of your guards to take them aboard, too.

*So, the protocol is pretty much respected, but there still remains a small measure to reassure me,* thought the Estalian. *Very well!*

Clarin turned to his own team where his servants waited, and made a gesture, calling two names. The two guards climbed onto the roof of the carriage.

A rather young and richly dressed Skaven approached. Psody put a hand on his shoulder.

- My eldest son, Kristofferson, who is also the first Skaven that is officially born on the surface. Here is Master Eusebio Clarin, who comes from the Principality of Sueño.
- It is a great honour to receive you, replied the young ratman before bowing.
- All honour is mine, young man, the Human replied.
- Kit, you shall drive the carriage to the temple of Verena, where we will decide the route that will please Master Clarin. Then you will take us wherever he wants-ask.
- Right, Father.

The tall brown Skaven moved quickly to the coachman’s place. Clarin was going up, when he suddenly felt an uncomfortable feeling. A strange reflection had appeared at the corner of his field of vision. He reflexively raised his head, and thought he saw a window close on the top floor.

- Is something wrong, Master Clarin?
- Well... for a moment, I felt I was being watched.

The White Skaven raised his head in turn, then sighed, guessing where the diplomat was looking.

- Don’t worry. It’s not an impression, but it’s not a danger, either.
- May I ask you what it is, then?
- This is my youngest son Gabriel. This window opens on his workshop.
- You think he just wanted to get some fresh air?
- I think he’s wondering what you are doing here?
- So he can come and ask me, I’ll be happy to answer him.
- I’m sure of it, but you won’t see him.
- Is he sick?
- No, but he’s horribly shy. He is at ease only in front of his drawing board.
- Is he an artist?
- A kind of. He invents some incredible machines.

The Human frowned, pensive.

- I beg you not to be offended. He’s a nice boy, but he cannot speak-communicate with people he doesn’t know. Everyone scares him, especially adults-grown up.
- Is he so young?
- For a Human, he would be about twelve years old. You know how children are at that age. We’re
expecting worse for him.
- Well. I understand. I hope for him that he will gain confidence.
- That’s what we all hope-want. Well, let’s go!

The Human took a seat aboard, followed by the White Skaven. He was about to close the carriage door, as Bianka ran towards them.

- I have to go to Verena’s temple, can I use your coach, too?

Psody looked at the ambassador questioningly. The latter turned to the ratgirl.

- Please, miss. I will have the pleasure of enjoying your company!

Without hesitation, the girl got into the carriage and sat down next to her father. Kristofferson slammed the whip, and the team left the property.

Eusebio Clarin was facing the two Skaven. He noted with a slight satisfaction that he was gradually becoming accustomed to the presence of the two ratmen. He looked out the window, admired the houses, and was still amazed to see men and women cross Skaven without any discomfort.

The voice of the girl pulled him from his thoughts.

- Master Clarin?
- Yes, señorita?
- Say no... what?
- Oh, that’s what a damsel is called in Estalia.
- Ah. I should learn to speak Estalian one of these days.
- It is a language halfway between Bretonnian and Tilean.
- I see. I... I would like to thank you for being so confident towards us. You are the first Human to show so much sympathy for us.
- Yet, your grandfather, all his subjects are as Humans as I am, and yet they don’t seem to consider you in a troubling way.
- I meant “a Human from the outside”. All Humans who have followed Prince Ludwig the First are volunteers. Everyone knew what to expect by settling here. And so, all those whom you will see here have left aside their prejudices, even if they are perfectly justified. This is not the case for outsiders. Well, until you arrive.
- Have Humans ever come, but finally left Vereinbarung?

Bianka remained silent. She turned to Psody. He answered:

- So far, we have not yet had to deal with this kind of issue. But mentalities can change. We come to a stage where all the first-generation Skaven have reached adulthood, and have fully taken their place in our society-society. From adopted-beloved children, they became responsible citizens. But it is not sure that everything will go smoothly. First, we live less time than you live, and that drives us to want to do things faster. Then... I cannot say. We’ll see!
- I wish you it works, Master Steiner.

The coach slowed down when approaching a large construction. It was a large, austere building, without ornamentation, with the exception of a large bronze sign representing a scale fixed above the large wooden entrance doors. The Temple of the Goddess of Justice had white walls, and the various blocks were topped with slate roofs. The windows of the building were narrow, without any colouring. The splendour was not the main characteristic of Vereneans worshippers.
The two Skaven and the Human descended from the carriage to enter the temple. Clarin let his gaze estimate the value of the decorations, the quality of the tapestries, the finesse of the sculptures in the wood of the doors and skirting boards.

Sober in quantity, but quality is at the rendezvous.

Bianka’s voice pulled him from his examination.

- Master Clarin, now I leave you, my office is here.

The ambassador bowed politely with a warm smile.

- I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again before I leave, señorita.
- We will see. I wish you a pleasant journey. Father…
- Have a nice day sweetheart.

The two Skaven embraced each other, and the girl took leave of the two men. Psody leaded Clarin to the cartographer’s desk. A large map representing Vereinbarung was hanging on the wall. In the centre, the capital, Steinerburg. The suburbs included cities with imperial-sounding names. Clarin spotted the main road to the north-western Empire, which ran through Hoffnungshügel. A city seemed more important to the southeast, Neuedorf. It was however far away, and the journey to reach this town required more time than the diplomat had. Finally, Prince Calderon’s representative chose to visit the city of Pluftzig. This city was situated in the middle of once arid plains. The Master Mage ensured, however, that cereal production was generous in this sector. This affirmation stirred the curiosity of the Human.

A few hours later, the whole company had arrived. The team stopped at the relay. The ambassador and the Master Mage descended, followed by Calderon’s two men-at-arms. Kristofferson stayed to look after the horses, leaving his father and their guest to walk around.

Pluftzig seemed prosperous. The streets were wide and relatively clean. The houses, of all sizes, clear and well maintained. Some of the houses, those around the Verena Temple in the centre of the city, were larger and wore some decorations that foreshadowed a certain financial comfort from their owners.

What struck most Estalien was the shock of communication between races. Rather the absence of such a shock. Indeed, even in a city smaller than the capital, where the average citizen’s level of openness was generally lower than in the large cities frequented by many peoples, there were no barriers between Humans and Skaven. They mixed with an ease almost disconcerting.

When they arrived at the exit of the little town, Master Clarin was surprised by something else.

- According to the information of our cartographer, this whole area was arid, and completely unfit for cultivation. How to explain such an abundance?

The White Skaven reached his arm in one direction with a knowing smile.

- Thanks to this.

“This” was the imposing form of a stone aqueduct that ran along the skyline.

- When we moved in, it was a dry-uncultivated land indeed. But we had the advantage of having among us a Dwarf who had engineering skills. He agreed to stay here for some time to plan and supervise the start of the work. All able-bodied men took part in the project, plus more from outside. It took a long time to finish, but it was worth it. The first real harvest made the following
The year was a real pleasure.
- I wish I could fully realize it! Could we go to see him a little closer?
- Of course! We will spend the night at Bau-Aquädukt, it is a village nearby where work started. A lot of wealth has passed through, and it is now a relatively large trading post. They have a good hostel. I suggest you go there in a short time. Let’s have a drink and let the horses breathe. Will be this fine to you?
- Sure it will!

The crew exchanged some opinions and observations around a cold beer. Psody invited Clarin’s two soldiers to join the conversation. He took care not to ask them what their previous experiences with the Under-Empire had been, and preferred to question them about their origins, and what had led them to attempt the Renegade Crowns adventure. The two men answered without being too intimidated or upset.

Then they resumed their visit, towards the construction. A few extra hours of travel were announced. Clarin put them to good use to continue his information work.

- Tell me, Master Mage, in Plufzig as in Steinerburg, the houses are inhabited by Humans and your peers. Skaven here all live on the surface?
- Of course.
- Why are the Skaven not installed underground?

The White Skaven answered in the same tone with a small smile:

- What pushes you to live in the open air?
- Well, Humans have always lived like this. Our gods created us, with the ability to build our homes. For the Skaven, this is not the case.
- You don’t know anything about it, Master Clarin. The Skaven are perfectly capable of building houses, too. The Horned Rat created them in the same way that your gods created Humans. And just like you, the Skaven do not like to live in the middle of garbage and garbage from the world above. They breathe stale air, they drink stagnant water, and eat the rotten food that falls from the sewer pipes. That is not their choice.
- You mean this situation doesn’t suit them?
- On the contrary, they are constantly inconvenienced by this life. Only a few of them indulge in dirt, members of Clan Pestilens. This freaky mentality is the result of dozens of generations made obsessed by the disease and intoxicated by drugs from birth. Believe me, all the others are ready to do anything to leave their cesspool.
- Are there cities populated only by Skaven? I mean, places where they could live on the surface?
- One city, to my knowledge: Skavenblight. It is the capital of the Under-Empire, the city where the Skaven appeared officially-established for the first time. It is in the middle of a quagmire, somewhere between Bretonnia and Estalia.
- Is it big?
- I’ve heard so, but I cannot say how much, I’ve never been there. It’s the largest Skaven city Skaven, I’m sure of it. There are still some Dwarven strongholds that have fallen into their clutches, but they are buried in the mountains. Even Hellpit is in a pit.
- What about Mordheim?
- Too dangerous to live permanently, even if they go regularly to pick up warpstone. No, overwhelmingly, the Skaven live-die underground. The goal of the Children of the Horned Rat is to invade the surface and settle there. Fortunately, they don’t think about it too much. It’s rare, but sometimes they do it.
- That explains the invasion attempts like Nuln’s or Ubersreik’s, I guess?
- I have never participated in such an offensive, but I received first-hand testimony of Nuln’s invasion. The person confirmed me it was terrible-terrifying. And I take your word for it when you
talk about the horrors of the Ubersreik invasion. For Helmgart, it was even worse. They concluded an alliance with weird-things.

- What?
- Oh, excuse me, I speak so little of them that I sometimes call them still as the Feral Skaven do. I’m talking about the creatures of Chaos. To invade Helmgart, the Under-Empire joined forces with the followers of their most rotten-corrupt god, Nurgle.

The emissary rubbed his chin.

- Master Prospero Steiner, may I ask you why the Feral Skaven have not already invaded the Empire, if they are so numerous and so well equipped?
- It is true that today, the Feral Skaven are as numerous as the Humans, have a more destructive technology, and master a formidable magic. But the Feral Skaven are not Humans, far from it. They will never admit it, but they are too scared.
- By us?
- Yes. As you probably know, a Feral Skaven will never agree to fight loyally. Whoever its opponent is, it will do anything to defeat him by treachery, unless that opponent is obviously inferior in number.
- The stories of battles against them that I could read confirm what you’re telling me.
- They are afraid of their enemies, but the most important source of fear is themselves.

The convoy passed near a field. Several peasants, Humans and Skaven, were ploughing the land together jokingly.

- You say they are afraid of themselves? repeated Clarin.
- It’s a bit long to explain, but relatively simple-simple. Do you want me to tell you how it works?
- Please.

The White Skaven cleared his throat, took a bag out of his wallet, drank a little water and handed it to the Human. While Clarin quenched his thirst, Psody began his explanation:

“When a Feral Skaven comes into the world, it is integrated into society from day one. According to his colour, it will be a Clanrat, a Stormvermin or a Grey Seer, unless it is a female, in which case it is put in the nurseries where it will serve as a breeder all its life. Girls have no other function than to be fecundated and to give birth to Feral Skaven. That’s why they do not even bother to name them.”

“The Skaven society is like a pyramid. At the foot, you have all the slaves, the worst scum, the off-clans. Above you have the Clanrats, the “ordinary” citizens. These are the most numerous. Then you have more “specialized” Clans members. Warplock Engineers, Plague Monks, and others. Then come the Clawleaders, Pawleaders, Fangleaders, so the equivalent of our “captains”. Finally, above all, stands the Warlord, who generally belongs-belongs to one or other of the Clans, and will tend to favour the members of his Clan, obviously. Grey Seers – the White Skaven, if you prefer – have a special place in this society. As chosen-chosen ones of the Horned Rat, they are above everyone else. Some are even the true masters of a burrow or colony, if not too big-big. This was the case for my master. The Pestilens were the most numerous, and Plague Deacon Soum was the ruler, but he did nothing without the agreement of Grey Prophet Vellux. Only the Seer Lord is above an ordinary Grey Seer. And only the Horned Rat is above the Seer Lord. And every White Skaven is sacred. According to the beliefs of the Feral Skaven, whoever dares to attack a White Skaven without being commanded by another White Skaven will be severely and mercilessly punished by the Skaven above him, or by the Horned Rat. Thus, everyone has his place.”

Clarin had a puzzled expression.
- Who is this... “Seer Lord”, exactly?
- The emissary-emissary of the Horned Rat. The White Skaven who hears his messages directly and transmits them according to his heart to the Skaven people. He lives in Skarogne.
- He’s a great religious figure, then. He would be the equivalent of the Great Theogonist of the Empire?
- Absolutely, Sir Clarin.
- Well, where are the problems? Everything seems well organized and structured, as with us.
- In appearance, you are right. But reality is different.

“The elevation from one rank to another in this hierarchy is not the result of a promotion obtained by honest-applied work. It is usually the result of treachery, murder or conspiracy to eject the one up. Everyone wants the place above, ensures that those who are at the same level do not constitute an obstacle, and takes care that those from below remain there.”

“Feral Skaven at the bottom of the ladder are the worst off, apparently in any case. Slaves are out-of-clan, they have no status, and will not be missed. So their life is a daily struggle. The least Clanrat can beat a slave to death on a whim, without risking the slightest consequence. Clanrats are intrinsically superior to slaves, and slaves are busy enough to protect their lives so as not to want to avenge one’s own.”

“The more a Feral Skaven climbs the stairs of the pyramid, the more the risks grow. First, compared to those above, who will be fewer and fewer, but more and more clever-cunning, and therefore dangerous. Second, Feral Skaven of the same level will do everything to have the place above, including and especially eliminate all the competitors. And, you have understood, a rising Feral Skaven must also pay attention to those who remain below him, who will do everything to overthrow it.”

A Skaven swung a heavy canvas bag in a trolley while singing. The diplomat understood the explanation.

- So, whatever its social position, a Feral Skaven will always be afraid for its life, whether it’s the most miserable slave or the most important of the generals.
- Only the Feral Skaven whose brain is no more than a sponge soaked in warpstone are not afraid for their lives. And more than one Feral Skaven behaving so did not see his end coming.
- And so, this constant fear pushes the Feral Skaven to fight each other permanently, instead of planning an invasion of the surface world.
- You understand everything, Master Clarin.
- How odd, this behaviour is reminiscent of the Orcs.
- The Orcs often fight with each other, it is true. But from what I read, they do not kill each other so much. Even a leader defeated by another will not necessarily be executed, if it proves that it can still be a good and useful warrior. Its men will submit to the new leader, their loyalty goes to the strongest of instinctive way. And the Orcs never act by treachery. They are violent, they are brutal, they plunder and kill, but they are not deceitful. There is no subtlety or ambiguity. And we are sure of one thing: they respect the law of the strongest. If their warlord is killed in action, there is a good chance they run away if someone doesn’t replace it very quickly.
- I never had the opportunity to realize it. Manann be praised, I have always avoided the Orcs, so far.

The visit of the surroundings of the aqueduct was done without a hitch. The Estonian emissary realized that the whole was not decorated with the sculptures proper to Nain architecture. Psody confirmed, but recalled that only the engineer was from the Dwarven Kingdoms. In addition, the urgency of the situation had somewhat precipitated the site. Although it took a few years to build it, sustainability had been favoured, to the detriment of aesthetics.
After an excellent meal at the *Rusty Dwarf* Inn, named in homage to the colour of the beard of the Dwarf engineer who led the construction – the famous Slayer Gotrek Gurnisson – Humans and Skavens went to bed. The next day, they went back to Steinerburg. It took them more than half a day to return to the capital, and the bells of the temples rang four times when the carriage stopped completely in front of the Prince’s mansion.

When he dismounted, Clarin saw five people waiting for them. Prince Steiner was there, as well as Miss Bianka and young Sigmund, and two people he had not seen were there: a little ratgirl, dressed with an elaborate dress, behind which stood a Skaven woman with a light coat that looked more mature. Psody hugged them.

- Master Clarin, I have not had the opportunity to introduce you to the last two people who are among the dearest to my heart-heart: my wife, Heike, and my youngest daughter Isolde.

The ambassador bowed, gave the mother a hand-kissing, and a small bow to the girl. The latter rose to her full height, inhaled a good blow, and said:

- Glory and honour to Prince Calderon!

Clarin pouted in surprise as he recognized his native tongue, and burst out laughing happily.

- How adorable!
- I hope you do not take too much of her accent, she has been training all day to please you, muttered Steiner.

The Estalian’s smile sparkled more.

- Your Highness, I wish to thank you. Thanks to you, I had a much more optimistic and enjoyable vision of the Skaven people than the memories I kept from Ubersreik. And I am convinced that my monarch and the people of our principality will understand the same thing when our exchanges begin.
- I suspect it will take a little while, Clarin. Even here, living together is not always very simple. But I am as optimistic as you. If the people of Sueño are in your image, we should be able to get along. You will remind Prince Roderigo Calderon that I am ready to meet him whenever he wants, wherever he wants.
- We will find a place at the border for that.

Then the Human turned to Sigmund.

- Young man, I beg you to excuse my behaviour, if I could seem scornful to you. Your father was able to find the right words to convince me of your good intentions.

The Black Skaven did not answer, and just nodded slightly.

- Well, my children, your parents and I still have things to do with Master Clarin. We will meet for dinner.

The five Steiner children each greeted the ambassador, then dispersed. The two Humans and the Skaven couple made their way to the library. As usually, the *Encyclopaedia of the Children of the Horned Rat* was enthroned on its shelf.

- My friend, as a token of friendship, I intend to offer Prince Calderon a printed copy of our common work. My adopted son, my best friend and I have written a book about the Skaven people. Of course, Prospero was our best source of information, indeed. But I spent long hours studying them from my side, and Prior Romulus compiled all the texts to bring them together in a
harmonious way.

Ludwig Steiner opened a small cupboard and took out a big book of about fifteen inches.

- Here it is. I beg you to hand it over to His Highness Prince Calderon. But if I brought you here, it’s to prove to you that it’s not a fake. The original is here, firmly attached to its base. I invite you to take the time you want to compare the printed copy that I’m giving you with the original.
- Is it a work you have written with your adopted son and your chaplain? Prior Romulus is your chaplain as well?
- He is. And each chapter is signed by the hand of its author.
- Well... I trust you, but the protocol requires me to make such a check.
- Then sit down and take the time you like.
- Oh, one hour should be enough, your Highness.
- We let you work. When you’re done, ring the bell, Gerd will take you back to the throne room.

One hour later, the Estalien appeared again before the Prince and his two adopted children, the print in hand.

- All the pages I checked were actually identical. I have no reason to doubt the rest.
- Perfect. I hope this will allow Prince Calderon to know a little more about Feral Skaven.
- Thus, the difference with the Fifth People will be the clearest, your Highness.

Prince Steiner smirked when he heard the ambassador adopt the expression he was trying to formalize, but he tinkered. He felt Clarin was going to say or do something unpleasant. And in fact...

- I would like to apologize to you, your Highness, but I have not been completely sincere with you so far.
- You haven’t? So what did you hide from me?

The Prince spoke in a soft voice, but with a note of firmness. Without losing his temper, the ambassador took an envelope out of his pocket.

- My monarch has instructed me to check your good faith before explaining the essence of the problem. Now, I know you are worthy of our trust. Also, I will give you information that even my people still do not know.

Prince Steiner relaxed.

- Ah, right, I appreciate that proof of trust. What is it about?
- It is a threatening letter that Prince Calderon received a few days after the attack on the two villages.

The Prince made a small gesture. Psody stepped forward, retrieved the envelope the ambassador handed him, and handed it to his adoptive father. Steiner opened the missive and read it aloud.

“The man-thing Calderon will die soon. The Children of the Horned Rat have already begun to remodel their lands. Soon we will arrive, and we will kill-devour you. Our men-thing slaves will weaken you, then we will attack, and you will learn to fear us before dying-dying.”

The Prince’s mouth narrowed into an ironic pout.

- Well, I admit that the style is quite provocative.
- Look at the signature, your Highness. That’s what pushed us to pay attention.

The White Skaven felt a sting between his lungs when he heard the voice of his adoptive father announce:

“Psody the Grey Seer of the Rat Kingdom”.

He noticed that Clarin had turned his head towards him. Feeling that an explanation was expected, he mumbled:

- My birth name is Psody, Sir Clarin. People who know-know me also know it. However, for the good of all, we think we’ll manage to make sure it doesn’t become known when I’m gone. Officially, I will remain an adopted child of Prince Steiner, but I will have been collected very small by one of his battalions of mercenaries, like my companion.
- Do not think of it as a rejection of identity, Heike added. It is to make life easier for the inhabitants of Vereinbarung. Even though I prefer truth to lies, there are certain truths that cause more harm than they help. And the citizens who will inhabit this kingdom in the future must not know that one of the founders of Vereinbarung was a Grey Seer.

The ambassador nodded.

- You are absolutely right, my lady. But still, today, Master Mage, someone knows you well enough so that your birth name is not a secret for him. And that someone does not like you. Prince Calderon wants to know the end of the story, and if you accept his help, he will be happy to set up a collaboration. What do you say, your Highness?
- The pleasure will be shared, but for now... I can send a team to investigate on the spot, however I do not see what more to do.
- We have this letter.
- This is a first element, but it is rather thin, you will agree.
- Because all the clues do not appear clearly, your Majesty. For the simple reason that this letter is a copy.

Psody, who had read the letter during the dialogue between the two Humans, narrowed his eyes.

- It’s not a Grey Seer writing, indeed!
- Sallust, our Master Mage of the Golden Order, copied the text after neutralizing the warpstone powder that was in the ink. To do this, he had to use a mask and protective gloves.
- Excellent-excellent initiative!
- I have the original letter. It is hidden in a reinforced compartment of my coach, in a lead box. The Golden Order has established that lead protects from warpstone fumes. I thought you might want to look at it, and make sure it’s a letter written by a Feral Skaven? Of course, taking all precautions. Master Sallust assured us that the warpstone was dead, but we are never too careful.

The White Skaven turned to the Prince.

- What do you think, Father?
- It shall be done in your laboratory. Come on, Clarin, let’s take a look at this.

The four people left the mansion to return to the emissary’s carriage. Clarin gave a brief order to the coachman, brought to the vehicle by Gerd. The man opened a hidden panel at the back of the carriage, and pulled out a small but solid-looking box. Psody seized it, and led his wife and two men to a small, secluded building at the bottom of the park, on the side of the cliff. Here again, Gotrek Gurnisson’s talent made it possible to create a high-performance laboratory, where everything was in its place, and where there was an impressive collection of quality instruments.
- It must be pleasant to work in these conditions.
- Indeed. Be sure that even the Seer Lord doesn’t have this equipment!
- That must kindle the envy of your inventor son, right?
- I promised my grandson Gabriel to have him build a workshop like this when the age of adulthood comes for him, said the Prince.

The White Skaven put the cassette on the desk and opened it carefully. He lives inside a parchment studded with dark spots. He closed his eyes, put his left hand on his forehead, and held out the fingers of his other hand over the box. He concentrated for a few seconds, then raised his eyelids.

- There are still some warpstone particles, but you should not take any risks. Well, unless you brew that parchment and drink it like tea.
- I’m not sure this kind of decoction is to my taste, Master Mage.

The Master Mage examined the parchment more closely.

- I let you guess whose beast belonged the back the skin was cut from, Master Clarin. And I confirm that it is indeed a hand of Feral Skaven who held the feather. Look at the aggressiveness-aggressiveness with which the author has slashed the tanned leather. He wrote in Reikspiel, but the writing of the Skaven is all in straight lines, without rounding.
- You mean, like the Dwarf Khazalid?
- Nah, the Dwarves have a much more refined writing, with cuneiform symbols. Master Gurnisson showed me some examples. There, in any case, it is really a literate Skaven who wrote that.
- Many people know how to write, among Feral Skaven?
- As for Humans: mainly priests and scientists.
- What about the merchants?
- They don’t have any. In the Under-Empire, people trade or steal. Hmm... the text is the same. Here, look-look!

Psody presented the back of the parchment.

- It’s typical: the ink has crossed the parchment, we can see the text upside down. There is probably some dried ink powder on the author’s desk. When I was a Grey Seer, I stained my writing table several times that way.
- It’s a good thing that the Skaven are immune to warpstone. You look perfectly healthy.

Psody smirked.

- We are not completely immune-insensitive, Master Clarin. Skaven can only handle refined warpstone. Rough warpstone is as dangerous for Skaven that for anyone else. And even treated warpstone still remains dangerous. Those who eat it to increase their powers may become addicted to it. It’s a deadly-incurable addiction.
- Really? Fortunately, you do not seem to have developed this addiction!
- Luckily I didn’t, I ate warpstone only once a long time ago. And I don’t know if the Skaven born in Vereinbarung will keep this resistance?
- My two children were born underground, in the middle of the permanent scent of warpstone powder, Prince Steiner explained. But everyone who has come to the world on the surface has always lived a healthy life. For my grandchildren, I cannot say, but maybe in a few generations the blood of the Skaven will have completely lost the habit of warpstone.
- If it is the price of a good health like that of all the Skaven that I saw in your borders, it is perhaps not so expensive paid? Warpstone has no place in your society, tell me?
- We do not use warpstone, indeed, said Heike. And one of our projects would be to find a way to appease the addiction to this scourge.
- I wish you success, my lady. And Prince Calderon told me to give you this parchment, if it can help you in your search, Master Mage. It is this parchment that convinced me of your good faith.
- How-how?
- While you allowed me to read your encyclopaedia, I purposely consulted the chapters written by your hand. I have carefully studied the writing of this letter of threats in order to compare it to yours. It is obvious that it was not yours.
- Clever boy, murmured the Prince with a small nod. I do not think it is necessary to make Prince Calderon wait any longer. We should send someone back to Sueño with you to examine the attacked places.
- I propose Sigmund, Heike suggested.
- Your son? He doesn’t seem to like me very much.
- I will not ask him to love you, but to investigate your home. And for that, you can trust him. It does not matter if it does not please him, the friendship between our two countries is more important.
- It will be an order from the Prince, said Steiner. He will have nothing to say against.

Clarin, satisfied, could not repress a slight smile.

And we’re even for the funny ideas of princes!

- You will leave tomorrow morning. In the meantime, please consider yourself as our distinguished guest. The day is not over, I suggest you visit some of the most notable places in our brand new capital.
- It shall be a great pleasure, your Highness.
- You will understand that my prince business does not allow me to leave my mansion, so I will ask my granddaughter Bianka to serve as a guide, your escort accompanying you, of course. Will it suit you?
- If her culture is developed as her company is pleasant, you will make me a fulfilled man, your Highness. If she agrees, of course.
- I think you fascinate her, said the ratwoman, evasively. It must be said that it affects her to talk with educated people, especially those who come from outside.
- So be it, said Steiner. We’ll meet again tonight for supper.
When the bell of Verena’s great temple of Steinerburg rang for the eighth time, Gabriel opened his eyes. Already, the sounds of the inhabitants were rising from under the Steiner manor. The young light-grey Skaven pulled himself out of bed. He scratched his back, rubbing his sleep-misty eyes. The night had been long for him, but it had been worth: he had managed to complete four diagrams, including one that had been squeezing him for several weeks. He felt a big smile light up his face when he thought about all that would be done thank to his inventions. But immediately, a black cloud darkened his thoughts.

Opa Ludwig will want me to design these to create weapons, again!

Indeed, Vereinbarung’s army was not very big. As compensation, it was very well equipped. More precise and formidable firearms, guns with particularly destructive ammunition, projects of steam war machines that could make the best Nuln engineers jealous. Everything had come out from Gabriel’s brain. That hurt him. He defined himself as an “engineering artist”, his father wanted to encourage him in this way, but Prince Steiner preferred to put his knowledge to good use for the defence of the Rat Kingdom. Even built in a spirit of friendship, it was necessary to be able to defend against the many threats from the outside.

This state of affairs was regularly a source of tension between Gabriel’s parents and his grandfather. During some conversations, it even had degenerated. The Prince had raised his voice, and Heike and Psody had responded with the same energy. And in those moments, Steiner reminded his children to order: as a sovereign, he always had the last word. The poor little Skaven felt responsible for the situation, but he never dared to say anything. Every time he had tried something, fear had tied his tongue. He just nodded and went back to work.

His belly began to gurgle, reminding him of more trivial things.

Fifteen minutes later, washed and dressed, he went down to breakfast. As he entered the large dining room, he saw his older brother Kristofferson getting up.

- Hello, Gab!
- Hello, Kit.
- You feel better now?
- Uh... why are you asking me that?
- Well, we did not even see you at supper yesterday. Is it Clarin who impresses you?

The young Skaven could not repress a thrill when he heard the name of the Estalian.

- He… I...
- Looks like you try to avoid him, don’t you?
- Yes... Well, no... uh... I mean...
- You do not have to worry about him, he comes in peace.
- He... is he still here?
- No, he went to visit the modest districts of the city with Bianka.
- What? Bianka in the badly districts?
- Relax, they’re accompanied with his escort, Kristofferson explained patiently. Clarin will leave after dinner.
- Oh, right.
- No worries, I assure you again. Well, I have to go, Father is waiting for me in his office.
Kristofferson left the dining room and wandered down the halls of the property. The day was beautiful, he was in an excellent mood. In passing, he politely greeted the servants he met. Finally, he arrived at the door of the Master Mage’s study. He was about to knock at the door, when he heard a burst of voice that made him suspend his gesture. He recognized his brother’s tone through the wood of the door.

- How can I convince you? It is still and always the same answer!
- Because you’re still-always asking the same question! You can be stubborn, so can I, too! And I do not intend to change my mind about it!

A grunt responded to this invective. Psody said again:

- Now, you shall accompany Master Clarin to clear things up with what is happening in Sueño. And I’ll ask you to stay polite to him.
- I don’t trust him, Father! My instinct tells me that this Human is hiding something from us.
- My instinct tells me he’s sincere, just like Opa Ludwig’s. And most of all, your grandfather knows how to tell the difference between a liar and an honest man, by experience. This prevails over your smoky-muddy impressions. Now go, and do your job! The Rat Kingdom is counting on you, Siggy. It will prevent you from thinking about anything else.

There was a brief silence, then the door burst open on a Sigmund in a very bad mood. The Black Skaven left the office without even a glance for Kristofferson. The latter timidly passed his head through the door.

- Ah, Kit! I was waiting for you. Come-come in.

The brown Skaven obeyed.

- Once again, this story of...
- Don’t talk to me about it! the White Skaven cut. His obstinacy-stubbornness will finally cost him so much. I just sent it on a mission, I hope that won’t crumble his skills!
- At Master Clarin’s? I couldn’t help but hear the end of your conversation.
- Yes. His tactical knowledge should allow us to find-track down those who made trouble.

After a very difficult first Harvest experience, the Black Skaven had given up collecting small Skaven, and had specialized in urban combat – the Skaven settlements tunnels were worth narrow alleyways. But he was also able to analyse the terrain in the countryside.

- Right, your friend Walter has sent his report to Major Schmetterling. This morning, news came in: some disturbing events happened again near Klapperschlänge. People have heard scary noises, secluded buildings have been destroyed, and their inhabitants have been found slaughtered, when they have not disappeared-gone. Captain Müller doesn’t know what to do. Schmetterling told him that reinforcements would be sent to him.
- I suppose I am these reinforcements, aren’t I?
- With Walter. You’ll take a dozen men with you, and find out what’s going on. If we are dealing with a magical creature or an invasion attempt, we must deal with the problem as soon as possible.
- Do you want us to take care of it on the spot?

Psody raised his finger.

- Do not take unnecessary risks. If it’s just half a dozen brigands, you bring them back to us by the skin of their buttocks. If it’s a magician or a big beast, you come back immediately. I repeat, Kit: no unnecessary risk. Is it clear?
- Crystal. No unnecessary risk.
The White Skaven patted his son’s shoulder.

- Come back quickly and in a one piece.
- Don’t worry, you know me.

Kristofferson gave a small smile that his father hesitated to return.

* *

In the large park that surrounded the manor house where the princely family lived, there was a small, lone, area, a little clear slope not far from the northern rampart, the one overlooking the rocky wall. It was a point of view that allowed anyone to see all the gardens. It was also a place where Sigmund used to practice weapons training, something he did when he wanted to exercise, or when he was upset.

Currently, he did not feel the need to train. And yet, he chained the blows and techniques with energy.

Like his older brother, he was well versed in the use of many weapons. Swords, war hammers, morning stars, one-handed, two-handed, with or without a shield... he was particularly proud of the sword he had made craft at his own expense by the best blacksmith in the capital – an expatriate Dwarf who chose to stay after the construction of the aqueduct. The latter had engraved, at his request, on the whole length of its blade, the name which Sigmund had given him: Heart of Unicorn. The Black Skaven had never seen this mythical animal, but willingly granted it a fantastic, fascinating character, which made him dream as he was a child. When he was younger, he used to play a knight brandishing a horn of Unicorn. His sister Bianka had been shocked and called him “animal killer”. He had reassured her, and explained her that the Unicorn had given him her horn before dying from a monster’s hand, and had given him for mission to avenge her. And now he was an adult, he had his real sword.

Heart of Unicorn had cost a fortune to the Black Skaven, but it was worth every penny. It was remarkable: it had a wavy shape like a Flamberge’s, but unlike this type of sword, usually very heavy, its blade was short and light enough to be mounted on a grip handle of one-handed sword. Moreover, it was made in gromril, the meteoric iron refined by the Dwarves. Its handle and its guard were made with black metal clasped in a solid leather of the same colour. At the end of the pommel was screwed a small copper ball, a simple and pretty ornament.

The second child of the Steiner siblings swept the air with large movements. Heart of Unicorn whistled, passed fluidly from one of his sides to the other with the docility of the most faithful animal trained for the war. From time to time, the Black Skaven jumped forward with a thrust, then backed away, splitting the air with a parade.

He spotted out of the corner of his eye Kristofferson’s tall slender figure climbing the hill in his direction. He made a reel over his head, slipped his sword into its scabbard, and stopped moving. He finished catching his breath when the brown Skaven was in front of him.

The two brothers looked at each other. They did not need to say a single word. They stayed like that for a long minute. Finally, the older of the two spoke:

- I’m leaving, too. I go to Klapperschlänge. We must know what kind of problem is coming to us.
- I already know who is a problem coming to us.
- My, my, my! I understand that a kid like Gab can be impressed, but a big guy like you, it surprises me more!
The Black Skaven groaned, irritated.

- I don’t fear him, Kit. But I feel he’s trying to manipulate us!
- I don’t trust Clarin as much as Father or Opa Ludwig.

Sigmund felt his heart lighten up as he heard these words. So, someone else shared his opinion! Unfortunately, he was very disappointed when he heard Kristofferson continue:

- But I think he’s sincere. And we need allies. The Old World will soon discover the existence of the Rat Kingdom, Siggy. Our kingdom, our home. Humans, Dwarves, Elves, all have prejudices about the Skaven. It’s up to us to prove them that we can be good people too. And you can already take a step forward by helping Prince Calderon.

The Black Skaven didn’t answer, but he pouted approvingly. To relax the atmosphere a bit, Kristofferson proposed:

- Why don’t we practice a short Siggy’s Mill before leaving?
- Right.

Kristofferson unsheathed his rapier, and placed himself behind his brother. Siggy’s Mill was a series of movements cleverly studied by the two brothers. It was Gabriel who had found this name, impressed by the demonstration of his two elders. “It looks like a mill!” he had shouted. Kristofferson and Sigmund had spent long days creating their own sequence by drawing on the fighting techniques described by many fencing masters in the library’s books. This series of weapon passes multiplied the feints, synchronized blows, sweeps, all to the rhythm of a text worthy of a nursery rhyme written by Nedland Barnrooster. The one who uttered the beginning of the little poem was the one who launched the initiative of the pass, and then each one pronounced a verse in turn. This time it was Kristofferson who began:

- The wind was blowing hard that day.

The two brothers made a wide strike from left to right, then from right to left.

- The storm was threatening, said Sigmund.

A thrust.

- There was a brief lull.

Parry position.

- It did not last long.

Another succession of broad blows.

- Hey, you, miller, be careful!

Each smashed his sword from top to bottom.

- The wings of your beautiful mill...

A mowing of the legs.

- Are not made to maintain...

Three thrusts from left to right.
- This speed too long!

A feint, then each one sent the tip of his sword back, on the flank corresponding to the direction of the pass, catching an opponent unprepared who would focus on the sword of the one facing him.

- It could not be otherwise.

A new vertical swoosh.

- All the ropes broke...

Another mowing at the knees.

The two brothers shouted at the same time the last line, the one who launched the most dangerous attack:

- And the mill went off!

This sentence announced the most difficult, most spectacular and deadliest weapon pass of the chain. The two swordsmen had to turn at the same time at the same speed, always back to back, and swirl their sword synchronously to imitate the movement of a mill in panic, at the rate of two turns per second. When they arrived at the end of a complete turn, each one sent his sword on his left so that the other seized it, and the two fighters made a similar rotation again in the other direction. This manoeuvre was also risky, but had the advantage of completely diverting the most concentrated opponents.

Once back at the start, the two brothers disjoined their backs, lowered their arms, and took a breath.

- No need to say, it lets off steam!

It was not necessary to be right-handed or left-handed to run Siggy’s Mill, but if Kristofferson was trained to use both right and left hand, his little brother was content with the right. And this movement forced the two performers to use the same hand. In truth, Sigmund suspected Kristofferson of being too perfectionist, without daring to confess.

The eldest Steiner child had a small smile.

- Well, I have to go. I assure you, Siggy, we will have only advantages to collaborate with Sueño.
- What if they try to bamboozle us?
- Then I’ll ask Opa to let you lead the assault on Barca.

They sneered together and hugged each other. After that, they went down to the entrance of the estate. Kristofferson strode on his horse and trotted to the barracks. Sigmund returned to his room, collected some belongings in a large leather bag, and took leave of his parents before joining the Estalian procession.

Leaning on his desk, Gabriel slid his feather along the ruler on the paper. He clenched his teeth, threatening to bite his own tongue. Suddenly, something made swing his ear nervously to the open window: the voice of his older brother talking to the stranger.

- I obey my father, Master Clarin.
- And that’s all to your honour, sir.
- Remember this: if I want, I can disobey him. If you try to cheat me, I’ll have the honour to make
you regret!

Gabriel dared to lean out the window. He saw Sigmund, on his mare, talking to Clarin who was standing near his carriage. The Black Skaven didn’t seem to be in a joking mood. The Human, on the other hand, remained smiling.

- I assure you that you won’t have to worry about it. It’s not a trap or a test. This is a problem that we are asking you to consider, because you probably have more knowledge on this subject, and my sovereign would like to take advantage of it.
- Right. I follow you.

The Estalian contemplated the Steiner manor for the last time in its whole. He looked up, and then saw, on the top floor, a small figure he had not yet met.

_Oh, this is the little young inventor!

He flashed his brightest smile, raising a friendly hand.

Gabriel closed the window hastily, drew the curtains, and dropped into his chair, his heart strongly pounding. He started when he heard the voice of his older sister.

- You know, he’s a charming gentleman, so you don’t have to be afraid of him.

The light brown Skaven grumbled.

- You... you could knock at my door before entering my lab!
- Yes, that’s right, please excuse me. I’m worried about you, Gab. Everyone is worried about you.
- Oh. There... there is no reason to be.

Suddenly, he remembered what he had noticed before having met the strange Human’s gaze.

- Siggy! Siggy is gone!
- He is, indeed.
- He left with this Human!
- That’s what Opa Ludwig ordered.
- He’s... he’s...

Poor Gabriel could no longer articulate the words. Tears came to his eyes.

- Is Siggy a hostage? Prisoner of this stranger?

Bianka sighed. She approached, and hugged her little brother.

- No, Gab, be quiet! Come on, do you think he looked like a prisoner? He did not even ride in his carriage! No, Siggy is leaving to make an inquiry at Master Clarin’s home. It’s not very far, he should come back in a few days. Come on, this is not the first time you see him go!
- Father said... that there would be no more Harvest!
- It’s not a Harvest, Gab. It’s just a check. There is no risk, I assure you.

She released him, and looked at him from head to toe. Poor Gabriel was shaking like a leaf. She gave him a beautiful smile.

- Well, you know what? You should go out a while and get some fresh air. I have some shopping to do. Do you want to come with me? Why won’t we go at Master Collodi’s shop?
At these words, Gabriel’s eyes began to shine. Master Collodi was the best cheesemaker in Steinerburg. He used to prepare and import cheeses from all over the Old World, food pleasures that the little young man-rat was fond of. Finally, he calmed a little, snorted, and obediently followed the young ratgirl.

- I assure you, your Majesty! It would never occur to me to betray my nephew! Certainly, he is not bound to me by blood in one way or another, but by the heart... the love I feel for him cannot be questioned!
- Lies! The only love you deign to show is for my mother’s money!

Prince Ludwig Steiner was getting tired of it. As ruler of Vereinbarung, it was part of his attributions to settle quarrels involving citizens who could not find an agreement, and who were in a situation that even the priests of Verena, goddess of justice, remained unable to solve with a regular judgment. Disputes between simple peasants were usually dispatched quickly, but other more complex cases proved to be very difficult. And at the moment, it was one of these. A middle-aged Human and a young Skaven stood in front of him.

- You are already enjoying what belongs to me by right, Claudius!
- My little Laerte, you know that I only want the best for you!
- Oh, you do! The best share, you mean!

The Human named Claudius adopted a posture that wanted to be benevolent:

- Your Majesty, I am sure you will understand! Like me, you have dependent children! When my poor sister, already a widow, made me promise on her deathbed to take care of Laerte as if he was my son, I couldn’t escape my family duty! Now, to feed a child, to clothe him, to make sure that he has the best of futures... it costs money! It is normal that I use the money of my unfortunate sister for that! She was rich, I use the riches she can no longer enjoy in this world to ensure the well-being of my beloved nephew.
- I’m a grown-up now, Claudius! I don’t need your attention anymore! Your Highness, you know the truth! This felon shamelessly uses my mother’s treasury for his own business, his gambling debts, his dishonesty, and so on!
- Ah, she was my sister, her fortune comes from your grandfather! I can enjoy a little part of it, can’t I? Anyway, when I die, everything will come back to you.
- If there remains anything left!
- Oh, why do you say that, my child? I do not intend to steal you!
- No, but you’re acting the same way!

Young Laerte spoke directly to the Prince.

- Your Excellency, you know better than anyone in this world that the Skaven live much shorter than the Humans! That’s right, my grandfather’s money must go back to his most direct descendant still alive, and to this day, this descendant is my uncle Claudius.
- The law is clear in that sense, your Majesty, Claudius agreed.
- It is, but you... you still have a large amount of years to live, my uncle. Twenty, maybe thirty. I’ve just reached my majority. However, I’ll be able to consider myself happy if I die in about twelve years, maybe fifteen! You will still have the leisure to use your money, whereas I, I would have had only constraints! Give me my mother’s share, and you will never hear of me again!

Steiner grumbled.

*The Vereneans must really be exhausted to not be able to solve this problem!*
- Master Claudius, Master Laerte, I hear your complaints. And here’s what we’re going to do: Master Claudius will repay all the money he took from his nephew, from the moment his adoptive mother blew her last breath. A priest from Verena will ensure that the accounts are well respected. As soon as tomorrow morning, he will contact the banker who manages your sister’s funds since her death, will have access to all records, and will do the math. The refund will be made in seven days at the latest. After which, Master Laerte will be able to enjoy the inheritance of his mother without you having any more the word to say, and you will keep your part.

Claudius felt the blood leave his tense, sweaty face.

- But... I... it represents a huge amount of money! I invested a lot in business, but it was to make this money grow!
- Then you should not have any trouble repaying everything, Master Claudius.

Feeling trapped, the Human fell to his knees and moaned:

- There will be nothing left for me, your Highness!
- You had to think about it before using resources that didn’t belong to you, Claudius.
- I did that for Laerte, your Majesty! To provide him with rents worthy of him!
- And that’s why your “generosity”, this generosity that has led you to do stupid things for the care of your nephew shall not be forgotten. Master Laerte, you will give a thousand crowns each month to your uncle for a year. This should allow him to find a stable situation, and to meditate on what is good for him and for you.

A thousand crowns a month was only a small sum compared to what Laerte was about to earn in the affair. Satisfied, he replied:

- I knew that your wisdom would undo this knot, your Majesty.
- Thank you, Master Laerte. Master Claudius?

Claudius hardly dared to look at the Prince when he murmured:

- I will comply with your wishes, your Highness.
- Perfect. Everyone is so in agreement.

Ludwig the First took a deep breath and pronounced with a loud voice:

- So spoke the Prince!

This sentence was a custom introduced by Steiner. This meant that his decision was irrevocable, and allowed no challenge. The two plaintiffs went out in silence, without the slightest indecency on either side.

Once alone, Ludwig Steiner cracked the bones of his back and grumbled:

- Longing for the day to end, I’m so tired!

He felt his lassitude growing as he heard a knock on the door.

- Yes, what is it?

The herald opened the door.

- Your Highness, this is Commander Schmetterling.
- Ah... let him coming in!
He repositioned himself on his cushion, and adjusted the ermine collar of his jacket as Commander Johannes Schmetterling presented himself to him. This tall Human had lived several decades of wars, revolts, clashes against beastmen, Skaven, Orcs, bandits and angry citizens. Before joining the Rat Kingdom, he had served under the direct command of Middenland Count Elector Boris Todbringer. It was easy to see him as a soldier. Admittedly, the years had fattened him a little, but he was still perfectly able to fight and command a battalion. An impressive red mane matched his red complexion, his arms were powerful, and he rivalled the Prince in size. The latter had seen in him great capacities of strategy and action on the battlefield, and had named him commander of his army.

- Good evening, your Majesty.
- Good evening, Commander.
- I come to make you acquainted with the report of the cohort party to Vran.
- Ah. So?
- Prince Grzegorz greatly appreciated our support. He will not fail to return the favour the day we will in our turn suffer an invasion attempt.
- Oh, give them time to recover. Many losses?
- A few dozen men. Others will be recruited.

The Prince couldn’t repress another annoyed sigh.

- You seem upset, your Highness, aren’t you?
- Oh, it’s nothing, Commander. It’s just I feel that as we gain peace beyond our borders, war breaks out inside the Rat Kingdom.
- As long as I’m in charge here, you will never see the slightest sign of any kind of civil war, your Grandeur. You know it.
- Yes, Commander. So, what can you tell me?

The captain talked again for some time with the Prince, then took leave. Outside, the clocks of the various temples across the city rang nine strokes. Steiner sighed; he had missed supper with his children and grandchildren. One of his most inalienable pleasures. He went mechanically to the exit of the throne room.

In the dining room, the servants were finishing to clear the table. One of them moved quickly to the Prince.

- Your Grace, we’ll prepare your meal at once.
- Oh, no, Davydd. No need you to bother for that, I should have been with my family. You will bring me a snack in my office in half an hour.
- As you please, your Highness.

Steiner advanced to his two adopted children.

- I beg your pardon, my children. The day was longer than expected.
- Don’t worry, Father, you are fulfilling your role, and it proves you’re a conscientious sovereign, replied Heike.
- There will be many more meals to share-enjoy, Father, Psody added. But you... is something wrong?
- I had to settle an inheritance story, once again. Except that this time the conflict opposed a Human and a Freed Skaven.
- It had to happen someday, Opa, Bianka murmured. Whether they are Humans or Skaven, our citizens have the same issues of contention.
- You are right, darling. You are perfectly right.

The Human then noticed that Isolde, the youngest, seemed over excited. She was making big gestures, and repeated without stopping more enthusiastic exclamations.

- Well, Isolde, you enjoyed your day, didn’t you?

The little girl turned to her grandfather, and replied, delighted:

- Oh yes, Opa Ludwig! You will never guess what I saw today!
- Won’t I? So? What did you see?

The little Skaven girl with a cream-colored coat applied herself with utmost solemnity:

- I attended Vaclav’s baptism!
- The little Cukor child, Heike specified.
- Ah! exclaimed the Human. It was at the Shallya’s temple?
- Yes! Sister Judy led the ceremony.
- And did you like it?
- Oh, yes, I did! It was a wonderful, magical ceremony! Was my baptism so beautiful?
- Of course, it was, my dear. It was a beautiful day. Shallya really smiled on you.
- I would really like to serve Shallya as Sister Judy, it would be wonderful!
- We know it, dear, replied Heike gently. When you are a while grown up, you will go to work in the temple one day to see if it’s really a life that suits you. But before, you have to wait!

Another servant approached the White Skaven.

- I deposed the book you asked for on your desk, Master Prospero.
- Thank you, Legré. Have a good night.

As the jacketed Skaven pulled back, leaving the Steiner family together, Isolde grimaced.

- Why did Legré call you “Prospero”, Father?
- Because that’s my name!
- No! Your name is Psody!
- Yes, you’re right, but I took another name. “Prospero”, is the closest way I found to remind the name “Psody”, so I decided-chose to take this name.
- Why did you take another name? Don’t you like yours?
- Of course, I do, my sweetie belle. However, it’s not a Human name. Opa Ludwig agreed to adopt me, so that I can live with your mother. The first step was to become Human, by name.
- And you were baptized like Vaclav?

This time, the White Skaven let a few seconds of silence pass before answering:

- No, my darling. I received my imperial name at the Verena Temple, where I was noted-added in the register. There was no religious ceremony.
- Why? You count for Shallya, like everyone else!

Once again, Psody took a moment to think.

- You know, I want you to understand something: everyone doesn’t pray Shallya.
- I know, laughed the girl. There is Morr, and then Verena, and Sigmar, and Taal, and Rhya. There is always an office for...

It was then that little Isolde remembered something she had already noticed, but which she had not
tried to understand until then.

- When Mother takes us to the temple, to pray at the end of the week, you’re never with us! Why?

The White Skaven took a few more seconds to think. He crouched, to be at the height of his daughter, put a hand on his shoulder, and replied:

- That’s exactly what I’m trying to explain to you, Isolde. The world is inhabited by a whole lot of different peoples. Generally, they wish to live happily, they are gathered in tribes, or live in cities. They need someone to guide them when they face something they do not understand. The world is huge, and many things that we do not understand happen. It is the will of the gods. But not everyone knows the same gods.

- Very far from here, where the sun rises, there are countries where men do not know Shallya, his mother went on. On the other side, far away where the sun goes down, I know there is a big island where the Elves live. They have their own gods. The Dwarves know that Shallya exists, but they don’t listen to her word, because they too have other gods. You have been educated in the worship of the Human gods.

- Like your mother, and your grandfather who raised your mother, said Psody. But my spiritual guide is the Horned Rat. The Feral Skaven who raised me when I was little was a bad man, but he introduced me to the word of the Horned Rat, and that word gives meaning to my life.

The little girl had a little trouble absorbing her father’s words. Her face scowled, she murmured:

- They say that the Horned Rat is a bad god. Why do you worship this god?
- It’s true that Humans say the Horned Rat is evil. But it’s more complicated than that, Isolde. When Romulus preaches, he reads a chapter from the sacred book of Shallya. And it’s the same for the other gods, whether Humans, Elves, and Dwarves. But for the Feral Skaven, it’s different; there is no book, or text. Only scrolls written by the White Skaven, who say that it is the only-one truth, whereas there are not two who say the same thing. And the problem is, all the White Skaven, and the Overseer, the High Priest of the Horned Rat, say that the Feral Skaven must become the masters of the world. But that’s not what I felt. One day, when I was Gabriel’s age, the Horned Rat spoke to me for the first time.
- Is it true? What did he tell you?
- He showed me what he wanted me to do: to create a kingdom where the Skaven could live happy-happy on the surface. But he never said “destroy all Humans first”. On the contrary, I saw images of Skaven, and other peoples, living together. That’s what we’ve been trying to do for six years, Isolde.

- Do not worry, said the grandfather. Your father is a very good person. Even though the Horned Rat is a god who can be mean, I can assure you that he will never push your father to do evil. If there are any who say the opposite in front of you, do not listen to them. And if someone tries to hurt your father because he’s praying to another god, he’ll have big problems.

The Prince coughed loudly.

- Well, now, children, it’s bedtime. Psody, you’ll join me in my office, we still have work to finish.
- Right, Father.

The White Skaven took his daughter by the hand and walked a good step towards the exit. The Human again threw:

- No need to hurry, take your time.
- Good night, Opa! replied Isolde happily.
- Good night, sweetheart!
The west wing was where the Steiner family quarters were. As the years and successive coming of the five children progressed, there had been reorganization and relocation, and since the previous year Isolde had her own room. The first floor included several work rooms, the children’s playroom, and a more intimate than the banquet hall dining room. The three floors above the ground floor were configured in the same way: the spiral staircase led to a single long hallway with doors to bedrooms on either side, and a larger apartment was spotted at the end of the corridor. On the second floor, there were the guest rooms, each equipped with elements ensuring comfort and well-being, especially a small space with a basin of water and a toilet set isolated by an opaque curtain. The third floor was also dedicated to guests, except the room at the end of the corridor. It was the private apartments of Prince Ludwig Steiner. Finally, on the fourth floor, only a few servants could go up: it was the floor where the Skaven family lived.

To give them some privacy, Prince Ludwig had left them the whole floor. They had arranged some rooms they did not use as storage rooms, and there was even a large bathroom. The couple formed by Psody and Heike slept in the large room at the end of the hallway. Their children all had their own bedroom. Even when they were on a mission, Kristofferson and Sigmund knew that they would always have their beds ready to welcome them when they returned. Isolde had the smallest room, the first door just left out of the room of the couple formed by his parents. Gabriel was sitting near the stairs, and his apartments were adjacent to those of his older sister Bianka.

For now, he was in the bathroom, with his mother and his little sister.

- Oh, Mother, it’s important! It is absolutely necessary that I note this calculation, otherwise I risk to forget it!
- Your inventions may wait until tomorrow, my darling. You have to think about your hygiene, if you want to stay healthy and be able to use your brain. Now, file your teeth, brush them well, and go to sleep.

Gabriel grumbled, but resigned himself to obeying. He stood in front of the mirror, took the small lime in the cupboard, and began to gently rub the ends of his incisors with his instrument. Isolde, wrapped in a thick towel, rubbed by her mother, asked:

- What about me? Why don’t I ever have to file my teeth?
- Because girls don’t have teeth that grow like boys, Isolde, Heike explained. It’s like that. For Humans, boys who become grown-ups have hair that grow on their faces.
- Like Opa Ludwig! exclaimed the little girl. He has a big moustache!
- Exactly, sweetie. Skaven boys and girls all have hair all over their body. So, as a difference, there are the teeth. I never needed to shorten them. But boys must do it!

Still his lime in hand, Gabriel turned to Heike and looked at her without saying a word. She continued:

- I know what I’m talking about, Gab. Your father has already told me that he had seen Feral Skaven with too long teeth in his burrow. And it hurt them, so much so that they were always in a bad mood!
- Feral Skaven are always in a bad mood, anyway, the little ratman replied. That’s why they all want to kill us, and why we must eliminate them all!
- Gabriel!
- What? That’s what my inventions do, after all.

This time, the mother did not answer. Isolde didn’t seem to have heard the words of her brother, much to Heike’s relief. But as she started drying her daughter again, she couldn’t help a little worry
from slipping lightly over her heart.
Ratwomen, ratmen,

I just realized something embarrassing.

I publish this story on half a dozen websites of fanfictions, in English and French languages. On the first page, I put the address of a DeviantArt page where I expose the images related to my fanfictions, with the nickname “ChildrenOfPsody”. However, on some of these websites, the link to the page was purely and simply erased by the engine.

I corrected somehow things, but just to be sure, I remind you the address here. Save it by removing all the “underscore”, the dash of the key 8 of your keyboard, which I had to add for the complete address is displayed.

https://childrenofpsody.deviantart.com/

Do not hesitate to consult this page, I will send your comments to the artists. I assure you, it’s worth your look, the few works of illustrators online are worthy of appreciation, so much so that I adopted the design of the characters suggested by the artists as being “canonical” in my work. And if you want to add your own creations, tell me by PM, I will send you my email address to collect your work and publish it in your name.

Thank you for your understanding, and most importantly, I wish you to have a new year 2019 full of successes and extraordinary adventures.

Glory to the Horned Rat!

The convoy had crossed the border two hours earlier. The weather was fine, the clouds were spinning in the blue sky, driven by a strong wind. The grass of the plains, less irrigated than Vereinbarung’s, was dry and yellowed, the road was rocky and the horses left a trail of dust in their path.
Eusebio Clarin was not comfortable. His carriage was quite large and comfortable, and designed to handle the jolts with efficiency. He was also used to the warmth that reminded some places of his native Estalia. Anyway, he had his gourd full of water in a small compartment at hand.

The true problem was the atmosphere that reigned in the small enclosed and mobile space. In front of him was sit Sigmund Steiner. His arms crossed, he stared at him with a look loaded with suspicion, as if he expected to see a trap about to trick him. This issue was necessary though: if Skaven could come and go as they wish in Vereinbarung, that was different outside its borders. To avoid the risk of frightening peasants and villagers on their way, the diplomat had asked the Black Skaven to stay inside the coach. The latter had immediately become angry, shouted, and threatened the Estalian. Fortunately, if the captain of the guard who accompanied the diplomat had promptly unsheathed his sword, Clarin had not lost an ounce of patience. He had to deploy treasures of diplomacy, and promise to watch over his mare to finally convince the young ratman to cooperate.

And so, the ambassador was supporting Sigmund’s gaze for two whole hours. He was not irritated, just saddened. He ventured to speak:

- I took the time to think about your behaviour towards me. You do not seem to like me much, Sir Steiner.

The tall Black Skaven didn’t pronounce the smallest word. The Human didn’t take offense.

- I regret this posture might be uncomfortable to you, but we have to! Inhabitants of Sueño are not as open-minded as those of Vereinbarung.

The weight of reproaches in Sigmund’s gaze increased. The Human felt a slight anxiety rising.

- Seriously, you are someone intelligent, well-educated. You’re not going to scream at me or threaten me to shut up, are you?

Still no answer. Clarin didn’t give up.

- Listen, I assure you that we have good intentions. If Prince Calderon really wanted to make you trouble, he would have sent a declaration of war! In the Renegade Crowns, things can go very fast. A principality may change prince three times in less than two years. Your grandfather trusts me, and I trust him. Just as I trust you by being in front of you, without weapons! You can make me
anything you want, I won’t have time to defend myself!

Sigmund remained silent. The diplomat tried another approach that he wanted empathetic.

- You know, Estalians are not always very well considered outside their home country. When I was a student at Nuln, ladies were interested in my exotic side, but men saw me as a stranger, someone who was always plotting for the benefit of his homeland. Some students even saw me as a spy. You know that the best universities of the Empire are in Nuln? I was often considered with coldness and suspicion, while I was as Human as the others. I cannot fully understand your feelings about Humans who have not chosen to live with you. But I hope I seem sincere when I’m telling you that I see you and your family as good people. Your sister Bianka welcomed me very well and guided me so. Your father showed me such wisdom that I never thought I would see in the soul of a Skaven. And you... I feel that you are someone I can trust. I wish I had someone like you by my side in Ubersreik. And I really hope that you will help us solve this problem. You are the best for that.

Finally, the facies of the Black Skaven began to cheer up.

- Bianka is my twin sister, Master Clarin.

Clarin could not suppress a raised eyebrow. Sigmund’s mouth tightened in an ironic grin.

- Indeed, that’s not something you could imagine at the first look. Well, it is. My coming to this world precedes hers by only a few minutes

- I guess it reinforces your relationship with her.

- I’ll do everything for her.

- I’m sure of it. She is a lovely young person.

- You think so? Yet, I admit, it is not always easy to talk to her

- That’s not the impression she left me. On the contrary, she never stopped questioning me, and answered my questions heartily.

- That’s because you are an intelligent and cultivated Human, Master Clarin. She may seem cold-hearted to people she doesn’t know and who do not share her education.

- Oh... you mean, she can be scornful?

- At the first look, this is an impression she inspires, but her heart is solid gold.

- Just like yours, young man. You love your sister, and your parents. It’s obvious.
Sigmund’s expression finally relaxed completely, and went from mistrust to interrogation.

- How can you be so sure of it, Master Clarin?

- It is my job. When you work in diplomacy, you must learn to decode the little signs that people emit without necessarily realizing it. You can use this science to destabilize a political opponent, or to reassure an interlocutor. Yesterday, you didn’t hesitate to defend your father in front of me. You thought you were dealing with a pretentious stranger who had come to rave about people whom he considered “inferior” and who wanted to laugh of people you love. I swear this is not the case, Sir Steiner.

- Are you sure you’re not a magician? You don’t know how to read thoughts? Sigmund asked, really taken aback.

- I can’t read thoughts. But I can read the small unconscious signs, and I can see in them a lot of things. For example, a true love of a son towards his father. Your voice, your eyes... you were too emotionally involved to do that just for the sake of appearance.

The Black Skaven looked down.

- I didn’t know that these signs existed.

- That’s normal, you’re a very young man. Señorita Bianka accepted to reveal me her age, which is also yours, since you are her twin. And so, you don’t yet have the experience to perceive these small subtleties. Don’t worry, I’m sure you will.

The Human allowed himself a slight smile.

- Your grandfather can already teach you some basics. He too is a man who has all my respect. In truth, you are lucky to have this kind of family, Sir Steiner.

- Do you have a family, Master Clarin?

- A brother and two sisters. They stayed in my home country. The money of our parents allows them to live well, and they do not have the spirit as adventurous as me. But let them call me for an urgent matter, and I will leave everything to go back to Estalia and help them.

A horse galloped at the height of the coach. It was ridden by Felipe Antoninus, the captain of Clarin’s escort. Antoninus tapped the glass. The ambassador opened the window.
- What’s going on?
- We have a problem, Master Clarin. We must stop the convoy!
- Do it, my friend.

Moments later, the coach was stationary, surrounded by the mounted guards. Clarin went down, and invited Sigmund to do the same.

- What happened now? murmured the ratman.

They were at the entrance of a small village composed with about fifteen small houses. A river ran nearby, a few miles away, and there was more vegetation. There was even a pine forest.

But not a sound, not a movement, no sign of life welcomed the procession.

The buildings were pretty much intact, but someone had ravaged the vegetable gardens and slaughtered the cattle. There were, pell-mell in the mud, the bodies of some unfortunate peasants, partially devoured. The dead animals bore all the obvious traces of a savage chewing.

Clarin approached Sigmund noiselessly, and murmured to his attention:

- This is the village of Rabanera. A community without problem, Sir Steiner.
- Till today. It’s very recent.
- Indeed, I went through that village on my way to Steinerburg, everything was right.

The young Black Skaven’s face narrowed in apprehension. Clarin asked him:

- Could you do a field study, please?
- That’s the reason I’m here. Let’s begin right now.
- They were very fast.

Sigmund felt the eyes of the men who composed the patrol weigh on him. He growled.
- I know what you’re thinking: it wouldn’t have happened if we had come earlier.

- It was I who decided to stay longer than I planned, Sir Steiner. And then, if we had come earlier, we would have ended up like those poor people.

Sigmund took a few steps to the centre of the village, glanced around.

- Where are we, exactly, Master Clarin? I mean, “geographically”?

- We are in an area that is close to two borders: Vereinbarung, of course, but to the north-west lies another neighbouring kingdom, the Kingdom of Jahreszeiten, ruled by Prince Leopold Frühling.

- What relationship do you have with this Prince?

- Correct, so far. I think he comes from Stirland.

- Tell your men to search the place, there may be survivors. I shall tell you who did it, precisely.

- Ratmen did, what else? Antoninus grumbled.

- They could have, captain, but appearances can be deceptive.

On the orders of their superior, the soldiers dispersed, inspecting the houses one by one. Three of them stayed near the leaders. The Black Skaven closed his eyes, sniffed the air for a long time, wanted to soak up the tragedy that had shattered all those lives. He felt the rhythm of his heart waving as he guessed the squeaks of the Feral Skaven, the terrified groans of the Humans cut to pieces.

_They are Feral Skaven. I want to face Feral Skaven._

He was interrupted in his thoughts by the sounds of boots sinking into the mud near him. He raised his eyelids and saw a soldier staring at him questioningly. He spat in a vexed tune:

- Stop looking at me like that, will you! If I wanted to betray you or attack you, I wouldn’t do it in front of everyone at fifteen to one!

The soldier answered in Estalian, which annoyed the ratman more.

- What are you saying?
- He didn’t understand you, Clarin said.

In a few words of his native tongue, the diplomat undertook to reassure the members of his escort. Then he turned to Sigmund.

- We follow you, Sir Steiner. Make your observations, I will translate as and when.

Clarin had found the right words and tone to appease the fiery spirit of the young ratman. Sigmund resumed his analysis. His eye, accustomed to the details that revealed the smallest disharmony, didn’t disappoint him once more. He quickly detected a series of signals that taught him the latest events as clearly as a storyteller. He smiled in spite of himself.

_Feral Skaven!_

Fortunately, he was convinced that he was right. His judgment couldn’t have been altered by a desire to fight with the Sons of the Horned Rat. He declared with satisfaction:

- No doubt, they were Feral Skaven. No Beastmen or disguised Humans. You were right, Captain Antoninus.

- Nice to hear it, but what makes you think that, Sir Steiner?

- Too many things that coincide.

He reached for a pile of freshly turned clay.

- That’s one of their tunnels. They gushed from the ground for a quick attack.

He showed an old rusty dagger planted in a corpse.

- Second hand gear. It is a Dwarf dagger, its pommel is finely carved. Stolen on a Dwarf, don’t forget that we are not very far from the mountains where they live. Beastmen generally hide in forests. They roughly cobble their weapons or steal them from the freshly killed Humans, and only rarely come into contact with the Dwarves. Whoever used this dagger couldn’t be a Dwarf, because a Dwarf would never have left it so neglected. It was either a Goblin or a Skaven. And Goblins do not dig tunnels outside their mountains.
Then he pointed to a graffiti on a wall: three lines that crisscrossed to form a triangle.

- The symbol of the Horned Rat. You could answer me, someone else who knows the Under-Empire could have drawn it, but there are tunnels and weapons.

Sigmund raised his finger.

- Anyway, the smell remains.
- The smell? Antoninus repeated.
- The nose of Humans does not have the same sensitivity as Skaven’s. I can distinguish a lot of things you cannot feel. Like... that!

He approached one of the houses.

- Come here, but stay away.

Captain Antoninus placed himself alongside the Black Skaven.

- Do you see this little hole in the wall?
- I do.
- It’s the impact of a bullet. Now, look at the burn marks around the hole.
- Oh... it looks like it’s diffusing a kind of green light?
- Warpstone powder. Just like the slug that is still stuck in the brick. You may not feel it, but I perceive it.
- Well, you too, you know how to decode signs that I can’t distinguish! Clarin observed with a big smile.
- Is it really warpstone?

Sigmund turned his head towards the captain.
- Warpstone has a very characteristic odour. Feral Skaven live with since immemorial times. It has altered our blood, it is even part of it, so much so that even a Skaven who has never eaten warpstone, or lived in an environment with warpstone in the vicinity, can instinctively recognize its smell.

- Have you ever touched the warpstone, Sir Steiner? Clarin asked.

- Never. and I would like the things to stay that way as long as possible. Only the Feral Skaven manage to see any use in it. The truth, Master Clarin, if you allow me to say such an expression, warpstone is a Taal damn shit. Worse than the most bewitching drugs.

A voice rose from the other side of the central square of the village. A soldier called Captain Antoninus with great gestures.

- ¡Capitán! ¡Hay dos niños aquí!

- ¿En qué estado?

- ¡Vivo, pero en serio agitado!

- ¡Llegamos! Clarin answered.

Sigmund, who hadn’t got a word of the exchange, became angry:

- What’s going on?

Clarin spoke to him with a slightly worried look.

- I’m sorry, Sir Steiner, but I think you’d better go back in the carriage.

- Why? Tell me why, right now!

- We’ve found two children. If they see you, they could panic.

Without saying a word, the Black Skaven climbed into the carriage, closed the door, and pulled the curtain.

Clarin and Antoninus went together to the building guarded by the soldier. The latter added:
- Captain, they... they were holding back one of these monsters!

- What? You mean there is a Skaven living with them?

- Jorge is watching him, waiting for your orders.

The captain sighed and hurried, followed by the ambassador. Both entered the stable.

The first thing that hit Eusebio Clarin beyond the threshold was the stench, a stench of blood, rotten meat, sweat and excrement, strong enough to tear off anyone’s nostrils. Then the furious buzz of thousands of flies rolled over his eardrums like a military drum. Finally, his eyes perceived a very sad spectacle.

The boxes where the few horses of the village were normally parked were flooded with blood and casings in shambles torn from the carcasses of the drudges. The tools scattered in all directions – a lumberjack axe was planted in the back of a dead Skaven on the ground. And at the bottom of the space where the villagers stored the hay, two children, a boy and a girl, probably no more than ten years old, trembled in all their limbs. The boy waved a fork, and the girl was firmly holding a shovel. Both were standing in front of a Feral Skaven. Clarin could not repress a shudder. Since his arrival in the Renegade Crowns, he didn’t had to endure the sight of a Feral Skaven alive. The meeting with the inhabitants of Vereinbarung had given her a completely different image of the ratmen. This one was a brutal reminder of all the horror he had experienced in Ubersreik.

Indeed, the Feral Skaven inspired more pity. It was a wretched, sickly creature, barely four feet tall, with a piece of filthy cloth wrapped around its loins for every garment. Its short coat struggled to cover its pink flesh stained with dirt and bodily fluids, its remaining teeth seemed ready to fall from its gums, its yellow eyes were blinking at full speed.

Jorge, the soldier who was pointing his harquebus at the Feral Skaven, approached Antoninus without looking away from his target.

- Captain, this creature is curled up in this corner since I came in, but I guess they’ve just spent a long time watching each other.

- You did the best. I think now this horror will not dare move.

Antoninus took out his pistol in turn, and murmured to the children:

- Right, you can go out, we protect you.
The two little children immediately dropped their improvised weapons and ran awkwardly as fast as they could to the exit. Once outside, they sat on the ground, threw themselves into each other’s arms, and burst into loud sobs.

In the closed coach, Sigmund felt his heart tighten. He saw his hand go down to the doorknob, but remembered that it would only aggravate the situation.

Clarin joined the two small victims and squatted in front of them.

- You were very brave. Real little heroes.
- They... they’re gone, the boy said painfully.
- How long have you been there?
- I do not know sir!
- They kidnapped the others! burst the girl.
- What? You mean these monsters took the villagers?
- Yes sir!
- Where did they go?

The two children stopped crying in order to think, but their tears redoubled.

- Don’t worry, we’ll find them, Clarin sighed.

Antoninus joined the trio, and murmured:

- You shall take refuge in the temple of Shallya in Esperanza. The nuns will take care of you, and we will try to find you a place to live.

He gestured towards two of the soldiers who were outside.

- Hey, you! Take them immediately to Esperanza and join us as soon as possible.
- Yes, captain!

The two chosen soldiers hastened to mount their horses. Antoninus helped the two children to ride pillion the horses. A minute later, they had already disappeared.

Clarin and Antoninus returned to the stable. Jorge and two other men-at-arms were still pointing their weapons towards the Feral Skaven.

- What do we do now with this creature? Kill?
- Not yet! Maybe it could tell us where the survivors are.
- You would know how to make it speak?
- Not me, captain. Hold it, I’ll come back.

The diplomat ran with little strides towards the carriage.

- Sir Steiner?

The window opened, letting the Black Skaven’s head pass.

- What is it?
- The two children imprisoned a Feral Skaven.
- Ah. And?
- All the villagers are not dead. Some were taken prisoner by its kind. I have something to ask you: do you know how to speak their language?
- Of course, my father taught me.
- So, could you question him?
- Hum... Interesting idea, but maybe I have a better one. Is it well dressed?
- Oh no, it’s just wearing a loincloth.
- So, no valuable equipment on it?
- Only a piece of cloth.
- Does it look strong?

- For two children, it’s impressive, but any soldier could knock it out with a slap.

- So, it’s a slave. No possession, malnourished, it can only be a slave. It probably does not know much... unlike its chief.

- What do you propose? To force it to tell us where to find this leader?

- Better than that, Master Clarin: it will lead us to its leader with confidence. Can I go out now?

- Yes, the two children are en route to a shelter.

Sigmund stepped out of the car, then approached a pile of bodies. He tore off two cloaks, a tunic and a coat, took the clothes under his arm and entered the barn of the village. Surprised, the Estalien hesitated a few seconds, then followed him discreetly. He spotted the tall figure of young Steiner from behind. The Black Skaven had put the clothes at his feet and was undoing the fastening of his pants. He felt Clarin’s presence, turned his head, and grunted aggressively:

- You want to enjoy the show?

- What are you doing? asked the Estalian, hesitating whether he should understand or not what he was seeing.- I’m perfecting my camouflage.

- By emptying your bladder on these duds?

Sigmund gave an annoyed sigh.

- Feral Skaven have a habit of urinating on their possessions, it marks them with their personal smell. It’s not very appetizing, but I’ve already cheated several Feral Skaven this way. Now, please go out.

The ambassador was still surprised, but obeyed. A moment later, Sigmund appeared dressed in torn and soiled clothes. He rolled himself in the mud, stuck some handles on his back, his head and his arms, and turned his back on Clarin.

- Sir Steiner?

The tall Black Skaven turned on his heels with a movement and hit the ground with his foot. He bent forward, nervously returned his head between his shoulders, and yelped something that no one understood.
Clarin felt uncomfortable recognizing the feeling of fear and disgust he had felt before one of Ubbersreik’s brutes. Sigmund’s soft voice helped him to return to the present moment.

- So, Master Clarin, is it convincing?
- You bet it is!
- Very well. So listen carefully and let me explain what to do.

Koursh was very scared. His comrades had left him in the hands of men-things. As he had taken a bad blow on his head, he had hidden himself in the barracks where men-things were putting up their animals. He had woken up because of strident screams. He then jumped up and found himself facing two young men-things. They had threatened him, they had the nerve to make him prisoner. He had remained in front of them without moving, waiting for the smallest opportunity. And then, those other men-things had arrived. Fear had seized him to the guts. Faced with all these men-things, he was lost. The two little men-things were out, the other men-things were still threatening him. They were not going to spare him. The chief had said so the day before: men-things never spare the Sons of the Horned Rat.

Suddenly, his ears stood up. He heard screeching in his native language. Three other men-things entered the stable, firmly holding a Stormvermin. The tall Black Skaven struggled, shouted, but the three men-things were too cowardly to face him on the same level. One of the men-things brandished a rope. All men-things forced the Mighty One to sit down. Under the threat of three harquebuses, they pushed Koursh so as to stick his back to the Stormvermin’s. After that, the man-thing with the rope tied the two Skaven firmly back to back, after putting the rope through an iron ring attached to the wall. Finally, the men-things left the house with a sneer, and closed the heavy door.

Koursh, still dead with fear, cried silently.

- Shut up! firmly ordered the Stormvermin.
- Argh! I do not want to die-die!
- You won’t die-die, silly! Calm down. Breathe slowly.

The slave was amazed. For the first time in a long time, a son of the Horned Rat had spoken to him without directly threatening him. He obeyed, and tried to slow his frantic breathing. And after a
few moments, he felt better.

- What’s your name?
- Koursh, O immense-gentle Mighty One of the Horned Rat.
- I’m Treb. Listen-listen to me, do what I tell you to do, and we can go.
- We... can... leave?
- Yes. But all my patrol has been decimated.
- Your patrol? Oh, you’re a Clawleader!
- Yes I am, and I too am the only one to have resisted these men-things.
- I... I know where the Clanrats I serve hide.
- Perfect! I will accompany you.
- But... we are prisoners! How to do?
- Do not worry about that, Koursh. We have to wait for the night.
- Oh… right.

Koursh was completely lost, but he was still too afraid to challenge. The two Skaven remained back to back, without exchanging a word more.

A few hours later, the last rays of sun that passed through the small openings dissipated.

- Koursh?
- Yes, Treb?
- Let’s go.
- How?

The Stormvermin writhed.

- These twerps forgot to search me completely.
Sigmund was almost ashamed to use such a simple procedure, but in front of a Feral Skaven slave, he didn’t have to bother with realism. He used his long tail to pull a leather case from under his cloak, from which he pulled out a small knife. He had no trouble cutting the rope, and a few minutes later the two Skaven were free.

Koursh danced from one foot to the other.

- Thank you, thank you, oh wonderful-powerful Mighty One of the Horned Rat!
- Hush, fool! You’re going to make us spot!

The slave slammed both hands over his mouth.

- Now we have to get out of there.
- We kill-kill men-things!
- If we do that, they will all jump on us, you moron! No, we must remain discreet, like the Eshin.

This comparison plunged Koursh into a fascinated trance.

- Like... Gutter Runners?
- Yes, like Gutter Runners.

Koursh was as enchanted. He, a miserable slave, was going to use the same tricks as a formidable assassin of Clan Eshin, under the tutelage of this Clawleader! And if the Clawleader was satisfied by his behaviour, maybe he would take him to his service! And the slaves of the Clawleaders were often envied by others. What a beautiful prospect!

The reverie of the slave was interrupted by a creaking sound. The Black Skaven gently pushed the heavy wooden panel.

- They forgot to block the door! chuckled the Clawleader.

Once again, Sigmund gritted his teeth. You really had to deal with a conditioned slave incapable to think to use successfully such a shabby ruse!
- Now-now, you follow me and you do not make noise.

The slave applied his toes exactly where his saviour had walked. Outside, the night had fallen well. There were a few men-things here and there, but all were sleeping.

- We don’t kill-kill? Sure?
- Sure-sure. Not now. But we will come back, and we will kill-loot!
- Yeah!

A few minutes of silent walking later, the two Skaven were at the exit of the village. The tall black Skaven tapped the slave’s shoulder.

- You have to take me to your chieftain, right now!
- Come with poor Koursh, Treb!

Without hesitation, the small Feral Skaven sank into the forest, followed by Sigmund.
Greetings,

Just for this time, I take advantage of my short vacation to give you a chapter earlier than usual. I’ll try not to lose the usual rhythm. Happy reading, and Happy New Year, Children of the Horned Rat!

- Where is this damn scribe?

Bianka Steiner crossed the corridors of Verena’s Great Temple with a hurried step, her face frozen with an angry grimace. The case between a Skaven and his Human uncle was finally about to end, but it still mobilized too much of her time and energy to her liking. She was anxious to step to another story, especially since she felt that her twin brother wouldn’t come back home with good news.

She sharply threw the door of the study room, and her eyes fell on two men discussing, a middle-aged, thin, square-jawed, greying-haired Human who was carrying a pile of books, and a Skaven, sat at the back office. Her blood only made a turn.

- Well, Bernhardt?

The seated employee jumped, brutally petrified.

- I said “the record of the Vanger affair, and quickly!” What do you not understand in this simple sentence? When I say “quickly”, I do not say “tomorrow” or “tonight” or “in an hour”, I mean “right now”!

- Lady Steiner... I ...

- What?

The man named Bernhardt Reitherman was a young, brown, bit abdominal Skaven, who wore a pair of spectacles with thick glasses. He had been the librarian of the Great Temple of Verena for a few months, and had until then more or less performed his duties. He was someone most people would call “correct”, aware of his homework, anxious to do it well, and making sure he kept in touch with those around him. Unfortunately, with time and the lack of clerics, he had to do more
and more tasks at once, which did not suit him because he hated to be jostled.

Worse than anything, he lost all his means against Bianka Steiner.

He defended himself limply while stammering:

- I do what I can! I ended up with a lot offered by a friend of the Prince to catalogue!
- And...?

The young librarian could say no more. Something indefinable held him back. He just gave her a parchment lying on the desk. Bianka snatched it from his hand.

- Do not blame Bernhardt, my lady, said the Human. It is I who distracted him.
- Rutger, I don’t need your explanations!
- I’m telling you it’s my fault! Bernhardt is a nice boy, you don’t have to pick on him like that!
- And you don’t have to interfere with my business! I don’t need someone nice. I need someone efficient and prompt. Not one or the other, both at the same time! You are not a fool, Bernhardt, so prove to me that you are someone capable, or I will ask Judge Tomas to find you a replacement!

And without waiting, the girl hurriedly left the room.

The Human breathed a scornful sigh.

- What a bitch!
- Oh, eh... don’t say that!
- Why not? Do you see any quality in her?
- Well... She’s pretty.

Rutger’s mouth squinted in thought.
Well, I can understand that you can find her pretty, but she’s a real shrew! Black Elves priestesses are famous for being pretty, too! Frankly, you shouldn’t let this minx step on you! Defend yourself!

I can’t!

Of course, you can! Why couldn’t you?

She’s a real princess!

You serious? She is not the princess, nor the duchess, nor anything at all!

She is! Her grandfather is the Prince of the Rat Kingdom. Her mother is the adopted daughter of the Prince, which makes her a princess, and so as it is transmitted by the blood, she also is a princess, automatically!

Not sure, Bernhardt. Only the eldest child inherits the title and the throne. And as far as I know, it is Kristofferson the firstborn of the mother of this harpy. As much as the royal family sitting on the throne, you cannot say anything to them without risking the prison or the block, as much as that one, she definitively can’t do whatever she wants to everyone she meets! So, in your place, I’ll stop shutting my mouth in front of her and I’ll calmly tell her to talk to me politely, or go fuck herself!

Bernhardt didn’t answer. He lowered his head, his heart heavy with sadness.

Seriously, buddy. She wants to talk to Judge Tomas? We will talk to Judge Tomas, and we will tell him that she should stop wearing a very high hat against other members of our clergy!

The young Skaven remained silent. He sighed with resignation, and went back to work.

For the fourth time, Bianka checked the newly registered birth files. She smirked. Her estimates were consistent with the results, and the population of the Rat Kingdom was growing.

M’ss Steiner? Heya! ‘ve been told I’d find you here!

The girl raised her head, and her muzzle frowned.

In front of her stood a man. A Skaven obviously from the countryside, if you payed attention to his patched clothes, cut in coarse fabrics without any ornament, the slight smell of manure that floated
around him, his dirty nails which nervously tightened his cap, his brown fur awkwardly combed with his hand, and his phrasing rough and simple.

Bianka blinked, looked around to see if any of Verena’s clerics working in the study room were reacting, but she had to face the facts: she was going to have to deal herself with this character.

- What do you want?
- I... I beg your pardon, M’ss Steiner. But... I have to talk.
- Right... who are you?
- The name’s Gustavus Finston. I live in Hemsbach.
- Don’t know.
- It’s so small, M’ss.
- No kidding! So, what do you want to talk about?
- Uh... actually... I have to see your father, the Master Mage.

The ratgirl gave a little start.

- Nothing more, sure? You’re direct!
- I have to talk to him. I would like to register a birth.
- Congratulations, pal. Give me the name of your child, I write it in my logbook, he can live happily and make you happy parents, and you can go home. So?

Bianka took back her register, dipped her pen in the inkwell, and waited. But the peasant remained silent. She raised her head, and sighed with annoyance.

- Come on, I have bigger fish to fry!
- I really have to see your father, M’ss, and no one else!
- My father is a very busy man. I cannot bother him like that, especially for a... someone who is a complete stranger.
- I insist, M’ss! It is important! There is... there is a risk of scandal.
As she heard these words, the girl felt a cold sweat.

- What the Hell are you talking about?
- Uh...
- Will you tell me right now what’s going on, or do I have to get angry?

The stranger panicked in an instant.

- Please... M’ss, don’t get upset!
- Is it blackmail that you make me there? Bianka shouted.
- No! I swear to you, M’ss!

Behind, the clerks had stopped, and watched the scene, taken aback.

- Is there a problem, young girl? asked a clear voice.

The two Skaven turned their heads simultaneously to the woman waiting in the doorway.

- Oh, Lady Gottlieb! You come at the right time, I’m dealing with a strange bird!

Franzseska Gottlieb walked calmly towards the peasant.

- A strange bird, really? This bird doesn’t look very mean, indeed.
- Uh... hello, ma’am.

The tall, blonde woman, who was not born the day before, immediately knew who she was dealing with.

- You look far away from home. What are you doing here?
- I must speak to Master Mage Steiner. It’s very important.
- It’s an attempt to blackmail, I feel it!

The farmer was shaking to the end of his tail, and seemed ready to cry. Lady Gottlieb rubbed her forehead.

- Bianka, you see evil everywhere! Do you really believe that this good man represents a danger?
- You can never be too careful!
- And you are too much careful.

Lady Gottlieb made a sign to Gustavus.

- Come on, follow me, we’ll settle this together.
- Lady Gottlieb! protested Bianka with a pat on the desk.
- I assume the responsibility.

The ratgirl grumbled again, but did nothing else. Once the peasant had left the room, she went back to her study.

Three knocks sounded the wood of the door of the Master Mage’s office.

- Come in-in!

The door opened on Lady Franzseska and a young country boy.

- This young man wants to talk to you, Prospero. It seems important.
- Really? How far?
- Your daughter saw an attempt at blackmail.
- So, it must be very-really important! Thank you, Lady Gottlieb.
The tall woman withdrew. Psody spoke directly to Gustavus.

- Come in, please. Have a sit.

The peasant obeyed. He seemed both terrified and subdued by the White Skaven.

- Relax, if you have not come to trouble me, you have no reason to be afraid. Do I intimidate you?

- I... I’ve never seen you before that day, Master.

- Yes, you did, but you don’t remember. I participated in all the Harvests. You were among the pups I and my men pulled from the claws of the Feral Skaven.

- Oh... I thank you, Master Mage.

Psody smiled kindly.

- Please, Master... What is your name, by the way?

- My name is Gustavus. Gustavus Finston.

- Pleased to meet you, Master Finston. So, what can I do for you so important?

- Well... for a week, I... I’m a dad.

The Skaven seemed to be still struggling to pronounce those words, as if he had not yet assumed that fact.

- Oh really? Congratulations, Master Finston. Your life will be completely changed, it won’t be easy every day, but I can guarantee you that it’s worth it. There will be many unforgettable moments, and I assure you that you will never regret being a father, even if you say one day the opposite!

- I’m sure, Master Steiner.

The White Skaven felt his brow crinkling.
- Still, I feel that something is wrong?
- Err... actually...
- Is there a problem-problem?
- No! Well... something. It’s rather embarrassing.
- Speak without fear-fear, I beg you.
- That’s... Taal, I’m afraid to become... insulting.
- What? How could I feel insulted by a happy Skaven who comes to tell me that he has become a father?
- There is... a weird thing with my child.

Deep inside him, Psody felt something. As if a tiny voice whispered to him what this young father was going to tell him. He continued:

- Really, I insist, I love my wife, and I know that she loves me... also, I’m sure the explanation is not what you might think.
- What explanation? What are you talking about? Speak, will you!

The young Skaven cleared his throat, and said in a whisper:

- My little boy, Emil, he’s not ordinary. He... he has white fur, and you can see on his head two little horns.
- Like mines, I guess.
- I know that my wife is faithful to me, and that you are faithful to yours! There must be something!

Psody raised his hand. He spoke slowly, in a reassuring and friendly tone:

- You are right, Gustavus, and you don’t have to panic. Since your marriage, your wife has never loved anyone but you, and I will never be unfaithful to my Heike. You are the father of this child. Well, it is so. This kind of thing is rare, but happens from time to time, and cannot be explained in any way. It’s a decision of the gods. Your son is a White Skaven. To tell you the truth, since the founding of Vereinbarung, he is the first-first, to our knowledge. But there is nothing abnormal. And that does not necessarily happen from one generation to the next. Me, as far as I know, I was born of a father who was not white. And I have no children with such traits. By cons, do you know
my son Sigmund?

- Taal, like everyone!

- He’s my son, definitively! No other Skaven here was old enough to have children, apart me and my wife, when he was born. Do you really think he looks like me?

The White Skaven burst out laughing, and the young brown Skaven relaxed a little.

- Seriously, it can happen to anyone. However, I can understand your embarrassment, so we will take the lead. We will warn your neighbours, in order to avoid them start to imagine things and chatter. As I am the only adult White Skaven here, it could be confusing!

Psody stood up.

- You live far from here?

- I live in Hemsbach.

- Ah... I’ll have to go away for a while, I think. I would like to see your child.

- Came here with my wife and our sonny, didn’t want to leave them alone.

- Excellent initiative! answered the White Skaven with an admiring pout.

Half an hour later, they were in the Mouse Trap district, escorted by half a dozen guards. As Psody had expected, the Finston had stopped at the Fishing Cat Inn, the most miserable establishment around. When they entered the building, everyone stayed silent. It was barely enough that the man-keeper dared to greet the White Skaven. Gustavus leaded him as quickly as possible to the room where his wife was waiting for him.

Erika Finston was a rather tall woman, with a thin face, a light coat, a generous breast and wide hips. It corresponded well to the image that the Master Mage had of the peasant women. Strong, able to perform farm work as good as men, while giving birth to many children and educating them with love and firmness. She was lying in the only bed in the room. When she saw the White Skaven, she tried to get up.

- Please, my lady, stay in bed. It is already brave enough-enough to have made the road so early!
The young mother had tears in her eyes, shaken by emotion.

- Master Mage, I’m so happy to see you!
- Your husband explained-explained everything to me.

Psody took place next to the bed, and knelt to be in front of Erika’s face.

- I’m ashamed to say it, Master Mage, but I’m scared!
- You don’t have to, Erika.

He gently squeezed the peasant’s hand between his fingers.

- Is this your first child?
- Taal, yes!
- You love him?

The Finston mother burst into tears.

- All the Renegade Crowns couldn’t contain all the love I have for him, my lord! But I’m so scared! I’m afraid not to be a good mother!

The White Skaven passed his knuckles over the woman’s cheek.

- Nothing abnormal, Lady Finston. When I had my first-first child, I was scared too. Right, my kids are not white, but I am. And I was raised by a Grey Seer, a nasty little freak who taught me to hate-destroy the Humans. I was afraid to do the same mistakes he did, luckily, I had friends to guide me. Are your Human parents still alive?
- Yes, the four of them, Gustavus said.
- So, you can always count on them to help you in case of a hard situation. When I see both-both of you, I think they rightly rose you up.
Psody stood up.

- Can I see him now?

- In our cradle, there, Erika replied, pointing to an assemblage of nailed planks in one corner of the room.

The White Skaven approached the cradle like a thief in the night. When he saw his occupant, he couldn’t restrain a tender smile. In the little cot, a baby, a tiny Skaven, was sleeping peacefully on a cushion. His short coat was bright white, and two small horns pointed to the top of his triangular head.

- Hey, Emil, Psody whispered.

The White Skaven raised his head.

- I’d like to examine him, but I will need your help.

At the request of the White Skaven, Gustavus cautiously lifted his son out of bed. Emil woke up and moaned immediately. His mother hastened to breastfeed him. Once fed, Erika undressed her child and laid him on the mattress. Both parents gently held the little, naked baby boy, in their hands. The Master Mage raised his eight fingers above the new-born Skaven, closed his eyes and focused.

They stayed that way for a long time. Anxious parents looked alternately at their son and the magician, in search of the slightest tension in one or the other. Finally, Psody’s face relaxed. He took a deep breath, lifted his eyelids and made a beautiful smile.

- You can be reassured, your little boy is in perfect health! In any case, I did not feel any unhealthy energy in him.

- Taal and Rhya be praised, Erika murmured.

- I’ve finished, you can dress him up.

The spleen-woman put his layette back to her little child, and held him in her arms.
- True, you didn’t find anything evil with him?

- How could such a so small, innocent thing, be evil, Gustavus? But beware! That does not mean that there is nothing.

- So there is something anyway?

- Well, I felt a very, very light wind of magic coming from him.

- What do you mean?

- I mean he will probably be able to use the magic winds in a few years.

- What? My son, a wizard?

Erika seemed to have a hard time believing it.

- That’s normal, Lady Erika, the White Skaven have magic in their blood.

- What should we expect, my lord?

The White Skaven thought, chose his words, and explained:

- It won’t be easy for him every day, because the other children of his age may be wary of him. It will be necessary to explain to them that it is not an illness or a punishment of a god. Black Skaven are different, and rare, and White Skaven are also different, and even rarer. Your love is what will help him the most. Be very patient, because it will be something he will have to assume, and some days will be more difficult.

- Good, my lord. I knew we could count on your wisdom.

- My friend, there is something else. When your son has grown up a little, he may have new questions.

- Questions? What kind of questions?

Psody walked a little up and down.

- Well, when a White Skaven comes into adulthood, something happens to him. At the dawn of my fifth year, I... the day of my first experience with a girl, I felt a particularly stunning vertigo. The emotion, of course, but also a kind of “contact” with my god, the Horned Rat. Emil may hear someday the call of the divinity of the Feral Skaven.
Erika looked terrified.

- You’re saying black gods would... take him away?

- No, Lady Erika. Emil is your child, and no one will take him away from you, apart, perhaps, his future wife, which shouldn’t bother you too much. But it is possible that he starts to see things in his sleep, or even while he is awake. Things that might seem very real. Things he might not understand, and that could scare him. And if it should happen, do not reject it. He will need more than ever your love. And if he’s really looking for answers... I sincerely wish things to be different, but I’m afraid I’ll be the only one who can bring him answers.

- That’s a fact, Master Mage, said Gustavus. You’re the only White Skaven in Vereinbarung. If it’s his dest’ny, we’ll send him to you.

- No, said Psody firmly. It will be up to him, and just him, to decide his destiny. I will always be willing to help him answer his questions. But he must remain master of his choices. Only the Grey Seers indoctrinate the little White Skaven to make them their servants. It happened to me, and I know how different it is from Human education. I refuse to snatch him from your home. Otherwise, I would behave like my own master, what I categorically refuse.

The White Skaven headed for the exit.

- Well, now I’ll let you take-care of your son. Remember: what he needs the most is your love-attention. I’m sure he’ll become a real little man thanks to you! Do you think you’ll be able to make the road back your home soon?

- Tomorrow, my lord. I must not neglect my job!

- You don’t have any assistant?

- Taal, I’m too poor for that!

- Hum... You’ll be accompanied by an escort, for more safety. And I’ll take the opportunity to give you a cradle a little more comfortable.

- I crafted it as I could, my lord, but I’m a farmer, not a carpenter!

- Don’t worry, it’s fine. Let’s say it will be a little gift-encouragement from me.

- And so, you think he will be able to practice magic?

- If he learns how to do it, Father. He will probably not be the only one. I think we should still think about opening a school of magic here.
Ludwig Steiner scratched his head.

- It’s an operation that will take time and money! First of all, we need willing mages, then we must be sure that it does not offend Karl Franz, who remains the most powerful person in this part of the world, and who has the authority over magic according to the laws that we have copied. But this little miracle deserves indeed that we seriously study the question.

The Prince yawned.

- Well, it can wait tomorrow. I don’t know if it’s because I’m becoming old, but I want to go to bed early tonight.

Heike got up from the table.

- Me too, Father, if you allow me
- Please.
- I really need to get into bed. It must be the change of season...

The ratwoman passed behind her companion, who had also risen. Bianka, sat a few feet from Psody, jumped. She was sure of what she had just seen: her mother had quietly slapped the White Skaven’s buttock. The latter accelerated the movement and followed her, pressing his pace.

An hour later, Bianka was in bed. But sleep didn’t come. She turned and turned again, looking for a more comfortable position. Nothing helped. With an annoyed sigh, she stood up. She groped for the curtains she pulled, opened the shutters, and remained at the window.

Everything was quiet in the Steiner property. In the distance, the young ratgirl could hear the sounds of Steinerburg’s nightlife. And in the sky, the warpstone moon Morrslieb was at its highest. Clouds passed in front of the emerald globe, without altering the brightness of the sky.

What a day...
Bianka reviewed everything she had done during the previous day, looking for something, the little detail that had turned the day so bad that she couldn’t sleep now.

Suddenly she understood. Tears came to her eyes.

Indeed... Although I am better educated and much richer than most inhabitants of the Rat Kingdom, I still am a narrow-minded girl who comes out painfully from adolescence, with her joys, her sorrows... and her frustrations.

She gazed at Morrslieb again, which was glowing greenish from the window, vainly trying to think of something else. She scanned the room lit by this ominous light, and her eyes stopped on her big bed. She thought for a moment, and finally took her decision. She stretched out all the way on the mattress and sighed for the second time, much deeper. She glanced at the front door, but changed her mind. At this time, everyone was sleeping.

She gently took the serrated edge of the bottom of her nightgown, and slowly went up the fabric over her breasts. The cool wind made her shudder. Then she stroked her naked body with her fingertips, sliding them from her thighs to her chest. At first very light, the contact became more and more pronounced, more and more rapid. She let her left hand tickle her bust, and guided her right hand in circles gradually concentrated towards her lower abdomen. She slowly spread her knees, and the feeling turned into sensuality. Her breath became panting as her heartbeat accelerated. Her eyes narrowed as tears fell on her cheekbones. She took a deep breath, and her lucidity slipped into vertigo.

Gabriel started. He had thought he heard a noise in the next room, the one occupied by his older sister. A sort of groan, halfway between pain and... something indefinable. The little Skaven listened, surprised and worried, but nothing but the wind in the trees tickled his eardrums.

Must be dreaming! he thought, shrugging his shoulders, before going back to sleep.

* 

- Who are you?
Psody was standing, his toes felt the contact of planks of wood, splintered laden. He looked briefly around, and realized that he was on the dais of the large nave of the Horned Rat temple of the colony of Brissuc, the colony where he was born. His four brothers were near him. All of them were holding their ear, or had a bloody cloth on it. They had just received the ritual scarification making them true adult Skaven. It was now his turn. He had to answer the ritual question that had just been asked to him by the greatest authority of the burrow, Grey Prophet Vellux, his master. He stammered shyly:

- I am Psody, a White Skaven... I am your servant, and the servant of the Horned Rat.

He knew he should not make mistakes. Any mistake would ridicule him, in the eyes of the Horned Rat, and all the Skaven citizens who formed the audience. The tall White Skaven asked with a loud and inquisitive voice:

- Why were you born?

The answer was obvious to the young ratman.

- To... to... to transmit the sacred word of the Horned Rat. His words guide the people of Skaven, and his magic destroys his enemies. I am...

He turned his head nervously, and suddenly his heart leapt into his chest. On his left, there was a heavy curtain crafted with dark red cloth. A face appeared in the shadows, on the side, behind the scenes. Someone was watching him. He couldn’t quite distinguish the features of the individual, but he spotted his eyes sparkling in the dark, and a smirk that twisted his face. He realized that Vellux was waiting for the rest of his argument, and hastened to resume:

- His most humble servant. I was born to serve him... to serve you, my master.

He turned his head back to the face behind the curtain, but it was gone. The Grey Seer approached, slowly raising his dagger, and cut his ear three times, thus engraving in his flesh his belonging to the colony.

- May those who hear you hear only the Horned Rat. May those who suffer your anger only see the will of the Horned Rat. May those who follow you be blessed by the Horned Rat.
Psody was at once relieved, happy, and proud. At last he was a true, whole member of Brissuc’s terrier. At last he was a real Son of the Horned Rat. Vellux then ordered:

- Hey! Bring the sacrifices!

The sacrifices? Psody wondered.

Three Stormvermins brought six Skaven on the platform. All six were naked, tied to each other by a heavy chain slipped into the collars they wore. Psody saw three males and three females. The males appeared to him relatively young. The one in the head, a brown Skaven, looked a little older than he was. The second, a Black Skaven, seemed to be born after one a seasonal cycle, at most. In contrast, the small Skaven boy following was skinny, and very young. The three females were otherwise more surprising: slender, walking on their two legs, nothing suggested that they came out of a hatchery; they had not been treated with warpstone. One of them was very small, and probably had not lived more than three complete seasonal cycles. Another raised her head with a very unpleasant insolence, considering the assembly with contempt. But it was the last of the procession that struck the White Skaven with astonishment.

At first it seemed old, perhaps it was as old as Grey Seer Vellux. Then, it was really disturbing. Deep down, in the depths of himself, Psody felt something. That female had something special. He couldn’t say what. Something deep, visceral. It was a complete stranger to him, yet he felt there was a connection between them.

- Here is the lie of the Horned Rat, said Vellux. They don’t belong to our world. They don’t belong to our race. They don’t belong to our kind.

Indeed, Psody noticed that none of the six prisoners were wearing burr scarification on their left ear. Vellux raised his arms, and turned to the huge idol standing at the back of the stage. This tall statue, more than twenty feet high, represented a Skaven with two pairs of horns, its two fists stretched towards the ceiling and its jaw wide open on a cry of challenge to the attention of the surface world. The little White Skaven knew that Clan Skryre Warplock Engineers had carved this idol by assembling quantities of metal pieces. The inside of the head was hollow, and a warpstone burst from its eyes and mouth.

- See, O Horned Rat! Vellux invernted. We found a whole bunch of traitors-disbelievers! These unworthy children of the Horned Rat have chosen to live among men-things! With their language, their habits, even their clothes!

The whole assembly exploded with jeers, sneers, and cries of indignation. The attached Skaven
were all petrified in terror. Suddenly, the smaller male reached out his hand, and smudged a few incomprehensible sounds in a shrill voice. The mature female opened her eyes wide, and moaned in her turn, tears in her eyes. Once again, the little white Skaven did not understand anything.

- They are not worthy-worthy Clanrats! You, take care of them as they deserve-deserve!

Chitik, Diassyon and Klur approached the prisoners, looking menacing. Moly, standing back, took a key out of his pocket and unfastened the locks that held the six traitors in their chain. He took the opportunity to put his warty legs on the females, by the way. The other three Psody brothers grabbed the three males. The treacherous Stormvermin and the brown Skaven tried to defend themselves, but Chitik knocked out the Black one with a punch, while Diassyon and Klur grabbed the arms of the brown Skaven and immobilized it to the floor. The little bright Skaven tried to flee, but the Pestilens jumped on it, pinned him to the ground, and cut its throat in a gesture with his rusty dagger, before biting its neck and sucking greedily its warm blood.

The three females screamed together so loudly that the White Skaven’s ears whistled. Vellux raised his fist.

- Sacrifice! Sacrifice!

Klur, Chitik and Diassyon then began to slaughter the other two males, with their blades, claws and fangs. Whole handfuls of hair hung on shreds of skin flew, viscera spread, and blood spurted out. Chitik, Diassyon and Klur feasted on the two biggest, while Moly tore the small body of the young ratboy with full bites.

As his brothers did their terrible task, Psody felt worse and worse. His brain was racing at full speed. Why such a reaction? All he saw was just justice: these three young males had agreed with the men-things, and had thus betrayed the Horned Rat. And these three females showed excessive outrage, daring to imagine themselves equal to the Clanrats! He should have rejoiced to see thus accomplished the will of the Grey Seer, and that of his god. He could even have given the execution order himself! Maybe he would do it again, once his title of Grey Prophet earned?

Yet... he was not so upset not to have ordered this carnage.

Psody suddenly realized that the screams had stopped. The three males were now in pieces, their guts spilled on wooden planks, their limbs torn off. Behind, the three females were clutching one another, petrified with terror.
Grey Seer Vellux raised his hand, and pointed a firm finger at them.

- And now, sons of the Horned Rat, I will finish fulfilling his will.

The assembly remained silent as the great White Skaven approached. He reveled with the scent of fear emanating from the three breeders. He gazed at them for a long time, licking his chops. Then he grabbed by the arm the young female who had not lost his arrogant air. He pulled it towards him and threw it on the floor. After which he made a gesture towards the assembly.

- You, and you, out of my sight!

Three masked Skaven burst onto the stage, gripped the old layer and the little pup with their claws, and hurled them into the pit. The effect was immediate. The Clanrats of the first rank threw themselves on the two females with excited squeals. Before disappearing, buried under a mass of horny Skaven, the mature female cried in a desperate voice:

- Psody! PSODY!

Psody’s heart stopped dead. Had the layer just pronounced his name?

Near him, Vellux plunged on the female who remained on the stage, turned it over, and lay down on it, crushing it with all his weight. He rolled up his robe, and flanked the breeder with violent thrusts. His moans of pleasure mingled with the desperate cries of the young breeder. Shouts that were silent soon, so much suffering was strong. The female turned its head to the little White Skaven, who perceived the glare of its eyes between two hiccups. A heavy look, full of regret and reproach.

Vellux, in full ecstasy, reared backwards and pushed a powerful:

- Glory to the Horned Rat!

- Glory to the Horned Rat! repeated the Skaven of the assembly.

Soon the formula echoed throughout the temple without interruption. Klur, Diassyon, Moly and Chitik took up the refrain, delighted to be from now on real Skaven, citizens of Brissuc, with the same rights.
- Glory to the Horned Rat! Glory to the Horned Rat!

The little White Skaven saw his brothers encourage him to proclaim the same sentence with them. Still stunned by what he had just seen, he tried as best he could to assert himself.

- Glory to...

But Psody couldn’t articulate another syllable. A terrible sorrow crushed his intestines, and tears came to his eyes. Unable to detach his eyes from the young breeder mated in front of him, he stammered:

- No... NO!

- What?

Psody awoke with a start, hardly repressing a little cry of fright.

- What’s going on? asked the voice of his wife.
- Huh? Oh... oh... nothing.
- Bad dreams?
- It will pass. Sleep, it will pass...

But the White Skaven didn’t know if he wanted to reassure Heike or reassure himself.
Strange birds of prey

Daughters and Sons of the Horned Rat,

I apologize for the delay, but I had some minor health problems. Nothing serious, I am cured by now, but it prevented me from thinking for a few days.

I am also pleased to announce that I have been definitively accepted into the French public service. I hope I can be transferred to a library, and have a job in which I will flourish more than the current one. But at least, my professional future is stabilized.

Finally, I noticed that almost no one commented for nearly ten months I started to publish this fanfiction. I beg you, do not hesitate to express yourself, it is very important for me to have positive or negative feedback, provided that they are issued for a constructive purpose. I hope it’s not because the general tone displeases you. I promise you that the action will FINALLY come.

Thank you for your attention, and Glory to the Horned Rat!

- Here we are, boys!

The dozen horsemen stopped. Walter Klingmann pointed to a small fort built on a hill at the entrance of the village.

- These are Klapperschlänge’s barracks.

The barracks was a small, dark and austere building, designed with the minimum of frills. The region, in reality, was the least wealthy of the Rat Kingdom, and every silver shilling was precious. It had despite all its share of adopted Skaven, the Prince had decided not to refuse the voluntary peasants to enlarge their family if they had the means to subsist, as modest as were these means.

*Is it reasonable?* Kit thought, who had never fully approved it. As the Prince’s grandson, he had
never known anything but opulence at home. His field experience had accustomed him to the barrack’s austerity, frugal meals, and nights in tents. But leaving poor people in charge of a Skaven seemed a mistake for him. Whenever he thought about it, his over-perfectionist side whispered to him that the Freed Skaven were too precious to be entrusted to people who couldn’t make ends meet.

He shook his head, wanting to drive those parasitic ideas out of his mind. Other more concrete and far more serious problems threatened peace on his kingdom. He turned to the men, and felt his whiskers quiver when he saw one of them with a vague look.

- Hey, Pol? You have a problem?

Pol Demmler started. He was a very good friend of Walter, even more. One of these two could rarely be seen without the other one. He was a man with dark grey hair and big, clear eyes. Adopted by the couple owner of one of the most prosperous hostels in Steinerburg, he had taken advantage of it. Probably too much, because he was very corpulent, so much so that it could be disabling. The influence of his parents and the small number of Skaven soldiers had no doubt contributed more to his acceptance in the army than his abilities as a man of action. In any case, without daring to say it aloud, Kristofferson was convinced of it.

- Uh! ‘Scuse, Kit, but I was thinking about something.

- You did? And so?

- You said “boys”.

- Yes, and…?

- Well, that proves that we are only men.

- And what? Speak.

After a short hesitation, Pol burst out:

- There are not enough chicks in this army! Girls, girls!

Some men sneered. Kristofferson, on the other hand, had a frustrated grimace.

- Pol, you know it’s not possible! In any case, not yet!
- Oh, I was joking! replied the fat dark Skaven. Relax!

- He’s right, Kit, Walter said. You always take everything seriously!

Kit turned to his best friend.

- You’ve been harvesting with me, Wally. You know how girls are treated by the Feral Skaven. Unlike you, I have a huge chance: I have two sisters and a mother tied with me by the blood. Thinking of what they could become between their paws makes me sick.

Then he returned to Pol.

- That’s why I expect people I work with to behave like real citizens, and not like those crazy fools who see women as mere balls-emptiers. And I take this opportunity to remind you how our girls are still rare, and therefore they are much too valuable! In a generation, if we see that there are as many boys as girls, those who want to join the army will do so – and I’m pretty sure they’re just as capable as the guys. But for now, we cannot take the risk to let our race die by lack of girls!

Walter patted Pol’s shoulder.

- Your problem is not the lack of women in the army, buddy. It’s because you don’t have one yet!

Once again, the members of the company sneered.

- Pol is a big frustrated!

- His tail is on fire!

Pol, ashamed, lowered his head. Walter did not want to leave him in this mood.

- Now that we have come back for good, you can work on it.

- Hum... Women like soldiers, don’t they? the other replied with a moist look of hope.

Finally, Kristofferson’s face illuminated with a smile.
- A handsome guy like you, well prepared… they will jostle at your door.

The laughter flared up again, but became less mocking. Walter threw to the elder Steiner:

- So, you see, when you want, you still know how to laugh!
- Enough with the jokes, Wally. We have to go; Captain Müller is waiting for us.

And the little company went back to the building.

Rudy Müller was a tall, skinny, emaciated man with a grizzled moustache and a well-trimmed beard. Former captain in the army of the Empire, he had kept his old uniform and his pectoral, never forgetting to maintain them well. His rapier and his harquebus were like him: imperial, worn, but still ready to serve. He greeted Kristofferson and his militia at attention in the middle of the dusty yard.

- Captain Müller, at your service! It is an honour.
- Dismiss, captain, I do not have the authority of a commander, I am just the representative of the Prince.
- That makes you a high authority, my liege!
- You still remain the captain of Klapperschlänge.

The Skaven dismounted. When Kit found himself in front of the captain, he noticed that the Human was taller than he was.

- So, Captain, tell me what’s the problem?
- A monstrous creature put us through Hell, my liege.

The brown Skaven looked at the Human from head to toe.

- I do not understand. My second, Master Klingmann here, told me that you had sent him a missive,
and in this missive, you explained that you didn’t know what to do?

- This is unfortunately the whole truth, my lord.

- Yet you seem to me to be a fellow who has lived more years in the army than all the other soldiers in this barracks! I heard you were a “newly appointed to this position”, but you have everything from the veteran!

Müller took his inspiration, and took a few moments to think before daring to explain:

- It bothers me to contradict you, but in fact, I’ve always been in positions... away from any trouble. In the heart of the Empire, no big military campaign to my credit... I can even tell you that during the Chaos Storm, I was already too old, I was asked to stay in my barracks. And then, the doctor advised me a better climate. So, I went to get a better life in the Renegade Crowns, and six months ago I was asked to replace Captain Falsch.

- I see... What happened to Captain Falsch?

- He fell from the top of a ladder, my liege.

- Ah... Bad luck, indeed.

The tall man looked at the young brown Skaven in his eyes:

- My liege, I am nothing but an old moron. But the citizens of Klapperschlänge trust me, I want to be worthy of it.

Kristofferson looked a little more at the captain. He seemed to be someone who took his duties very seriously. Perhaps he was no longer good at anything, but he seemed at least capable of applying himself to do things as rightly as he could.

- Did you send a report to the commander of Fort Wüstengrenze?

- I did, my liege. But the commander didn’t take me seriously. I even went to see him in person, he laughed in my face.

- What did he tell you, exactly?

The captain spat with disgust.
- I told him: “We are on the border of Vereinbarung, and the danger may come from there”. But he said: “In that direction, there is only sand, dust and sun. Nobody would be crazy enough to cross the desert and go back to here. Your Mutant is bandits”. And, of course, I came home without the slightest support.

- If we succeed in proving to this commander that you were right, I’ll remind him of what trust in his fellow soldiers is. Well, can you take us to the burgomaster?

- At once, my liege!

Müller hastened to ride an old tired horse. The members of the company followed him.

Klapperschlänge corresponded to the idea that could be had of the small village in the countryside: a dozen maisonettes were gathered around the unique well. One of the houses, the only one with an additional floor, was that of the burgomaster, Reiner Kästner. Kästner was a good man, rather strong, used to working in the fields. He welcomed the little company with relief.

- It’s a real pleasure to finally see the representatives of the Prince authority come here to help the people! exclaimed the Human.

- When the Prince’s subjects have problems, the Prince’s duty is to help them solve these problems, Kristofferson replied. So, it seems that you have nasty beasts?

- I am sure, completely certain, that they are wild animals that attack our cattle!

- Do you have an idea what kind of animals are we dealing with?

- At first, I thought about wolves, but the third night we heard screams. And those shouts were not those of a wolf. Neither a bear. Nothing of this kind. Usually, when the weather is nice, we leave the animals outside at night, but we finally decided to gather them all in the barn. Last night it was a nightmare. “It” was very angry. We have an ox who was scared to death.

- You did not have the courage to check what it was? Walter asked.

The burgomaster didn’t dare answer. Kristofferson wanted to reassure him.

- You did what needed to be done. Now we are here. And we’ll get rid of this thing.

- Can you show us the barn? Müller asked.

Kästner took the group to the big building on the outskirts of the village. The company went around, and the Skaven recognized the whole damage. The roof had been lacerated by something that probably had big claws. Several logs that made up the walls were completely exploded, as under blows of clubs. Splinters of wood, some as long as an arm, were scattered around. Kit
whistled, impressed.

- How much time this situation has lasted?
  - About three weeks. At first, it was just a cow that disappeared every three days, but now... it looks like this... “it” is getting bolder. Two days ago, old Egbert disappeared, too.
  - Are you sure he didn’t simply leave the village?
  - He would never have left without taking his stuff, nor without warning me.
  - It is time to unveil this mystery. We will stay there until this creature shows up.

The men of the company did not seem reassured. Fritz Hafner, in particular, was sweating profusely.

  - Uh... Kit?
  - Yeah?
  - Are you sure we need to stay there? We saw that it was dangerous, so leave now, we can prevent reinforcements.

This attitude greatly displeased the brown Skaven.

  - We are reinforcements, Fritz. These people are counting on our help. Something terrorizes the villagers around and attack them and their cattle, and I want to know what it is.

Big Pol scratched his head, and thought aloud:

  - But if it is big and strong enough to carry a man, how does this beast do not leave traces? The field is intact!

Kristofferson looked up, and narrowed his eyes.

  - It moves through the air. This thing can fly. It’s even the first thing Walter suggested me when he told me about this story.
  - I’m sure it’s a winged Mutant, Kästner agreed. The night when it vented on the barn, I thought I
heard a flutter of wings. Like a bat, or a huge bird!

Steiner’s son rubbed his chin.

- Have you locked up all your animals in the barn?
  - Yes, my liege.

- So, this monster cannot feed anymore. That’s why it’s mad. It must have made a habit of picking up in your cattle, and since it cannot take it off, it’s getting angry.

- Maybe it’ll try to feed itself somewhere else? Kästner hoped.

- I’d rather not, because that would only move the problem. No, we have to bring it here. We shall bait it.

The burgomaster shivered at the idea of leaving one of his villagers at the mercy of the beast.

- Oh no! Don’t ask me that, my liege! All my villagers are good people!

- Calm down, Master Kästner. Nobody is going to bait. You said an ox died with fear?
  - Yes, as if it had been struck by lightning!

- So, we have our bait. Its meat didn’t have time to rot too much. You’ll cut it in pieces and leave the carcass in the middle of a field away from the houses. If this beast is still hungry, it will come.

Kästner had tears in his eyes.

- Are you sure that my fellow citizens will remain safe?

The villagers, attracted by curiosity, surrounded the company. The looks were sometimes questioning, sometimes anxious, sometimes clearly frightened. Kristofferson wanted to reassure them.

- Listen, brave citizens: there is no way that any one of you takes the slightest risk. You will all stay home and barricade your doors and windows. We will remain hidden in the field to surprise the beast and to defeat it ourselves. I will send a messenger to the Wüstengrenze fort, too. If they receive a letter written and signed by me, they will intervene.
He turned to Kästner.

- Where did you put the dead ox?
- It was put in a corner of the barn, under rags and straw, because of the smell.
- The smell must be incredible, indeed! Walter grumbled.
- Well, that was this way, or take the risk of being attacked again, sir! We are not warriors!
- Watch your language, answered the spotted Skaven. We’re here for you!
- We are, and that’s why it’s on the beast that we will spit our anger, and not on you, added Kristofferson, who felt the ambient tension going up a notch.

The young man-rat took a few steps and looked at the villagers one by one. Then he gave his instructions in a loud voice.

- You’ll all go home and barricade yourself. Stay calm, have confidence, and I promise you that we’ll get rid of this threat. Captain Müller, I want you to bring me your three best soldiers.
- I get you them right away, sir, the Human replied firmly.

Müller jumped on his horse and galloped to the barracks. In the process, he risked to fall from his saddle several times. Kristofferson took no notice, and continued to give directives.

- I want three volunteers to come with me, prepare our bait, and put it on a suitable place. Master Kästner, is there a place where this thing can be lured and trapped?
- Old Egbert’s field, right here, the burgomaster replied, pointing to a piece of poorly maintained land.
- Three with me. The others, gather in a circle around the perimeter.

The look of the young brown Skaven became harder.

- Whatever it is, tonight, it won’t be anymore.
Three hours had passed. Three hours during which no one had dared to say a single word. The dead ox, dismembered, was prominently in the middle of Egbert’s field, bloodying from all parts, like the promise of a carnage to come. All the inhabitants had cloistered themselves at home. And the fifteen Humans and Skaven soldiers were waiting. Only the buzzing of the flies, and the singing of the birds, unaware of the drama, were heard. A few crows came to feed on the carcass that was rotting under the sun.

The sky was orange, and the first stars appeared. Müller, lying in the grass next to Kristofferson, rubbed his moustache.

- I sincerely hope that you won’t have come for nothing.
- Don’t worry, captain. This crap will come. After all, the attacks happened at night, didn’t they?
- They did.

The young Steiner leaned on his elbow to turn to the Human.

- You say that you have never been confronted with some serious threat. But you still have regular training?
- Of course, my liege.
- Have you had any conflicts to resolve? Drunk fights, marauders, that kind of thing?
- I had, a couple of times. Anyway, I never neglected my duty, and still today, I regularly…

A cry tearing the skies interrupted the captain. A loud screech, far too powerful to emerge from a throat familiar to ordinary mortals. All the heads rose simultaneously, the eyes widened, the mouths twisted. Two creatures were beating loudly on their bat wings above the village. The last rays of sun shone their reptilian scales. The span of the bigger of the two stretched over twenty-five feet, while the other was about fifteen feet. Their bodies were long, sinuous and muscular like those of a gigantic snake, and claws half a dozen inches long protruded at the end of their hind legs. Their tails were long and tapered, their heads elongated, their eyes huge and gleaming with a malevolent glow, but the most frightening remained their sharp and menacing like so many daggers fangs.

Captain Müller exclaimed:

- Wyverns!
- Pol! Kristofferson called.
The fat Skaven had at least one special talent: he was a good shooter. Formed by Nedland Barnrooster, he was able to reach his target at a far distance with any shooting weapon. He had taken his harquebus, certainly less efficient than that of the Halfling scout, but more effective than average. With a precise gesture, he turned his weapon towards the smallest wyvern. He took a few long seconds to aim at the monster’s head, and squeezed the trigger. The detonation made the old captain start, and he screamed with joy.

- Well done!

Indeed, the bullet had reached the creature at its temple. Not enough to kill it, but it slipped into a surprised groan, distracted by the shock. The joy of the men-at-arms was short-lived when the wyvern fell on one of the little houses in a great crash. The roof of thatch and branches collapsed under its weight.

- Taal! exclaimed Walter.

A desperate yell answered this invective. The door of the hut, still standing, opened on the fly, and an old woman out of breath ran across it as fast as her frail legs could run. An odious screeching broke the twilight again. The hungry, greater, wyvern had just spotted a game at its convenience. Already it was putting herself in a position to dash on its prey, its paws forward, its claws ready to tear.

- Charge! Kristofferson ordered.

All the warriors, Humans and Skaven, rushed forward shouting at the flying creature. This one, surprise, slowed down its diving. Walter, who was right behind it, took the opportunity to try a trick that he considered daring, but he would consider dementia thereafter. He spotted the long sinuous tail of the wyvern, ran to the monster, then when he was within reach, made a huge jump, arms outstretched forward, and grasped with both hands the pointed appendix. Fully cut in full attack, the wyvern roared with frustration. Its claws closed in the void. The old woman didn’t slow down. Soon, all the soldiers harangued the creature, tried to pierce its coat of scales.

Kristofferson, left behind, was ready to attack as well. He unsheathed his rapier, brandished it, and made three strides towards the fray, but froze. He glanced at his weapon, and spitted. As much as he could find the weak point of an armour, so much this thin blade could not much against such an adversary. He quickly looked around for something more suitable, and his eyes fell on a lumberjack’s axe planted in a stump not far from him. He whistled his horse, ran to the axe and grabbed it. A moment later, his horse had arrived near him. He leaped on the horse without a saddle, and made him gallop towards the wyvern. His steed, driven to this kind of situation, didn’t
Kristofferson turned around the beast, then when he found himself facing its back, ran his horse in his direction, then he stood up, balancing on the back of his horse, and leaped on the wyvern, to hold on firmly to one of the quills on its back.

The hungry beast felt the shock. It screamed, shook itself as hard as it could, tried to fly away again, but it was too heavy with the two Skaven who held it back. Kristofferson raised his hand, and slashed the axe on the wyvern’s collarbone. It moaned appallingly, it hind legs touched the ground. The wyvern wriggled its wings, repelling the soldiers encircling it. Young Steiner didn’t let go of his hold, and he stroke again. At the fourth blow, he cut the right wing of the wyvern. Stunned with pain, unbalanced, it flipped forward. The brown Skaven jumped to the ground and narrowly avoided a tail swing. He straightened up, and hastened to re-join his comrades.

The whole company surrounded the wyvern, and beat it. The monster squeaked in pain, desperately trying to repel its attackers, without success. Kristofferson raised his axe with both hands and smashed the head of the beast. At last the cries went silent, at last it stopped convulsing.

A great silence hovered over the village. Kristofferson quickly scanned the company members. Not one had been seriously injured, at most there had been bruises. Walter, in particular, had been dragged to the ground rather violently, but he already seemed to be recovering. The young Steiner raised his fist to the sky with a cry of victory, immediately imitated by all the others.

- Great job, boys! You have been…

He was interrupted by another croaking. All heads turned to the hut on which the little wyvern had fallen. During the assault on the tall one, it had got rid of the little house so badly, and now it was flying again. The fiercest soldiers were already running in its direction, but it did not attack them. On the contrary, it flew in the direction from which it had come as fast as it could.

The soldiers remained dumbfounded. Müller approached Kristofferson.

- We can stop it when it returns, my liege.
- If it comes back, Pol mumbled. Maybe it got the message.

Kristofferson approached the bloody corpse of the greater wyvern, and narrowed his eyes.
- It may not be so simple.

He looked around again, and since he saw nothing suspicious, he thought the danger had passed.

- You can come here, the monsters are gone!

The villagers came out of their homes, and warmly congratulated the soldiers. The boldest approached hesitantly from the body of the beast, and one of them even dared to touch its scales.

Kästner approached Kristofferson.

- You are real heroes!

- Thank you, Master Kästner. Alas, I’m afraid the troubles are not over yet.

- You think the other beast will come back?

- It may not be alone. Come to see.

The burgomaster accompanied the young ratman who placed himself beside the flank of the wyvern.

Look, he said, pointing at something.

This something was a strange mark on glistening scales, something too clear to be a mere mark of birth.

- Looks like... a tattoo?

- I believe it is, indeed, Master Kästner.

- Could someone have tattooed this horror?

- Out of the egg, I guess. I have read somewhere that it is possible to tame a wyvern if you proceed early enough. These animals can be easily trained, if you know how to do it.

- So, you mean that this thing belongs to someone?
- I think.

- And so, who is the master of these wyverns, in your opinion?

- I don’t know, I’ve never seen a tattoo like this before today. But I’m sure of one thing: when this master sees one of his two pets come home, he may not be happy and come himself.

- What shall we do now? the burgomaster moaned.

Captain Müller raised his hand.

- No worries, Master Kästner. Now, we have evidence that these attacks were the result of something much more dangerous than mere bandits in mop. The captain of Wüstengrenze will no longer be able to remain deaf to our call for help, and will have to leave men on the spot with mine until we are sure that there is no more danger.

- We’ll bring its head back to him, Kristofferson continued. And if he is still reluctant to help you, I’ll take care personally to find a more competent substitute.

The general euphoria fell, and with it the certainties, while worries rose again. Kristofferson wanted to reassure the inhabitants of Klapperschlänge.

- Brave folks, we’ve slayed the beast, but our company will wait for the reinforcements here. We stay at the barracks. If ever one of you sees or hears something weird, he warns us right away. Face of adversity, stay united as you did so far, and I promise you that your village will soon be freed from this threat.

The young ratman then saw something out of the corner of his eye that squeezed his heart. The old woman who had escaped the wyvern was kneeling before the remains of her house, in tears. Kristofferson approached her, and squatted by her side.

- Ma Dame, tomorrow morning, your house will be rebuilt. In the meantime, you shall spend the night with someone who can accommodate you. Master Kästner?

- Yes my lord?

- You have the biggest house in the area. Can you accommodate this person by tomorrow?

- Of course I can.

- Let’s all go to bed, the day has been long and emotional. We will burn this carcass tomorrow, until then, no one should touch it.

- Why? asked a peasant.
- You never know, wyvern blood or putrefactive vapours can be toxic. Rest, and thank you all!

With these words, the inhabitants of Klapperschlänge returned to their homes. Captain Müller approached Kristofferson. He looked unhappy.

- My liege, I am really sorry.

- For what, captain?

- Because I did not have the courage to fight like you did.

- I saw you alongside the others. You did what you could, given your age, you did well. Captain, I feel that you lack confidence in yourself, but maybe it’s because you have not been trusted enough in the past? Sure, you’re not at the head of the legion of a Count Elector, but you ran to the wyvern, and not in the opposite direction.

The old man did not answer. Kristofferson patted his shoulder.

- You’ll feel better tomorrow.

And the fighters returned to the barracks. The dorm was large enough to temporarily house Kristofferson and his company. They took care of lodging, feeding and curing their horses, cleaned their weapons, and went to sleep on the straw mattresses.

* 

Kristofferson awoke with a start. He looked nervously all around him, breathless for a few moments, then he relaxed, and grumbled.

Again! This must stop!

He knew very well what just happened. It was a regular pain to him when he was nervous. As his mind floated in the limbo of sleep, something suddenly brought him back to reality. Generally, it was a dry, loud and very short sound that resonated directly in his ears, and woke him up immediately by reflex. A dog bark, a gunshot, a thunder crack, a scream, or any other sound of the same kind. Fortunately, he didn’t have much trouble falling asleep again when it happened to him. He laid down, closed his eyes, and waited for sleep.
Suddenly, his ear moved slightly.

He opened his eyes. It was another reflex he knew well, too. The one which told him that he had felt something unusual.

*I sleep in a barracks of a village where I never went before... of course, I will feel unusual things!*

Once again, he felt his ear tickle. He raised his head. This time he had heard something clearly. And it was not in his dreams, nor any illusion. The noise began again. It was distant, but characteristic enough to be recognized with certainty.

*What is that? A pig?*

Yes, it was the cries of a pig. The young ratman sighed. What’s more normal than screaming pigs in the countryside? He turned on the mattress, wanting to forget about it. But something tenacious kept him awake. A small impression, the presence of a tiny little detail, but who could...

Kristofferson jumped up.

*There are no pigs here!*

The cattle in the village of Klapperschlänge were cows and oxen only. The Steiner son put on his leather vest, took up his weapons, and hurried up the parapet. He approached one of the soldiers.

- Hey, you! Have you seen anything?
- Nothing, my liege.
- I think ... wait! Listen!

The two men were silent. No doubt, cries of pigs rose under the starry sky.

- What is that? asked the soldier.
- Look, here! the brown Skaven firmly replied.

The pig squeals came from behind a hill. And now, an orange glow was in that direction.

Kristofferson hurriedly ordered:

- Horn the alarm!

He did not need to repeat it. The soldier grabbed the horn he wore on his belt and blew inside. The other guards answered him. In the barracks, it was the commotion of combat. It took only a couple of minutes for all the men-at-arms to be gathered in the yard. Captain Müller, standing at attention in front of his troops, asked Kristofferson who was still on the walkway:

- My liege, what is it?

The young ratman turned back to the hill, and felt a shiver electrify his spine. He could see the massive silhouettes of great humanoids wearing motley pieces of armour, helmets with spikes and horns, and coarse heavy weapons. Some held lighted torches, others began to strike their shield with their clubs, the hilt of their sword or the handle of their axe. The flames intermittently illuminated hate facies, burning eyes, protruding fangs. Kristofferson quickly counted a hundred of these invaders, almost four times more than all the soldiers in the barracks. About twenty of them were mounted on huge wild boars. He had never seen one in his life, but recognized them immediately. His blood boiled in his veins. He lowered his muzzle to the yard, and shouted:

- Brace yourselves, soldiers of Klapperschlänge! Your village is attacked by Orcs!

As if to confirm this terrible affirmation, the war cries of the Waaagh broke out in the night, and the Green Skins charged.
A Hate Triangle

Daughters and Sons of the Horned Rat,

I admit, I dragged a little. The work has been pretty tough these recent weeks. But I know you’ll understand.

This doesn’t mean I have not written anything. I just wrote other things in other later chapters.

Soon on vacation, I’ll see if I can chapter 15 a little sooner.

Thank you for your patience, and glory to the Horned Rat!

Koursh, the slave Skaven, reached out in a precise direction. Sigmund saw in the distance the undulating flames of a campfire. The night wouldn’t delay to make way for the dawn, and in an hour, the Feral Skaven would go to sleep.

- Finally! Camp of Pawleader Qroshay of Clan Moulder!

The Black Skaven winced. The characteristic smell of Feral Skaven, carried by the wind, infected his nostrils. He felt himself approaching a particularly difficult ordeal. In the past, he had already infiltrated a group of Feral Skaven. It was something that was not easy or pleasant for him. The hardest thing was to silence all the education his parents had transmitted him, without letting the most primitive instincts that lay dormant in him. But he was resigned. Lives were on the balance.

As they approached, heads were raised, eyes narrowed with suspicion and malice. Sigmund groaned inwardly. They were about twenty, in the middle of three large skin and branches-crafted tents, all more filthy and naughty each other. Ten of them were sitting in a circle around a group of a dozen terrified Humans, mostly women and children.

One of the Feral Skaven in particular caught the attention of the young Steiner. It was a very skinny Clan Warrior, with a rather thick brown coat, who was in charge of a jezzail, the infamous
harquebus with warp ammunition designed by Clan Skryre. It was easy to guess its role or its membership in the Mutator Clan: its two eyes had been replaced by two enormous eyeballs, as big as oranges, torn off from some huge creature.

*Damn Moulders and their habit of playing with their own meat!* 

His father had explained to him the methods of Clan Moulder: their Clanrats were modified with great reinforcements of surgery tainted with warpstone. The most deserving became true weapons of war. Those who failed in their duties were usually transformed into Rats-Ogres.

A loud voice shouting made Sigmund’s ear turn.

- Koursh! You dirty little spit! You appear in front of me! How dare you?

The tanned skin that covered the opening of one of the tents was kicked aside by a stout arm. The young Steiner didn’t need to think to understand that he was dealing with the leader of the group. It was a tall, light-furred Feral Skaven, six feet high for more than one hundred and fifty pounds of muscle. Its fur was peeled in places, which revealed the presence of sharp metal pieces embedded in its flesh, like the Moulder used to.

Koursh threw himself at the feet of the chief.

- Finally-finally I find you, O powerful-wonderful Qroshay, our Pawleader!

The leader of the Feral Skavens marauders kicked the shoulder of the slave which rolled on the ground squealing as a response. Then he looked up at Sigmund.

- A Stormvermin... I don’t recognize-recognize you, you were not with us

- I came with my own group-regiment. I am Clawleader Treb

- Where’s your company, Treb?

Sigmund knew exactly what to do: he had to make it clear that as Black Skaven, his strength and authority prevailed over those of Qroshay. Also, he barked:
- Do I mind your business, Moulder?
- Uh… no.

He didn’t give the Pawleader time to be indignant, and continued:

- You Clanrats are all the same! All cowards-incapable, like those who abandoned me when men-things began to defend themselves. They make me think of those lousy rats who make up your battalion. How could you ravaged the men-things village further with such a bunch of good-for-nothings?
- Uh... we fought-fought, Treb.
- And you call me “Clawleader Treb”, you miserable worm-worm! I can’t believe how you can be such a jack-ass!

Qroshay didn’t completely lose his means, he remembered who the leader was.

- Well, do not get angry. Are you hungry, maybe?
- Perhaps.
- Right!

The Moulder approached the prisoners. Sigmund realized what was happening. He tried to keep his face impassive, but he knew exactly what was going to happen.

*Don’t do anything, don’t spoil your cover!*

Qroshay was now evolving between the Humans. He looked at one, brushed a second.

- Men-things... so stupid-weak, so delicious.

The brown Skaven stopped in front of a dark-haired little girl. He looked at her from head to toe. The little one curled up, terrified. A dark spot spread over her peasant skirt. She opened her mouth, but she didn’t have time to scream. In a heartbeat, Qroshay planted his claws in her cheeks, lifted her and bit her throat. The blood spurted instantly. A woman screamed in despair. One of the Feral
Skaven knocked her out with a punch in her face. Qroshay applied his mouth to the gaping wound and drank with large gulps. Then he threw the little body on the ground.

- Yum, yum! I love men-things blood! Especially from little things-men! It’s so fresher! Do not you think, Treb?

But the Pawleader was not aware of the tumult in which Sigmund’s brain was wading. The tall Black Skaven had to draw from the deepest of his convictions the resources what were necessary to keep his calm and avoid crushing the head of the Feral Skaven leader before being slaughtered by the other Clanrats. He clenched his fists so hard that he hurt his own fingers, and cut the skin of his palms with his long pointed nails.

- So, Treb? Which one do you want to eat?

*Think, Siggy! A good idea, now!*

- I’ll choose, but before...

It was necessary to go to the bottom. Fortunately, he had already had a general idea of his plan before arriving at the camp.

- I need to pee. Nobody moves!

- Yes-yes, Clawleader Treb Claw.

Sigmund hid behind a tree, made sure he was not in anyone’s vision field, and then he discreetly picked out of his pocket a small piece of paper folded in four, a feather and a vial in which he had put ink. He quickly scribbled on the paper:

- *10 Clanrats*
- *6 slaves*
- *1 leader*
- *1 harquebusier*
- 12 villagers prisoners

*Attack them by daylight!*  

He blew on the paper to dry the ink, then he hid it. Then he returned to the camp.

- Well, now, I’m going to fulfil my stomach.

Sigmund licked his chops. He slowly scanned the prisoners sitting on the floor who trembled like so many dead leaves. He saw an old man, a little boy, an exhausted woman with her eyes bulging in terror... and stopped on a young, but sturdy man, with a bandage tied around his fair hair, which almost defied him with his blue eyes. He reached for the villager.

- That one! Looks very meaty-meaty.

- It’s yours, Great Treb Claw! Qroshay chuckled.

Sigmund grabbed the Human by his collar, and dragged him towards Rabarena. Which surprised Qroshay.

- Hey, where are you going?

- I move away further!

- Why?

The Black Skaven turned around, and growled:

- Because I want to be all alone for eating-eating! Your smell is going to make me puke! Is it a problem for you?

- Uh… it isn’t.

- Good! The first one who follows me, I kill him.

Sigmund violently pushed the Human with a slap on his back. They took a few steps when he heard someone running and panting behind him. It was Koursh.
- Wait-wait, Treb! My master-master, I want to serve you!

The Black Skaven swivelled in a flash, and threw his little knife in the same second. The weapon went straight into the heart of the sickly slave who fell on its back and died in an instant. In front of the surprised looks of the Savage Skaven and those horrified by the Humans, Sigmund withdrew his knife from Koursh’s chest, and barked:

- I said “the first who follows me, I kill him”! Are you deaf, or are you dumb?

Then he returned to the Human who had not dared to move, and dragged him back to the forest.

While walking, he had a thought for Koursh. This frightened little slave had trusted him, led him to his camp, had wanted to become his zealous servant, and in return he had coldly killed him. He did not feel the slightest regret.

Koursh was not an innocent victim. In the society of Feral Skaven, as soon as you leave the nursery, there is no longer any innocence. Even among slaves.

When Sigmund was certain that he was no longer visible to anyone in the Moulder camp, he stopped his march, without letting go of the Human. The other didn’t move anymore. The Black Skaven sliced the links with his knife, and pushed the Estalian with a push on his shoulder.

Immediately, the Human turned to the rat-man, his fists ready to punch. Sigmund raised his both hands above his head.

- No! Hold on!

He let his knife fall on the ground, and remained motionless.

The man was ready to jump, his arms outstretched and his legs bent, but the expression on his face reflected a certain perplexity. Sigmund concentrated. He had to give back the few words in Estalian that Clarin had taught him. He slowly lowered his hands, placed them on his chest, and
pronounced in the sweetest voice he could:

- *Amigo*

The Human widened his eyes, and his face relaxed slightly. Still with infinite caution, Sigmund fumbled in his pocket, and took out the list he dropped to the ground. He took a few steps back and showed the paper. Without losing a degree of circumspection, the prisoner advanced slowly, and picked up the sheet. He unfolded it, and frowned. The ratman had written in Reikspiel, a language unknown to him, but he understood that it was data on the encampment of the invaders. He lifted his head, displaying a jaded expression towards his interlocutor. The latter pointed to the direction of his village, and said again:

- *Señor Eusebio Clarin. Rabarena.*

The man nodded, took a few steps back, then turned and ran as fast as he could. Sigmund watched him go away, then picked up his knife and thought for a moment. He had to do something to be credible. Fortunately, the forest did not lack quarries. He spotted a rabbit. With a gesture, he threw his knife and reached the critter at its throat. He munched on the raw meat a few times, and rubbed the bloody carcass on his chin. Then he returned to the camp of the Feral Skaven.

Qroshay greeted him with a sneer.

- So, Tasty-tasty?

- No! Nasty taste of sick rabbit! I let him rot on the ground, feed the worms!

- Ah? Good.

Sigmund sat down on a log, and still looked at the prisoners. Pawleader Qroshay mumbled.

- The evil sun will soon rise.

- But what are you doing here? You have ravaged the hutches of men-things! So why are you hanging around here?

- Because we’re waiting for someone, Clawleader Treb. These are the orders of the War Chief Blokfiste.
- I heard he was a grand War Chief.

At these words, Qroshay’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

- Oh, he is-is! Very grand war chief! Very powerful-powerful army! Gone seeking his main troops. Soon, all men-things knee before us!

- Is he so strong?

- Very powerful-malignant! He has a plan! The “Blokfiste Plan”. He will soon join us, and we will trample-devour men-things!

- What’s this plan?

- I don’t know. Only Blokfiste knows. But we all know it’s the best of plans! And we are the best! But before that, we will sleep-sleep.

- Good idea, for once.

Sigmund was going to propose to stay near the fire to stand guard, and help Clarin’s men as soon as they arrived, but he didn’t do anything about it. As a Clawleader, he had to delegate the dirty work to the lower-ranking Feral Skaven to remain credible. He decided to act.

- Where can I sleep?

- You can take a nice rest in the big tent, with the others.

The Black Skaven glanced sideways. He spotted the tent from which Qroshay had emerged, the smallest, and pointed at it.

- I take this one.

- Uh, this one is mine...

- Exactly.

- Uh... we’ll have a hard time keeping two in this tent.

- Who said you would sleep with me? I take this tent, or I take your head! Choose!
Qroshay grumbled, but went to take refuge in one of the big tents. Satisfied, Sigmund settled in the little tent, under the fearful and respectful eyes of the Feral Skaven. When he pulled the skin that covered the entrance opening behind him, he winced. The smell was really dreadful.

*At least I’m not going to fall asleep like the others.*

At the end of an indefinable time, he heard the galloping horses. Clarin’s men would be as subtle as a sledgehammer. He jumped up and went out of his tent. The Feral Skaven camp was in turmoil. The Pawleader bellowed orders in a completely messy way. The fifteen Estalian warriors were led with much more discipline by Captain Antoninus. Beside him stood Clarin, who had mounted Sigmund’s mare, and the peasant who had decided to come back and fight on one of the horses of Clarin’s carriage.

The Black Skaven quickly analyzed the situation. His pupils stared at the large-eyed Skaven. The latter waved its jezzail towards the diplomat. Sigmund reacted in a heartbeat. He leaped right next to the shooter, grabbed the barrel of its gun and forcibly turned it away, shouting:

- Watch out, Clarin!

The shot banged in a thunderous snap. The warpstone bullet went straight, and planted into the back of one of Antoninus’ soldiers, who was crossing swords with a Clanrat. The man collapsed. Sigmund didn’t take the time to worry about it. He faced the gunman, which looked completely haggard. The Black Skaven didn’t give him the opportunity to think. He pulled the short sword of the Feral Skaven out from its scabbard and plunged it in its belly. The shooter collapsed like a rag doll with a gurgling, its huge eyes widened and rolled in all directions.

- Treb!

Sigmund had the reflex to let go the short sword and leap to the side. He dodged a halberd blow from the Pawleader. The rusty metal head hit the ground with a loud noise.

- So, that was true!
Qroshay swept with his weapon, elegantly ducked by the Black Skaven.

- Blokfiste was right!

The Moulder attempted a thrust, once more in the void.

- Some Skaven betray the Horned Rat!

Another thrust that grazed Sigmund’s other flank, who had turned on his heels without ceasing to face his opponent.

- You are with men-things!

The leader took a run-up, and again performed a sweep with his halberd, twice stronger than the first one, to plant the blade in the ribs of his target. Sigmund decided to finish it. He seized the weapon with his both hands, and squeezed it so hard that he broke the movement of the Feral Skaven. Surprised by the maneuver, Qroshay almost fell upon Sigmund. The Pawleader screamed painfully:

- Naughty traitor-liar!

Then he raised his nose to face the traitor, and suddenly, his blood froze. The glowing eyes of the Black Skaven were throwing daggers. Qroshay felt his facies break down in fear when Sigmund roared in a terrible voice:

- You fucking CHILD KILLER!

Sigmund let go of the halberd, and in a flash his powerful hands were wrapped around his opponent’s head. And then the Black Skaven exploded in anger. With a frightening scream, he stuck his thumbs into the eyes of the Pawleader, which squeaked with pain and dropped his weapon. Sigmund pushed the Feral Skaven’s head towards the ground and slammed it on his raised knee. The muzzle exploded in a sickening crackle and a sheaf of blood, and the rascal found himself thrown back and fell full length on his back. Overexcited by the sight of the Feral Skaven on the ground suffering the martyrdom, Sigmund picked up the halberd and chopped it into Qroshay’s ribcage with a full force, once, twice, three times, so that the weapon broke in his hand before he could strike a fourth blow.
The Black Skaven looked at the handle in his hand, and looked around for another weapon.

- *Señor* Steiner!

He turned and spotted Clarin, galloping in his direction. The emissary was brandishing Heart of Unicorn. He threw it in his direction as he passed near, and the young ratman grabbed with a firm grip his trusty weapon. He saw three Feral Skaven pursuing the prisoners that Antoninus’ soldiers were evacuating. He ran after the three Moulders. He mowed the legs of the first one, decapitated the second, and thrust his sword between the shoulder blades of the third, up to the pommel.

Finally, the pressure fell. The cries ceased, the clanging of the weapons went silent, the blood ceased to flow. Sigmund snatched his cloak from Qroshay’s corpse and used it to wipe his Flamberge. He checked every corner of the blade, and gave a little wink.

- I had to leave you behind to pretend to be one of them, but I’m glad to find you back.

Eusebio Clarin came down from Sigmund’s mare and rejoined the young ratman.

- I took the liberty to ride your mount, I did not want to leave it alone in the village.

Still angered by the adrenaline, Sigmund snatched the reins from his hands and sheathed Heart of Unicorn. The Estalian observed:

- It’s quite a beautiful sword, *Señor* Where did you get it?

- When we had the aqueduct built, the construction site was supervised by Master Gotrek Gurnisson, the famous Dwarf Slayer. He had some of his kindred with him, including a blacksmith, who settled in Steinerburg. I asked this blacksmith to craft me a special sword.

- This blade looks particularly strong.

- It is, Master Clarin. It’s made with gromril.

The Human opened wide with surprise eyes.
- You mean a Dwarf agreed to craft a gromril sword for someone who didn’t belong to his kind? A Skaven, moreover?

- This blacksmith is an expatriate, and he’s greedy to the point of obsession. If you want, I’ll introduce him to you.

- And he got gromril under the nose of the Dwarves of a whole Karak? He must have half of the Dwarf people on his tail!

The Black Skaven smiled wryly.

- Do not think all Dwarves are firmly and nobly attached to their honor. Exceptions are rare, but there are some. And everything can be bought, among the Dwarves. Including gromril and silence. The whole thing is to have the money. I have.

Clarin approached the corpse with the only loss his regiment had to deplore. Up close, the sight was even more shocking.

- You will excuse me for telling you only now, but thank you, sincerely. You saved my life, Sir Steiner.

The Black Skaven joined the Estalian, and squatted close to the body to examine it.

- I regret not having deviated its rifle enough. You lost a man.

- You had the intention. Here is the fate of all the men of the army. But such a disgusting way…

In fact, the poor soldier’s face was tense with indescribable suffering. This was hardly surprising, because with the dirty influence of warpstone, his spine had frightfully mutated. No less than five long arrows of vertebrae and bones had sprung from his back, tore his flesh, crushed his organs, and had literally planted him above the ground like a macabre scarecrow. Fortunately for him, he hadn’t to bear the pain very long.

- Manann be merciful, it’s terrible! murmured the Estalian.

- It’s warpstone.

- You were right, it’s a real crap!

- There appears something else I don’t like: generally, warpstone which the Feral Skaven use to
craft their bullets just causes very serious burns. It looks like special ammunition with more concentrated warpstone inside, enough to cause mutations. It’s bothering…

- Do you think it can cause mutations on someone like you?

- I hope I never have to learn it, Master Clarin.

- Your father explained to me a little about the effects of warpstone. Can you tell me how much the Skaven fear changes?

- The only way to have a mutation for a Skaven is to swallow a very large amount of warpstone or inject it into its body, as those ones did. If I seize a raw buckle, it will burn my fingers. On the other hand, if I take a fine warpstone token, like the ones Feral Skaven use as money, it won’t do anything to me.

- So, it’s without effect on Skaven?

- That’s not what I said. Even if there is no mutation, if I eat this kind of warpstone, it will cause a whirlwind of Warp energy in my stomach. Skaven wizards use it to shape their magic, which I don’t know how to do. Not only it will squeeze my bowels, but in addition I may develop an addiction, simply with a fragment walnut-sized.

- Is this dependence tenacious?

- Worse than the worst of drugs, Master Clarin, remember? When it eats at you, it is impossible to get rid of it. There is no cure for this addiction to date. And if you do not soothe this warpstone hunger every day, you will die in unimaginable suffering.

Clarin detected a spark of sadness in the look of his interlocutor.

- You’ve seen that already, haven’t you?

- One day, we freed a girl who was mature enough to be able to give birth. She had been treated with warpstone. Too discreetly so we could see it right away, but the damage was already done. Once back home, she suddenly fell ill. She was quickly isolated. Our best Shallya priestess tried everything, but even pain-relieving medications were ineffective. The poor girl didn’t live more than a week, and considering the pain she endured, for her, it must have been triple.

Sigmund had finished his sentence painfully, as if the memory had exhausted him.

- Sorry to hear it, young man.

- A Taal damn shit, Sir Clarin.

Teresa’s case came back into the young Skaven’s mind.
- I know another one who has also been poisoned with warpstone. Fortunately, she wasn’t touched by addiction. However, there were other consequences on her brain.

- You mean her faculties are damaged?

- In her head, she will never be more than eight or nine years old.

Clarin noticed that Sigmund’s face had become darker. He wanted to comfort him:

- Master Steiner... if it can help you keep your spirits high, remember that you allowed us to save these villagers with nearly no loss.

- Fine.

- I’ll talk to Prince Calderon about you’ve done.

Captain Felipe Antoninus approached the Black Skaven. Beside him walked the man Sigmund had freed. Antoninus put a hand on the peasant’s shoulder.

- He’s Enrique. He told me you didn’t hesitate to be as credible as possible. You even killed one of your brothers, as doubtlessly a real Skaven would have done!

These words lashed the young ratman like a whiplash. He planted himself in front of the soldier and barked:

- Do not compare me to these animals, Antoninus! These creatures will never be my brothers! Got it?

- Therefore, you are a Skaven. Skaven use to kill other Skaven, right?

Sigmund clenched his fists and hissed between his teeth:

- Say Humans never fight each other. Say it!

The captain put his hand on the guard of his sword, and supported the stare of the Black Skaven. Clarin intervened.
- Antoninus, Master Steiner has just experienced a few very trying hours, and thanks to him, the worst has been avoided. Let’s not...

But Sigmund didn’t hear the rest. He had distinguished something out of the corner of his eye. He turned, and saw again the little corpse of the girl killed before his eyes by Qroshay. No one else had touched it except the vermin that had already invaded it. He dropped to his knees in front of the body, his face twitched in a grimace of pain and sorrow, and under the more than surprised eyes of the villagers, he burst into tears, and remained a long time crying loudly.

Nobody dared move or say a word. Then the tall Black Skaven felt a hand resting on his shoulder.

- ¿Hermano?

He raised his head, and saw Enrique, the man who had transmitted his message. The latter whispered a few words to him. He did not understand the meaning, but he could hear respect and compassion in the Estalian’s voice.

- He just said: “You did everything you could. You are a real man”, Clarin interjected. And I agree.

The villager patted the arm of the Skaven, and added:

- ¡Va con Taal y Rhya, hermano!

This time, Sigmund gave a sad little smile.

* *

The Estalians gathered the corpses of the Feral Skaven in a single pile, to which they set fire. With infinite caution, Sigmund and Antoninus dragged the mutated soldier and threw him into the fire. Then the villagers took the time to bury Qroshay’s poor little victim. Clarin, the most literate of all the company, pronounced a prayer to Taal and Rhya, and everyone gathered in silence. The diplomat could not help to notice that the saddest was the only Skaven of the whole audience.
After that, they returned to Rabarena. Along the way, some of the villagers dared to approach Sigmund. One of them patted his shoulder with a smile, an old woman thanked him in a voice still clutched by emotion, and a little boy took his hand, and didn’t let him go until they reached the town. These small signs of affection, very simple, but warm, comforted a while the Black Skaven who felt his heart lighten a little.

Once back in the ravaged village, Clarin gave some instructions, and the villagers bustled. Grief still sealed their guts, but they set to work with resignation.

- I told them to start the repairs as soon as possible, so they don’t let themselves go to despair.
- Good idea, approved the Black Skaven.
- We should discuss strategy, suggested Captain Antoninus. Let’s go to the burgomaster’s house.

The three men settled in the office of the largest house of Rabarena. The captain unfolded a map of the crown on the working table, and indicated three points.

- They first attacked Chiringuito. Then they ravaged Salograr. And now it is Rabarena who has suffered their violence.
- I asked these poor people if anyone saw a White Skaven, but none of them answered in the affirmative, explained Clarin. Rabarena is a smaller place than the other two, they had to send fewer troops.
- The White Skaven must be hiding somewhere to prepare an evil plot, Sigmund grumbled.
- Why did they attack these three villages, in your opinion?
- It’s obvious, your Excellency. They want to gnaw us in order to weaken us before devouring us, suggested Antoninus.
- There is something else, Sigmund replied. Before you arrived, their chief told me about a “plan”. These Skaven obeyed precise orders, instructions issued by a War Chief named Blokfïste. Given the way he talked about him, he’s probably a famous warlord at home. I couldn’t learn anything more.
- It doesn’t matter, we already have good information thanks to you.
- Wait, I’m thinking about something else. I wonder if...

The Black Skaven reached for a feather in an inkwell.

- Can I?
- Yes, we have others.

The Black Skaven took the pen, and drew three lines on the map. Each line connected two of the villages, forming a triangle whose lines were slightly higher at each intersection.

- There! Now, we have a logic.
- Another triangle of the Horned Rat, Clarin observed.
- It’s in their mentality, they associate the triangle to everything they do, even unconsciously.

He put his finger on the space in the middle of the three villages.

- Is there anything special here?

- Yes, sir, answered Antoninus. This is the domain of Patrizio Nichetti, one of the richest farmers in the Principality of Sueño. He owns a huge estate and has several dozens of servants at his service. In fact, most of the people who lived in the three razed villages worked for him, near and far.

Sigmund rose his nose and faced Antoninus.

- In this case, you must evacuate the area. As quickly as possible.

Then, addressing Clarin.

- Master Clarin, can you send a messenger to Vereinbarung?

- Tell me where the pigeon relay of your kingdom nearest the border is, and your message will be transmitted tomorrow at the latest.
- I shall ask a friend to bring some troops.
- You don’t trust my men? retorted Antoninus with anger.
- I do.
- So, what? Don’t I not have enough soldiers, as your wish? We cleared their camp almost without any loss!
- These Feral Skaven weren’t very numerous, but we don’t know their plan, nor how many will
execute it. And I prefer to have behind me soldiers accustomed to fight them, who will obey me without arguing because they know my decisions are appropriate. On the other hand, if we really are responsible of their attack on your home to destroy ours, it would be nothing but justice our troops get involved more than yours to make them leave.

The Black Skaven glanced toward the river.

- Now, if you allow me, I want to wash myself.

He picked up the canvas bag in which he had gathered his clothes, and quickly left the village. As he walked away, the ambassador questioned the captain.

- What do you think about it?
- I hope they won’t be much more numerous than today, we don’t need that.
- I was talking about this young man.
- What do you want me to say about him, Master Clarin?
- This is the first time you approach a Skaven so closely without he considers you as his enemy. Would you please tell me your impression?

Antoninus groaned.

- “Without he considers me as his enemy”, I’m not as sure as you, Excellency! Seeing how he easily gets the needle, I don’t know if he is so trustworthy!

- Remember our people has been waging war on his for almost one thousand and five hundred years. Even with the education he has received, he must be titillated by this enmity.

- This is an extra reason to be wary, Excellency. In addition, I remind you the rat-men are those who attack first, systematically!

Clarin looked at the captain in the eye.

- Put yourself in his shoes, even if he has not, for a moment, Captain Antoninus. Think about how he sees us, and analyze his actions. It makes him rather fascinating, I think. Judge by yourself: he doesn’t seem to like us very much, yet he didn’t hesitate to put his life in danger to infiltrate their band, obtain information and release prisoners to whom he owed absolutely nothing.
- I guess he obeys orders well?

- No, Antoninus. His grandfather ordered him to accompany us to analyze the terrain, not risking death for our peasants. There is something else. A kind of passion that drives him.

Clarin pouted thoughtfully.

- Indeed... something motivates him, and it’s not friendship with Sueño. It’s deeper, more visceral. As if he was trying to prove something. Anyway, I want to trust him.

- I hope you won’t have to regret it, Excellency.

Focused on the black silhouette that was now at the edge of the water, the ambassador didn’t answer.
Struggle against the Waaagh

Daughters and Sons of the Horned Rat,

I apologize for being late once again. I had a lot of little things to do outside of work, and I had a hard time getting ideas for this chapter, I admit – those amongst you who are familiar with my fanfictions know that action scenes are those I am the least comfortable to write. I also took a little vacation, and besides I advise you to visit the city of Bordeaux, France, which is very nice.

Otherwise, I wrote a lot of ideas for coming chapters, and especially for a “spin off”. Let me explain: I have already written the end of this story, as well as some chapters of Heirs of the Horned Rat the sequel and end of the Rat Kingdom Trilogy. And at the end of the Rat Kingdom appears a completely anecdotal character – I will not tell you who this character is, that would only spoil, just remember it’s really anecdotal.

Well, I can reveal you at least this thing: it will be one of Psody’s grandchildren, more. precisely a granddaughter. But I won’t spoil you anything more. If you’ve looked at the Deviantart website page named “ChildrenOfPsody”, you already know who I’m talking about.

Be aware, however, that this anecdotal character has suddenly taken on a particular importance to me, so much so that I wonder if she is not the one that I have most enjoyed creating and making evolve throughout my fanfiction author career? Anyway, I find this person really very endearing. I don’t think I’ll be able to do an entire novel for her, though, because I have no idea of any big plot where I could involve her, and I’d rather focus on The Rat Kingdom and Heirs of the Horned Rat, in terms of long stories.

I rather want to write short stories that would take place throughout her life, from early childhood to her last moments. I already have half a dozen projects of short stories, in this sense. And besides, who knows, maybe YOU could participate in her evolution, submitting your ideas to me?

And so, well... it took me a while to put on word processor, but I couldn’t let go of the scenes I imagined. Now, let’s go back now to our history, to the present time.
Glory to the Horned Rat!

- Bowmen, now!

The few archers in the barracks whistled arrows to the mounted Orcs. For the third time, the Waaagh swallowed the salvo. The deadly spikes ricocheted on the helmets and shields, but two of the green-skinned brutes were thrown off their boars and rolled into the grass.

The strategy of the Orcs was in their image: wild, noisy, without the slightest subtlety. They circled around the small barracks, shouting, brandishing their axes, clubs, and other heavy and primitive weapons. They had tried to intimidate the soldiers, but Müller and Kristofferson had been able to keep calm and sufficiently motivate their respective troops. If they were not very numerous, they were determined to defend themselves.

The Orcs had neither bow nor javelin. As long as they stayed away, they couldn’t hurt any Human or a Skaven. And the arrows had put down a good dozen of them.

- Beware, to the south! Müller shouted.

A small group of Orcs had left the group to get around the building in the other direction. The four barbarians had arrived at the foot of the fifteen-feet-high wall, and began to climb it. Their strong arms and iron-clad fingers allowed them to climb with confidence.

Kristofferson, Walter and Pol ran along the rampart. The fat Skaven stopped half-way, as he had just found a favourable angle. He grabbed his harquebus attached to his back, knelt down, put the barrel of his weapon on the stone of a crenel, aimed at his target, and opened fire. He shot one of the Orcs just between its shoulders. The invader tumbled with a yelp and smashed its head on the ground.

The first of the three remaining Orcs had almost reached the summit, but as it raised its head to focus on the summit, the tip of Kristofferson’s rapier pierced its eye. Walter kicked the third with a kick on its chin, which broke his back below. Finally, the fourth was hoisted by Kristofferson and Pol, before being shredded.

Captain Müller joined the three ratmen on the double.
- Well done!

- How’s the situation, by now?

- I ordered a fourth salvo. They seem to fall back!

- What?

The three Skavens and Müller ran together to the roundabout point the nearest of the Orcs battalion. Indeed, the wild boars no longer ran, and were gathered a few dozen yards out of range of the arrows. The Greenskins warriors seemed to be consulting each other.

- They are violent, but not stupid, observed the captain. If they see that their opponent is too strong, they give up.

- I don’t see any leader, Pol noticed. I heard that the Orcs still have a leader, and this one is easily identifiable.

- Normally, they have; Walter answered. If it’s a small band of scouts, they probably didn’t have their war chief with them.

- A hundred of these butchers, a "small band"? So what do you need!

Kristofferson hadn’t said a word. He remembered one of the lessons of Commander Schmetterling, who had faced the Orcs many times.

- Without leader, and after a defeat, they are easily discouraged. I have an idea!

He ran down the stairs into the courtyard, entered the shed where the wyvern’s head had been stored, grabbed it, carried it on his back, went up the steps of the walkway, and repositioned himself beside his friends. Then he shouted with all his might:

- Hey, bunch of jerks! You forgot something!

Before swinging the village trophy over the wall. The elongated skull of the creature fell into the slush. The remaining Orcs, about seventy, urged on their mounts and the wild boars galloped in the opposite position to the barracks.
On the walkway, the soldiers exulted with joy. Müller congratulated his men, and Kristofferson climbed one of the crenels to overlook the assembly.

- Fellow Humans, fellow Skaven, you have been perfect! You are the pride of the Rat Kingdom! Thanks to your combined efforts, the enemy has...

Suddenly, the rest of the speech remained stuck across the throat of the young brown Skaven. Indeed, the Orcs were moving away from the barracks, but they had just forked, and rushed all weapons brandished towards the village itself!

- Soldiers, they attack Klapperschlange!

A wave of panic seized all the men-at-arms present. All rushed to the heavy doors that two sentries hastened to open. Kristofferson, Walter, Pol and Müller followed them at full speed. Once in the yard, they ran to the stable. While saddling his horse, Walter yelped:

- Gods almighty, why didn’t we made them shelter themselves here?
- We didn’t expect them to attack so soon! Pol moaned.
- I should have expected it! Müller exclaimed.
- We should all have, captain. Now, we must all defend them!

And the four fighters, trimmed and mounted, galloped the horses towards the village.

While pushing his mount, Kristofferson was constantly cursing himself. How could he have shown such negligence? How could he have left the villagers defenceless? His thoughts were quickly overshadowed by the impending danger. Some cottages were already burning under the fire of Orcs torches, and the inhabitants who went out, terrorized, were quickly gutted by the Greenskins.

This is not happening, this is not happening, this is not...

A brutal shock suddenly reversed the brown Skaven. He rolled in the slush on several yards. Raging pig squeals mingled with heart-breaking neighs. Kristofferson screamed furiously when he saw the boar of an Orc finishing gutting his horse. Mad with anger, he jumped to his feet, pulled
his rapier in his right hand, and rushed to the rider. Too busy trying to roll back its wild boar whose tusks remained stuck between the horse’s ribs, the Orc didn’t see its end approaching. Kristofferson leaned on the carcass of his unfortunate mount, made a huge leap, stretching out his arm, and pierced the Orc’s head. Then he put his hand on its big face and pushed with a sharp blow, tilting the still warm body. He didn’t waste time and settled on the saddle of the boar.

- All right, now you do what I want!

And with a steady hand, he pulled on the reins. The animal finally disengaged itself, and no longer felt the grip of the vigorous legs of an Orc squeezing its flanks. So, it tried to overthrow its rider with savage kicks. But if Kristofferson was not as muscular as a Greenskin, he was much more supple and agile. Also, he managed to remain balanced on the saddle, and continued to pull with all his strength. Finally, the beast got tired, and stopped rushing. The young Skaven Brown heeled the animal, and made it gallop in the middle of the village. He spotted an Orc rider, threatening to crush two children running next to each other. He forced his wild boar to turn towards the Greenskin, and as he was right at its side, he leaped from his saddle and wrapped his arm around the Orc’s throat, and then carried off in his dash, and they both found themselves on the ground. The difference was that Kristofferson had been flexibly received on the feet, one knee on the soil, while the Orc had landed head first. It found himself with its neck broken.

The young Steiner jumped up and glanced around, searching for a new action. At some distance, an Ora was trotting his boar at the height of terrified peasants to better mow them with its huge sword. Once again, the brown Skaven used his skillfully developed physical abilities. He anticipated the Greenskin race, and spotted a cabin near which it was about to pass. He ran to that cabin, climbed on it, and when the Orc came, he made an impressive leap, legs forward, and hit his target. The Orc sprawled all the way into the dust. One of Müller’s men smashed his head with an axe.

A little further, Walter Klingmann was in melee with two Orcs. He congratulated himself for taking the time to put on his heavy armour when the alert had woken him up. As he was tall and tough but not particularly agile, he had specialized in combat by being heavily protected. The blacksmith at Steinerburg had made an extraordinary crafting work: every piece of his armour was cut right with the others, and only partially hindered his movements. As long as he did not need to run, he was trained enough not to lose his breath too fast. His helmet let out his two big round ears, which could make him look a little unlikely, even funny, but the people he faced had little time to laugh. He crushed the limbs and bones with his war hammer, solid and aesthetically distinguishable thanks to the chiselled decorations on its head. The shield he held in his left hand was a heavy four-foot-high bulwark painted with the colours of the Steinerburg Ward. He hadn’t watched what he spent to buy a balanced, solid shield that fitted his measurements.

The two Orcs attacked the Skaven without the slightest subtlety or coherence. Walter hadn’t any difficulty parrying the blows of the first one and dodging the assaults of the other. He whirled his hammer forward to threaten the first Orc. The latter didn’t have the reflex to back down. The hammer fell quickly on its cheek. Walter quickly pointed his shield to his left. The axe of the second Orc ricocheted on the steel, dragging sparks on its surface. The tall Skaven pushed his
assailant away with a bulwark backswing. The Orc was unbalanced, Walter took the opportunity to hit its knee. The leg broke with a painful angle. The Greenskin squatted with a bellow of pain. The Skaven swung his hammer from down to up, breaking the chin of the Orc that fell on its back, and didn’t move anymore.

- Well done, Wally! exclaimed Kristofferson, brandishing his rapier.

He rolled back just in time to avoid the spit of an Orc that he had not seen coming. Fortunately for him, he was not as heavily harnessed as his friend. He used to wear for every piece of armour a spaulder and an armband on his left arm, in addition to a simple cuirass of reinforced leather. Currently, he made his sword jump from one hand to another depending on the circumstances, and unlike Walter, was very mobile. He also guessed that the slightest blow from one of these monstrous brutes would have disastrous consequences on his health. He decided to play with the Orc. He turned around it, insulting it, making grimaces and abusive gestures, while gracefully avoiding every stroke of his opponent. The Orcs were not famous for their patience, and this one was no exception to this rule. It foamed in rage, and hit harder and harder, unable to reach him. Its eyes blushed, yellowish saliva spurted from between its long, lower canines, and lathered on its waistcoat.

Kristofferson wanted to go on the offensive. Whenever he dodged an assault, he immediately punished his opponent with a small slash. The Orc was not wearing arm or leg protection, and soon found itself with a multitude of cuts on its limbs. The blood was flowing more and more, dripping on the ground in small green spots. The Greenskin didn’t get tired, and its attacks redoubled with savagery. The young brown Skaven wasn’t worried about it, on the contrary the awkwardness of his opponent exhilarated him. Finally, he turned around the Orc one last time, and the tip of his rapier slat the air up to its throat.

*One more on my hunting board!*

- Behind you, Kit!

The young Steiner immediately jumped to one side. An axe planted the ground just where he had been a half-second earlier. The Orc encamped on its feet a few yards away roared in frustration, but a bullet exploded its naked torso and made it twirl backward. It laid down on the ground.

Kristofferson turned to the Skaven who had warned him.

- Thanks, pal!
Pol answered with a little hand sign, and hid himself under the shelter of a wall to reload his harquebus.

Kristofferson searched quickly for a new opponent to face. He spotted a huge Greenskin in front of one of the houses. The massive bully was threatening an old man with its huge club. In a flash, he grabbed the axe that was still lying on the ground not far from him, and threw it at the aggressor. The axe whirled to its target, but touched it with the handle. This, however, destabilized the big Orc, which allowed the old man to move away. Kristofferson ran to the Greenskin with a cry of defiance.

The Orc was huge, and was better protected than the others. It was carrying all kinds of armour pieces stolen from his previous victims, the only exception was its helmet, roughly wrought to completely protect an Orc’s skull. It saw the ratman arrive, and faced him, ready to knock down its club on him. One more time, Kristofferson swirled around the Orc and waved his rapier in front of it. The Orc positioned its mace horizontally and turned on itself, faster and faster, until it became a crushing cyclone. The roar it uttered made it really scary for a frightened villager. Which was not the case with Kristofferson.

Jumping from one foot to the other, the young brown Skaven continued to turn around the Orc which was still spinning like a top. The spectacle of this unusual ballet could have been fun to observe if there had not been all this violence. The green-skinned barbarian was clumsily heading for the cottage, and its mace hit a wall. It was cut short in its tracks, and remained dazed. It leaned a few blows on its temple to regain its senses. Kristofferson saw an opportunity to cause a very disabling injury.

- Take this!

And with a firm and precise gesture, he plunged the blade of his rapier just under the armpit of the Orc. It sank into the gnarled flesh on a whole fifteen inches long. But he realized with astonishment that the green-skinned giant only uttered a short grunt before replying, barely embarrassed by the steel running through his body. The brown Skaven only had time to let go his weapon and back up. The club brushed his head, but crushed his hand on the daub wall of the house. A blistering pain made Kristofferson groan, tears stung his eyes. The Orc knocked him down with a handle blow on his chest.

Kristofferson found himself on his back, the backbone bruised by the shock, short of breath. In front of him, the huge Orc approached slowly, sneering, and raised his club again with both hands. The young ratman concentrated on determining which side he should roll to avoid the attack at best, as his opponent’s head exploded in a slamming clatter. The huge Greenskin carcass swung forward and froze just before Kristofferson’s feet.
Captain Rudy Müller rushed to the young Steiner, his fist clenched on his still smoking harquebus.

- My liege!
- Oh... Splendid, captain! You have arrived at the right moment!
- Fortunately their armours are nothing but junk! Are you hurt?

The Human helped Kristofferson to get up.

- It smashed my hand! growled the ratman.
- Can you fight?
- Wait...

Kristofferson approached the corpse and extirpated his sword away from it in an only pull.

- It’s fine, captain. I will... I’ll...

The young ratman felt suddenly dizzy. The taste of blood of his burst lip invaded his mouth. The backlash of the pain, the exhaustion following such stress, he couldn’t say. He staggered, his legs bobbed. The captain hastened to grip him by his shoulders to support him.

- Come! I bring you to a safer place.

Kristofferson didn’t answer, but he knew the captain was right. He was no longer able to play the hero. He followed painfully Müller’s footsteps. The flames made the sky glow. The screams, the rattles, the clash of arms still resounded violently in his ears. It was then that he heard a horn. The rolling of several dozen pairs of boots and howls of charge shook his eardrums. He raised his head, and saw a whole contingent of armed men running towards the Orcs. Realizing that the barbarians would quickly have the underside, he let himself plunge into unconsciousness.
Kristofferson slowly opened her eyes. A sharp pain in his right hand tore him completely from the mists of unconsciousness. He straightened up with a squeak. A clear voice reassured him:

- Don’t worry, it’s over.

The young Steiner looked around him. He was lying on a pallet unrolled on the earthy floor of the barn. A strong smell of blood brought back his nostrils. Many warriors, Humans and Skaven, suffered more or less loudly from their wounds. He turned his head again, and his eyes fell on a young Human girl. She was wearing the white dress of Shallya’s priestesses, and was kneeling beside him. She was buxom without being too much fat, had long brown hair knotted in small braids, and a round face with large clear eyes. She smiled at the ratman.

- Stay still, and everything will be fine.
- Who are you?
- Sister Carolina Kuhlmann, from the Wüstengrenze temple. I arrived with Captain Kreutzer.

The young brown Skaven looked down at his right arm. The priestess had tied his fingers to each other, and put a splint that went up almost to his elbow.

- I did what I could, but do not hesitate to ask the priestesses of Steinerburg to take over.
- Hmm... That seems to hold on well.
- A small revision every week will not be a bad idea. In the meantime, you need to rest, and let your body put back the bones and flesh in place. In a month, you’ll be able to fencing again!

The brown Skaven made an ironic grin.

- What a mistake! It’s my fault.
- Defend ours, a fault? You’re astonishing me!
- No, that’s not what I meant. My fault is to have underestimated my opponent. I wanted to try a strike on an exposed place where the wound is not deadly, but can hurt a lot. Although, this brute didn’t flinch. I didn’t think Orcs could be so insensitive to pain.
- Is this the first time you face Orcs?
- Indeed, and I’m in not in a hurry to renew this experience!
- I’ve been told that Orcs have a much more restorative blood than Humans or Skaven. They even say if you cut an arm or a leg from an Orc, you just have to keep the sliced limb tight on its stump and wait for it to stick back on its own in a few hours.

- Too bad I don’t have green blood, then.

- May Shallya witness it to me, I prefer you as you are. If you had Orc blood, that would reduce our work load, but if it made you as bellicose, it would add to us three times more!

Kristofferson leaned his eyes down at his hand again, then looked warmer at the nun.

- Thank you for your kindness.

- I’m only doing my duty.

- If I can do anything for you or your order, ask.

Carolina hesitated a moment, then leaned forward and whispered:

- Captain Müller told me that you are the grandson of Prince Steiner. Is it true?

- It is.

- You have the opportunity to see chaplain Romulus?

- Every time I’m at home, he’s my grandfather’s closest friend.

- Far be it from me to want to be a profiteer, but perhaps you could intercede on our behalf?

- What do you expect from me, exactly?

- We had lately to deal with an epidemic. We were able to save everyone, but our stocks of medicines are empty. We could harvest it ourselves, but the renewal of stocks may be too slow by next winter.

- Did your Superior Mother ask for it?

- She did, but she thinks Captain Kreutzer has kept shipments for his soldiers. Normally, we, Shallya’s priestesses, should be the ones who manage the reserves. Mother Hannah sent other letters, in the absence of an answer, but still did not have any news. She suspects the captain of intercepting the mail, but cannot prove it.

- Yeah...

Carolina looked right, then left, then leaned forward and whispered two tones lower:
- Just between us, sir, I think Captain Kreutzer has strong ideas about the abilities of us women.

Kristofferson grimaced and sighed.

- Better and better! Do you imagine I told my men yesterday that only the Feral Skaven don’t consider their women as equal persons!

- I wish I would this to be so simple, sir... alas, on this question, Humans have not much to envy them. Many women who have come to the Rat Kingdom have borne the brunt of these inequalities. I know some of them.

The young ratman scratched his head, and said with conviction:

- I don’t know how far it will go, but I promise you that Romulus will know everything as soon as I get back to Steinerburg. All you have to do is ask your superior to write a new letter and give it to me before I leave.

He felt his heart warming as he saw a small smile on the round face of the girl.

- You are worthy of your rank. Thank you.

- I’m only doing my duty, he said with a wink.

Someone entered the dormitory. It was Walter.

- Kit, are you better?

- I knew worse, lied the brown Skaven, anxious to save face. Many losses?

- Those Greenskins bastards have done some serious damage in our ranks! We lost eight men. It was Müller’s troop that had the prettiest rough. Thirty dead, I can’t remember.

- Damn it…

Kristofferson thought of the brave captain and his professionalism. He promised himself to return him the favour in due time. But the expression on Walter’s face disturbed the young ratman more. He didn’t need more time to understand.
Kristofferson’s faithful friend didn’t answer. The young Steiner sprang from his bed, and ran outside. He found himself facing disaster.

The sun rose painfully on a completely ravaged village. The smaller buildings were nothing but crumbs. The larger houses reduced to smoking ruins. And, on the side, many cattle of the village, gathered in piles by the men of Müller, lay crushed, smashed under the fury of the Waaagh.

That’s why it stinks so much...

The worst was exactly what Kristofferson had feared: there were no villagers left alive. All the bodies were lined up, wrapped in thick stuffs to be buried. In front of this terrible spectacle, Kristofferson clenched his fists so nervously he felt pain in his knuckles.

All these brave people who trusted us, who showed themselves united against the danger... By Taal’s antlers, I will massacre all the Orcs I can!

- So, doesn’t it deserve a thanking?

- Your saviour, replied the other one without the slightest friendship. Hansel Kreutzer, captain of the Wüstengrenze guard. My sentries spotted the Orcs’ torches as they arrived near your barracks. We arrived as soon as possible, and by my faith, just in time. Without us, you would all be dead.

Captain Müller stood beside the two men.

- They’re already all dead, Kreutzer!
- And you’re still alive, Müller. Do not complain.

Kreutzer spoke again to the brown Skaven.

- It’s a good thing we arrived. You couldn’t have done anything with that old fag for only help.

Müller put his hand on his sword.

- What did you just say?

The skeletal human blasted the old captain with a scornful look.

- I said you’re dead wood. This carnage proves it.

- I inform you that we could have avoided this carnage if you had sent reinforcements when I came to ask you for!

- Are you insinuating I’m an unworthy soldier, Müller?

- I don’t insinuate it, I affirm it!

Kreutzer planted himself in front of Müller. The contempt in his eyes turned into a heavy threat. Feeling the situation fester, Kristofferson intervened.

- Captain Müller, please, let’s settle this kindly. Captain Kreutzer, I am Kristofferson Steiner, son of Master Mage Prospero Steiner, and grandson of His Majesty Ludwig the First. It is he who commissioned me to understand what has been happening for some time in Klapperschlänge.

- Well, you have your answer, Master Steiner. Orcs marauders attacked, and we arrived in time to kill them all and prevent them from further harming the Rat Kingdom.

- And I thank you for that, Captain Kreutzer. You are right, without you, we would all be history. The Prince will be informed of your professionalism.

Thanks to his grandfather’s lessons in diplomacy, Kristofferson had found the right words and tone to ease tensions. The skeletal figure of Wüstengrenze’s captain unstrung a few, but he did not lose his stern look, nor his cold stare.
- I’d like to know something, Captain Kreutzer: Captain Müller told me that he came to see you some time ago to let you know about his concerns. He repeated it a minute ago. Is he telling the truth?

- Yes, Master Steiner.

- Did he ask you for reinforcements?

- He did.

- Then why haven’t you satisfy his request?

Kreutzer looked at Müller scornfully.

- I didn’t believe him.

- You didn’t believe him? You mean you don’t trust someone who has the same rank as you in the same army as you?

- I wouldn’t waste my men’s time by following blindly the words of an old captain known for his lack of competence.

Müller’s face flushed again.

- You are really a...

- Captain Müller, calm down, please, Kit interrupted, raising his valid hand. Captain Kreutzer, so you didn’t trust Captain Müller?

- No, I didn’t trust him. But before you ask, I have no remorse. I have always acted in my soul and conscience in the way I consider the most just.

Kristofferson showed with a gesture the whole extent of the disaster on the village.

- If you had sent someone here on the first request of Müller, your men would have seen the traces of the attacks of the wyverns. You would have acted accordingly. Instead, you have turned a deaf ear to him, and you can now behold the result: the Orcs have massacred the whole village! A village that you could have helped us to defend! These people were your fellow-citizens, captain!

- If they couldn’t defend themselves, it was because they were not worthy. Our Kingdom doesn’t need a few peasants unable to fend for themselves.

- Our Kingdom needs conscientious army men, captain. You have been negligent, and this negligence has cost the lives of the people of Klapperschlänge. It was not their role to them to
defend ourselves, it was ours, the men-at-arms, to protect them.

- Are you sure you are well-placed to dictate my duty, Steiner? You’re not a career soldier.

- I participated in many Harvest campaigns, Captain Kreutzer. Believe me, I faced my share of enraged opponents. It is true I have fewer years of service than you have, but they have allowed me to know how to manage my men with Captain Müller. Otherwise, you would have found nothing but corpses here!

The tall, stern man didn’t answer. He shrugged vaguely.

- Captain Kreutzer, I shall report to Commander Schmetterling, and to my grandfather, the Prince. I kindly invite you to learn how to use the fork and the plow, because I can promise you that you will never give the least order to the last of the orderlies anymore.

He left Kreutzer to his silence and left in the opposite direction. The captain’s voice broke the silence.

- It will be your word against mine, Steiner. I’ll say that Müller misjudged the situation. I’ll add that you have not been able to shelter them. And I know Schmetterling enough to be sure he won’t believe the words of lousy giant rats.

The faces of the few Skaven still alive twitched angrily, and some grumbled, “What did he spit?” And “Hey, say it again?” A couple of them nervously grabbed their weapons. Kristofferson stopped short, facing his men, and raised his valid hand to intimate them to stay still. He took his breath, blew, then he chuckled, and his laugh grew louder.

- Can I know why you find that so funny? Kreutzer asked dryly.

The young brown Skaven stopped. He murmured without turning around.

- Because I know something you don’t know.

The captain approached mechanically to hear better, and asked:

- And what is that?
- I’m not right-handed.

Kreutzer raised his eyebrows, wondering what his interlocutor meant, when he widened his eyes as he felt a terrible burning sensation lacerating his skull. In a heartbeat, Kristofferson had turned, his rapier in his left hand, and in two sharp and precise swooshes had slashed a cross just in the middle of his forehead. The Human, stunned and shaken by the pain, fell on his posterior. He moaned as he felt the blood dripping under his eyelids.

- So, I’ll know exactly where to plant my blade if I hear again a word coming out of your mouth, Kreutzer. In the meantime, by the powers conferred upon me by Prince Steiner, I discharge you from all your military functions.

Then, without the slightest glance at the man on the ground, Kristofferson crossed the ranks and invited his men to follow him with a hand gesture.
- Here we are, O Supreme-immense Grey Seer!

The Skaven who had spoken knelt down and touched the floor with its filthy snout. In truth, even if it didn’t show it, it feared the wrath of its master. There was so much reason for a Son of the Horned Rat to complain and unleash its wrath on another lower-ranked Son of the Horned Rat...

Exactly, a reason dawned when the leader of the Skaven murmured in a sweet voice:

- Where are the men-things?

Fikki, the guide of the expedition, raised his head. The look of his interlocutor pressed his stomach violently. The latter was a chosen one of the Horned Rat, a white-furred Skaven, with a pair of horns on its forehead. It was rather small for an inhabitant of the Underground Empire, but in compensation, was quite potent. Its two horns were like those of a ram, and curled behind its ears. It had a rather broad, flat muzzle, and incisors nibbling nervously its lower lip. Its red eyes blinked several times, reflecting anxiety and impatience.

- I... I do not understand, brightest light of the lights!
- This village of men-things does not contain any men-thing! Why-why?
- Uh... probably because they were afraid of you, your Greatness?

The White Skaven didn’t seem completely convinced. It turned its head, and called:

- Blokfiste!

The masters of the Under-Empire moved away nervously to let a remarkable Skaven pass. It was much taller than the others, of a size comparable to the Stormvermin’s, but without their black coat. On the contrary, it was rather clear of fur. On the other hand, you could guess that it was a formidable warrior with his armour made up of steel plates fixed on its torso and its arms, and with the heavy lance which it carried tied behind its back. But what attracted more attention were the different modifications of its body, the infamous craft of the Masters Mutators of Clan Moulder. The most obvious were the grafted blades on its fingertips, over its claws, as well as the pieces of cutting metal implanted along the entire length of its tail. What to silence those who would have dared to laugh at it seeing its truffle as big as a melon. A truffle capable of detecting odours three times more effectively than an ordinary Skaven muzzle.

Blokfiste dropped to his knees and lowered his head. He murmured without the slightest fear or deference:

- What can I do for you, O divine master of intrigue and conquest?
- Blokfiste, have you ever seen men-things abandon their village?
- I have seen men-things flee before the magnificence and invincibility of our armies-legions. But never an empty-abandoned village. First time.
- So, it’s not normal-normal for you?
- It is not, o incarnate Word of the Horned Rat.
- What do you propose-suggest?

The tall warlord tried to remain impassive. In reality, he was surprised and delighted. How could the Grey Seer, under whose orders he had been placed, ask for his opinion? This Grey Seer who was always full of pretentious certainties, this Grey Seer who spit happily on everyone because
there was no older White Skaven to reframe him, needed advice from him! Inwardly, Blokfiste chuckled.

*Maybe this little warp bat dung will soon lose ground?*

The voice of his religious leader made him start.

- So, what can you tell me?
- Uh... I can try to smell a danger.
- Well, go on, you silly-moron!

Blokfiste clenched his teeth, irritated by the insult. A brief thought of him tearing the little creature’s head kept him calm. He closed his eyes, raised his enormous muzzle towards the stars, and sniffed several times at length.

There was no noise. All the Skaven stared at their warlord, hanging on the smallest of his gestures. In the distance, crows were heard croaking between two winds, and the rustle of the river a few miles away. The huge Skaven chief stayed so for a long minute, pointing his nose in all directions, then raised his eyes.

- Something is strange, o Grey Seer... I can smell something.

The White Skaven got impatient.

- And what, perfect ass? Speak!

Blokfiste grunted in annoyance before explaining:

- Clay. A lot of clay.
- Of course you can smell clay, you idiot! We are in the middle of the cultures of men-things! A lot of soil, a lot of manure to grow their grain grasses faster! You’re trying to make me doubt, you fool, but it won’t work!

The Moulder War chief didn’t answer. He couldn’t determine precisely whether he wanted to maintain his position, or whether he would agree and submit to the explanation of his superior. The White Skaven lost interest in the warlord and waved his arms.

- Come on, Sons of the Horned Rat! Let’s prepare the ritual!

Everyone started to move under the orders of the Grey Seer. That didn’t realize that Blokfiste’s gaze could have lit a bonfire.

In the mill on the edge of the village, there were three persons: Eusebio Clarin, Sigmund Steiner and Nedland Barnrooster. The latter had followed the whole conversation thanks to the scope on his rifle. He had found a good angle to watch the scene without the risk of being betrayed by a ray of sunshine – a precaution that he didn’t need to worry about once after dark, of course, but he remained professional. The Halfling, among his many talents, had acquired that of being able to read on the lips. Thanks to Psody, the common Queekish had no more secrets for him, either, so he had understood all the dialogue, and what he deduced from it made him squint in concern.

- Shit! I hope we won’t get burned!
- How could they?
- You see the biggest? He’s a warlord, the other one called him Blokfiste.
- Blokfiste! The Skaven Qroshay told you about, Master Steiner! Clarin reminded.
- Right, so what? He's a soothsayer?
- No, but there is something else. From here, you cannot see it, gentlemen, but this Skaven has an Esmeralda damn long sniffer! The last time I saw one like this was on the tip of the skull of an oliphant on the Black Continent!
- Another Moulder, Sigmund growled.
- Which explains the blades added on his fingers and in his tail.
- Like Qroshay, Clarin murmured.
- I guess they had to pass through the paws of the same Master Mutator. And so... ah, wait! Good. They're about to prepare their ritual. This Blokfiste guy does not seem to insist.
- It was a great idea, Master Barnrooster!
- Of course it was a great idea, Master Clarin! I got it! Well, I admit, it scratches a little.

The Feral Skaven had not noticed it, but in reality, the village was not empty of any Human presence. The houses remained silent, with their doors closed, and the shutters hiding the windows, but they were not uninhabited. A whole battalion of Humans and Skaven was there. They were hidden in the houses, in the stable, inside the mill... Jochen Gottlieb was even waited in the well. But the Feral Skaven, too confident in their ability to naturally scare the peasants, had not taken the time to thoroughly search the place. In reality, their tunnel-devourers instinct had not been alarmed by the characteristic smell of Humans. This was perfectly understandable, as all the Vereinbarung fighters and their Sueño allies were covered with mud.

Nedland’s trick had succeeded. The Skaven, too preoccupied with their preparation, had not made the difference with the aroma that floated over the surrounding fields. But the Halfling remained worried. They were numerous, perhaps a hundred of them, and were well equipped. In the sky, Morrslieb, the warpstone moon, was at its highest. Its greenish glow gave a very disturbing aspect to the picture. Four Black Skaven bent under the weight of an enormous cauldron almost as big as a Feral Skaven slave. The container had been melted in a black iron, and nuggets of warpstone were encrusted on its surface. On a sign of the White Skaven, they dropped the cauldron in the middle of the village square, the clearest spot around. The sound of hollow scrap metal ricocheted on the walls of the houses.

Clarin was pleased to see them settle here, in this village soberly called “Oropesa”. Had they chosen to exercise their dark magic in Patrizio Nichetti’s own domain, the plan would probably have been more difficult to execute. The wealthy owner had his mansion and park on the outskirts of the village of Oropesa, a village that his personal fortune had gradually allowed him to buy. Its inhabitants were not particularly oppressed by this “unofficial privatization”, and the whole area was rather prosperous. The inhabitants were hidden in a large barracks, a day’s walk away, defended by Captain Antoninus who remained in this place. The burgomaster, Nichetti himself, had however insisted again and again. He wanted the least damage possible on his domain. The diplomat had promised to do the best for the principle. In truth, both of them knew very well the uselessness of this kind of promise.

On the Oropesa main square, the Feral Skaven didn’t ask themselves such questions at all. On the other hand, the White Skaven was still not convinced.

- I wonder again why the men-things have abandoned their village, Blokfiste?
- I do not know, o great and beautiful Grey Seer.
- Maybe someone warned them? Maybe there is a traitor in our ranks?

The White Skaven darted a furious look at Blokfiste.

- Wouldn’t be you, by chance?
The warlord reflexively lowered his muzzle.

- I assure you not, powerful-awesome Messenger of the Horned Rat! I never-never will betray you!
- Well. Come on, it’s enough! Let the ritual begin!

The Clanrats moved aside to let three decrepit, completely malformed Skaven, dressed in robes darkened with stains of all sorts. Clan Pestilens had sent three of its representatives. Each of the three Plague Monks was carrying a musette containing ingredients; organs, dead animals, tokens made with warpstone refined to various degrees, every element more sickening than the previous one. The four Stormvermins came back, with four barrels between their paws. They began to pour into the cauldron the contents of the casks.

The White Skaven stood in front of the cauldron, looked up at Morrslieb, brandished his fists at the heavens, and shouted:

- O Horned Rat, guide of the People of the Under-Empire! Listen-listen to my prayer, and accept our offering! Three times, we have shed the blood of men-things, o Horned Rat. Three times, we have left your mark on the upper world, this world waiting only for you to shape it according to your heart, and to rule it as it deserves! We adore you, o Horned Rat! We will kill-destroy traitors to your cause-will! We will blow your breath on this earth, and very soon there will be nothing but the Sons of the Horned Rat!

Nedland groaned in annoyance.

- Their nice party begins. If we have to do something to stop them, it’s right now!
- Can you shoot that Grey Seer?
- I have his head in my viewfinder. You have only one word to say, and it will stop forever to output these bullshit.
- So, prepare your strike.

The Halfling still adjusted the scope of his harquebus, and gently slid his finger on the trigger. He thought for a moment.

- Maybe we should take the opportunity to take it alive?
- And how would you do, Nedland?
- A bullet in its belly.
- A bullet in its belly? repeated Clarin. Won’t it be killed?
- Not if I hit exactly the right place. It probably won’t have much luck surviving for more than a couple of hours, but that will be enough to capture it and make it speak.
- What do you think about it, Master Clarin? Sigmund asked.
- Hum... Are you sure of yourself, Master Barnrooster?
- On the hair of the left ear of my third cousin by marriage.

The Estalien and the Black Skaven exchanged a look of approval.

- What’s your plan, Nedland?
- Sigmund, I want you to go down the mill, and you rush on it at full gallop. Let me know when you’re ready. As soon as you hear my shot, the others attack, according to what was agreed, and you take advantage of the panic to abduct the Grey Seer, and you bring it back.

The young Black Skaven had hidden his faithful mare in the mill, having camouflaged it like the soldiers. He hurried back down, quietly took his mount out of the cylindrical building, mounted it,
and raised his thumb toward the Halfling.

Nedland stared at the White Skaven, and when he was ready, opened fire. The harquebus barked, and the bullet went straight to its target. The White Skaven received the slug in its belly. It fell on its knees with a startled yelp.

This was the signal for the beginning of the battle. Sigmund hounded his horse and galloped towards the square, his eyes focused on the Grey Seer. And at the same moment, all the soldiers of the Human Princes burst out of their hiding place with war cries and brandished weapons. They were more than sixty. Fewer than the Sons of the Horned Rat, but much more determined. The advantage of the surprise allowed them to eliminate a dozen Feral Skaven in an instant.

Fikki yelped in fright, turned on his heels to the edge of the village, and scurried away. His only mistake was to pass near the well. He was brutally stopped by Jochen, who jumped right in front of him and smashed his head with a hammer blow.

The Grey Seer rose laboriously with a grimace of pain. It was then that it saw a Stormvermin on one of the four-legged beasts used by men-things to move quickly. The Black Skaven was rushing towards him. Quickly, it fumbled in the pocket of its gray dress, took out a little token of warpstone, and hastened to swallow it. The warp energy crackled in its stomach. It clenched his teeth, and muttered nervously a magic formula.

Sigmund stretched his legs, and slid his feet on the saddle so he could jump on his target which was approaching at full speed. Another couple of seconds, and would be able to capture the rascal. Finally, when his mare passed near the White Skaven, he jumped forward, arms outstretched. But as he closed his arms, he was brutally blinded by a cloud of green smoke. He rolled in the mud, and coughed loudly. He tried to catch his breath, swallowing loud gulps of air, and exhaled just as awkwardly. After long seconds, he finally regained full possession of his means, and got up. He glared furiously around him, searching for the White Skaven, but couldn’t see it. He remembered something his father had taught him about the Warp magic of the Feral Skaven.

*It surely teleported!*

The Black Skaven couldn’t repress a cry of frustration. He had to let off steam on somebody. It was then that he spotted a large figure, a Skaven more massive than the others, who knocked down two of Sueño’s soldiers. Nothing more was needed to inflame his nervous system.

- **BLOKFISTE!**

He ran to the Feral Skaven, determined to unleash his fury on this one.

Jochen Gottlieb was very big and strong for a Human. He had inherited this might from his father, Lord Wilhelm Gottlieb, himself a native of the north of the Empire. The tall, cold Franzseska, his mother, had Kislevite blood in her veins. She had given him a little of his tenacity and coldness. At first glance, Jochen might have been thought of as a simple-minded brute who banged with all his strength without thinking, but he was not at all. During his childhood, his father had accustomed him to the violence of the battlefield by bringing him regularly to observe the shape of the soldiers of his castle after a fight, the living as the dead. In addition, he and his sister had benefited from the training of a renowned fencing master from Middenland, a mercenary of the Ulrican temple specialized in the handling of heavy weapons. Once settled in Vereinbarung, Lady Franzseska had convinced this mercenary to resume lessons for his two children. He had remained two years before hitting the road again. He had taught Jochen and Marjan the invisible but well-known
subtleties of fighting with weapons like the two-handed sword or the war-mace.

And so, the young man dexterously handled his enormous crafted hammer. He hit hardly, smashed skulls, crushed bones, but he never stroke a single blow randomly. Each attack was aimed at a very precise location, with a calculated force in a heartbeat. He was even able to play with the weight of his weapon between his hands for a greater fluidity of his strikes. His determination and his familiarity with the violence of the fighting made him unperturbed. And the corpses piled up around him. The Feral Skaven rushed forward, eager to kill him, but they were quickly repulsed by his hammer. Even when two or three Clanrats wanted to attack him simultaneously, he always found a way to smash them in a hurry.

- Guys, all of this is really, really funny! laughed the young man.

He spotted three of the four Stormvermins from the battalion, who neatly slaughtered the two Skaven soldiers who had just slain their fourth black-furred comrade.

- Ah, here’s something more interesting!

He grasped his hammer firmly, and went to meet the three Black Skaven. These were stronger than ordinary Clanrats, and more disciplined, too. This didn’t worry the young Human fighter. He waved his hammer with both hands with a cry of defiance. The three Black Skaven stung their halberds at the same time. Jochen jumped to one side and deviated the three rusty iron heads with a single sweep. Without interrupting his impulse, he made a turn on himself and swept the air a second time horizontally, throwing his hammer towards the head of the first Black Skaven. The Stormvermin had its head shattered, and fell on the second. The third Mighty One of the Horned Rat slammed its halberd towards the Human. Jochen presented in a flash the handle of his war hammer, which he held firmly in both hands. The blade of the halberd bounced on its metallic reinforcement. The Black Skaven didn’t have time to regain its senses that the hammer of the man-thing grinded its belly.

The second Feral Black Skaven, still standing, realized that he was dealing with an even tougher opponent. Without saying a word, it raised his spear, bowed its head, and slowly turned around the man-thing, ready to leap. Jochen chuckled softly and smiled at the Stormvermin. He knew he couldn’t afford any clumsy move. They stayed so for a few seconds. Finally, the Stormvermin mowed the air with its halberd. Jochen lifted the handle of his weapon vertically to parry the blow, but at the last moment, the Feral Black Skaven whirled its halberd and immediately attacked a second time by the other side. Another less experienced warrior wouldn’t have had time to anticipate and would have received the iron head in the ribs. Jochen wasn’t. He made a small jump to the side, turned to the other way, stopped the blow, and sent the head of his hammer directly into the chest of the Stormvermin. Its bumpy plastron didn’t protect it enough. The Mighty One stumbled and fell on its bottom, its breath cleanly cut. One last blow on its muzzle definitely ended the fight.

Jochen didn’t want to make wait for other Feral Skaven by savouring his victory. He searched for another opponent to put down.

As he pierced the chest of a traitor to the Horned Rat, Blokfiste heard a voice calling him angrily. He turned on his bare heels. His eyebrows rose in surprise when he saw a Mighty One just a few steps away from him. Its armour, its sword were designed and maintained in the manner of men-things like the other traitors to the Horned Rat, but this one looked more combative. Blokfiste had already trained on Black Skaven, and knew how formidable they could be. He twirled his heavy spear and hissed:
I’m going to skin-skin you, false Son of the Horned Rat!
You’re the one to die, you Moulder freak!

Young Steiner rushed to his opponent with a fierce bellow. The ochre Skaven swept the air with his spear. Sigmund parried the rusty metal head with a firm sword blow. Blokfiste twisted his wrists to accompany the movement, and hit the Black Skaven with a thrust of the spear-stick. Sigmund groaned as he felt the weapon bruise his shoulder. He grabbed Heart of Unicorn with his both hands, brandished it above his head, and jumped to Blokfiste, slamming the sword up and down. The warlord held out his spear with both hands. The gromril blade cut the wooden staff in half, in front of the surprised eyes of the ochre Skaven.

This one didn’t remain dazed very long. In a flash, he swung forward his long tail with metal blades incrusted in. The appendix lashed Sigmund’s ribs. He recoiled with a brief shout of pain. His armour had cushioned the impact, but blood soaked the torn sleeves of his jacket. The pain lacerated his left arm. Furious, the Black Skaven twirled his sword, then swept the air again to hit Blokfiste’s head. The warlord dropped the two pieces of his spear, and seized the blade of Heart of Unicorn just between his steel claws. Thanks to the infamous science of Clan Moulder, the tendons of his fingers and the muscles of his wrists could deploy a strength far superior to that of an ordinary hand, with which he snatched the sword from young Steiner’s hands. He threw it on the ground with one hand, and sent the other towards the face of his adversary.

Sigmund drew back again with a louder cry of pain. He stumbled, and rolled on the ground. Blokfiste stooped proudly, fists on his hips, and burst out laughing. He quietly picked up the end of his broken spear with the iron head on its tip, twirled it, and threw it to the Black Skaven still on the ground. Sigmund spun backward, narrowly avoided the fatal trait. He jumped up. Blokfiste stopped laughing. He stretched his two paws forward, and ran towards Sigmund with a yelp of rage. Sigmund rushed in his turn, but at the last moment, stopped, leaned on his tail, and sent his two legs forward. He hit the ochre Skaven in the stomach.

It was Blokfiste’s turn to roll to the ground. Overexcited, Sigmund picked up the spear of the war chief who was dragging near him, and hurled it at Blokfiste. The spear planted between two rings of flesh from the tail of the Feral Skaven. The warlord found himself nailed to the ground, lying on his back. Sigmund did not waste time bragging. He rushed towards his sword, seized him without ceasing to run, and returned to Blokfiste to inflict him the deadly strike. The Feral Skaven grabbed the handle of his spear and yanked it away. He pushed on his hips and narrowly escaped the sinusoidal blade... which cut his tail cleanly.

Without taking the time to feel the pain of this new wound, Blokfiste leaped on Sigmund and punched his muzzle. The Black Skaven immediately saw stars. He fell to his knees. The world was circling around him, blood was beating so loudly in his ears that he couldn’t hear anything, and a black veil covered his eyes. The taste of blood fulfilled his mouth. He raised his nose painfully, and felt his heart quicken as he spotted in the middle of the whirlwind of colours that fluttered around him the bright form of Blokfiste. The hoarse voice of the ochre Skaven echoed in his skull.

- You can fight well, Stormvermin. But not enough-enough.

Blokfiste took a few steps to get a good distance from the young Black Skaven, and raised his arm firmly, ready to spike him with his broken.

- May the Horned Rat devour-digest you!

He threw his weapon. Sigmund felt a violent blow of adrenaline whipping his nervous system. He stopped thinking and let his instinct guide his actions. His arm went forward, and his gloved hand grabbed the lance shaft just as it was about to reach him. Without giving Blokfiste time to
understand, he turned the spear over his head and hurled it again with all his might. The rusty iron head sank into the shoulder of the ochre Skaven in a sheaf of flesh and blood. Blokfiste squeaked in pain and flickered on his legs.

- Hold on, Siggy!

Jochen and another Human who was following him ran in the direction of the two fighters. The warlord immediately realized that he wouldn’t have the upper hand. He had to flee. He looked quickly around him, and spotted something that made him react quickly, in defiance of the pain that burned his side.

Not far from him was the warpstone cauldron. The Plague Monks were gathered around, so drugged that they were barely aware of all the confusion around them. They were throwing the different ingredients inside, sneering. Blokfiste ran at full speed, skirted the cauldron, and knocked down one of the Pestilens with a shove. Then he put his valid hand on the edge of the cauldron, and pushed with all his might. The Plague Monks glared with surprise at the interruption of their ritual, but the warlord didn’t pay attention. The wrought iron cauldron encrusted with warpstone flickered slowly, then fell forward in a loud clang.

Sigmund had regained control of his senses. He was following Jochen and his partner as best he could. The hairs of his fur bristled when he heard his friend exclaim:

- Step aside!

He saw a wave of bubbling, greenish liquid flowing straight in their direction. He had only time to jump on his side. He felt a heat wave sting his feet, but fortunately he had managed to get out of reach of the mixture. Jochen too. Unfortunately, the other soldier slipped, and sprawled all the way into the puddle. The result was not long in coming. He screamed, louder and louder, as he rolled in pain on the dust, and a flurry of aberrational mutations swept over his whole body: a third leg pushed him in the back, the fingers of his left hand merged in a pearly pincer, his neck lengthened to aberration, his legs melted into a bundle of vermicelli.

From the top of his post, Nedland Barnrooster spotted the unfortunate soldier. Without the slightest hesitation, he made his head explode with a bullet.

Sigmund got up, and ran to Jochen, who was still on the ground. He grabbed his wrist and helped him to stand up again. He was furious.

- Where is he? Where is this motherfucker?  
- He ran away!

And it was true. Blokfiste had taken advantage of the confusion to escape. The two friends wanted to find him. They went back to the spilled cauldron, spotted the traces of the blood of the ochre Skaven, but with the mud and the bodies strewing the ground, it was not possible to determine exactly where he had gone.

- With one arm less, he won’t go far.  
- The field is clear, if we can’t see him, I’m afraid he was able to distance us!

The battle was over. The last Savage Skaven were desperately trying to escape the warriors of Sueño. Master Clarin joined the two friends.

- Caballeros! Are you hurt?  
- We’re not, Master Clarin, Jochen answered.
- Captain Gottlieb, your fighting skills are impressive!
- Oh, three times nothing, excellence, these ugly worms were only small fry!
- Not all of them, Sigmund muttered.

The Estalian lowered his eyes to the ground, and shivered with disgust.

- Manann have mercy…

The fight had stopped, the Feral Skaven still alive had quickly fled as they had seen their leader abandon them. Alas, nobody had the heart to rejoice. In fact, the concoction contained in the cauldron was completely spread on the ground, and the earth had already begun to absorb it. Which was causing a real decay of the soil itself. The earth had cracked, and had become blackish and ashen. Some very disturbing green lights and plumes of smoke emanated from the cracks.

The Estalien looked at the Black Skaven.

- Have you seen that before?
- No. Not even in their burrows. But I guess it’s the kind of thing that happens often, at their home.

There was suddenly a succession of squeaks, and a swarm of rodents escaped the molehills. Rabbits, rats, field mice, all had begun to mutate into disgusting little creatures.

- Back all! Do not let them bite you! Jochen ordered.

Humans and Skaven immediately obeyed, those who could hasten to climb improvised shelters. The abominable horde of vermin scattered.

When the silence returned, everyone was still trembling.

- Gosh, how horrible... Clarin murmured again.
- Don’t worry, these rats won’t live long, assured Nedland.
- I believe you, Master Barnrooster, but I didn’t think that mutation could have such effects.

The diplomat extended his arms. For the first time since he had introduced himself to Prince Steiner, his handsome, delicate face was heavy with annoyance.

- Look at this! The whole area is corrupted! What am I going to say to Master Nichetti?
- You say Master Nichetti this is the kind of complication to expect when you face a Grey Seer! retorted Nedland. In addition, he can consider himself happy.
- Oh, really? The central square of his domain, completely impracticable, and we don’t know how far it goes, and he can consider himself happy?
- Yeah, because the ritual has not been accomplished! Psody already told me what the Pestilens could do. The Morrslieb rays should have charged their poison with energy. The rot would have been much more violent. The whole village, the houses, and even us, all could have been touched. For the moment, it is in this state, and it doesn’t seem to grow.
- Anyway, that’s not a reason to hang out! replied Jochen. We’ll first count ourselves, then gather the corpses to burn them. Then we’ll return to report.
- What? You’re going to leave the place like this? exclaimed Clarin.

The tall Human approached, and had a smile that mingled irony, sympathy, and condescension.

- You might want to shovel all that shit by yourself, excellence?
- Don’t be ridiculous, Captain Gottlieb! I don’t want to finish like that poor man!
- Me neither, and no one here wishes it. This is a pollution of magical origin. The only way to fight it is to call a magician. Luckily, the father of the Black Skaven is, and in addition he can
manipulate the Magic of Life. The best thing to do is to find him as soon as possible so that he finds a way to purge all that.

The Estalian relaxed a little, and nodded affirmatively. Jochen turned to the troops.

- We lost enough time, guys! Come on!

The men and Skaven went to work. Sigmund felt the pain of his wounds. He sat down, and tore off the sleeve of his tunic. He winced as he saw the irregular cuts that tore the fur and skin of his arm. He clenched his teeth even harder when he saw small pieces of metal planted in his flesh.

Clarin noticed it, and leaned toward him.

- We shall pass by the nearest temple of Shallya. It is absolutely necessary to make you examine!
- Indeed, you’re right, Sigmund gasped.

Jochen had finished the counting the men.

- We have twelve dead and a few wounded. It could have been worse. But I heard your idea of going through a temple, and I think it’s good, Master Clarin.
- Serious wounds?
- Some, but especially, with the vapours we breathe, it is better that the doves do us some fumigations, in case of.

It took nearly half an hour to gather the corpses of the Feral Skaven in a large pile and find enough oil to set it on fire. Once more, and this seemed to him even more painful than in Rabarena, Clarin prayed for the victims of the Feral Skaven, especially the unfortunate man who had been completely dissolved by the Pestilens potion.

The Estalian talked to Jochen.

- Sorry to have overreacted, but all of this is starting to seriously worry me.
- No worries, excellence. Me too, I’m getting tired of this. We will have to take more appropriate measures, I believe.

Clarin cleared his throat.

- I have to go to Patrizio Nichetti to summarize him the situation. After that, I’ll come back to your Prince. I want to be in the front row for the next events.
- You don’t have to, Master Clarin.
- I really do, Master Barnrooster. This case has become a personal one. Shall we meet at Steinerburg?
- I propose something else: you take the seriously wounded ones to the first temple of Shallya between here and the barracks where Nichetti is. Some valid warriors will accompany you for the form. Nedland goes to Steinerburg with the others. I go my side with Sigmund, and we’ll be waiting for you in the village of Sondernach.
- Sondernach, right. A reason for that?
- Nothing very important, excellence. It’s just a perfect place to have a little break.

Sigmund hadn’t participated in the collection of the corpses. Nedland had stayed close to him to help him treat his wounds. After the prayer time, the Halfling moved closer to the Black Skaven.

- How are you, son?
- I’ve been better, Sigmund grumbled.
- Not too disappointed?
- I’ll get worse.

Sigmund had replied without any conviction. Nedland, meanwhile, was furious. He spat on the ground.

- I was sure to have shot that fat slime ball in his belly! Besides, I got him! I saw him fall to the ground!
- Maybe he was wearing an armour?
- Under a Grey Seer robe?
- Made with padded fabric?
- I don’t know, but anyway, it would not let the magical energies pass! I’m not a magician like your father, but I’ve had enough sided magicians to know that! No, there is something else. Normally, he couldn’t have got up and run away like that! Not with a bullet of a calibre sufficient to tear off an arm burrowed into the meat!

He sighed.

- Sorry, big boy. If I had known, I wouldn’t have made you take such a risk.
- Don’t worry, we’ll find him, whispered the tall Black Skaven.

He squeezed his fist, thinking of Blokfiste.

And you, you’re in a lot of trouble later!
Pains of Yesterday

Kristofferson was uncomfortable. It was a little past ten o’clock in the morning. Sweat made his shirt stick to his spine fur. He could feel the stare of the three persons facing him weighing on him: his grandfather, Prince Ludwig Steiner, sitting quietly at his desk, Commander Johannes Schmetterling on his right, and Dame Franzeska Gottlieb on his left.

The Prince finished the reading the report signed by Captain Rudy Müller. While holding the paper between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he turned with his left thumb the seal he had made craft around his ring finger. Kristofferson focused his attention on this seal, a simple jewel, fused in steel, with the coat of arms of the Rat Kingdom delicately carved on its surface. This allowed the young ratman to be able to avoid seeing the eyes of his interlocutors, while seeming to look in their direction. He also forced himself to focus his ears on the chirping of birds that could be heard through the windows, to escape the unhealthy silence that was smothering the office.

Steiner set the report on the varnished wood, looked up at his grandson, took his inspiration, and asked calmly:

- And so, they are all dead?

- There is no longer a single villager from Klapperschlänge alive, Opa.

Kristofferson lowered his head, resolved to face the fury of his grandfather.

- It’s my fault. I didn’t had the idea of putting them away in our walls for the night.

- Hum... what do you think about it, Schmetterling?

The tall man answered sternly:

- If a soldier under my command reported such an answer to me, I would have him immediately submitted to the judgment of a court martial, your Highness. Nevertheless, with all the sympathy he can arouse, and his significant qualities as a man of action, your grandson is still young, he’s not officially a soldier, and I can understand that he may not necessarily think of all these instructions that should automatically follow any officer of any corps. I think the captain of the garrison should have taken this initiative.
- Very good. And what about you, Lady Franzseska?

- I know Kristofferson since he was born, Highness. I admit that I have a little difficulties understanding how something so important has escaped him? He’s not the type of person that neglects the smallest detail, usually. However, this is the first time that he has been given direct responsibility for a mission. During the Harvests, he has always been accompanied by your son, as well as myself or my children. And no one is infallible. I hope he will learn from his mistake.

- I hope so too, mumbled Steiner.

One again, a silence pressed the lungs of the young ratman. He started nearly as he heard the smooth voice of his grandfather ask:

- Have you something in particular to tell us, Kristofferson?

- How can I catch back my mistake? he spluttered.

This time, the Prince had a short satisfied smile.

- We’ll see that later. Before, I’d like to talk about how you survived the Orcs. Can you confirm to Commander and Lady Franzseska the words of Captain Müller?

- Absolutely, Opa. Thanks to the intervention of Captain Hansel Kreutzer, from the Wüstengrenze garrison, the Greenskins were routed.

- And about what happened after the battle? What is your version?

Kristofferson understood that he had an interest in being honest, but that he absolutely had to convince his grandfather that he had done well. He wanted to try to go for it. He spoke to the chief of the armies.

- Commander Schmetterling, are you the one who placed Captain Kreutzer at the head of the Wüstengrenze garrison?

- Indeed, my lord.

The features of the brown Skaven hardened.
- I invite you to pay attention to better choose the ones you will hire, henceforth.

- Why, my lord? replied the tall, red man, suddenly annoyed.

- Because we don’t need to have at our borders captains who underestimate a clearly dangerous situation, leave other soldiers to bear the greatest losses, and despise both women and Skaven. Kreutzer had all these defects. As Müller reported, as the Prince’s emissary, I removed him from office.

- Oh yes? asked Schmetterling. It was up to me to do it! Until proven otherwise, I am the Commander of the Army of Vereinbarung!

- But as emissary of the Prince, he was entitled to do so, intervened Steiner. And if I have more or less confidence in your judgment and your loyalty, Schmetterling, I trust my grandson much more.

Schmetterling didn’t answer, but his angry glare told Kristofferson, with a limpid tone, that was just the beginning of a coming confrontation. The Prince noticed it, and murmured:

- You can dismiss, commander.

The commander bowed and left the room.

- Lady Franzseska, we’ll have to make an estimate of the damage, the cost of the repairs, the compensation to the survivors for the moral damage, all these sorts of things, in short. It’s your specialty, so you’ll be in charge. We can do without your excellent services for some time, the situation in Wüstengrenze seems more urgent. I want you to leave in three days, time for you to prepare all your belongings, account books and calculating instruments, to charter an escort and to inform Captain Müller.

- It will be done according to your good will, your Greatness.

- Thank you.

Dame Franzseska took leave of both Steiner. Once the two men alone, the Prince relaxed a little, and spoke again to his grandson.

- I trust you, my boy, but I wonder if the sad fate of Klapperschlänge doesn’t affect your judgment? Was this Captain Kreutzer so ignoble?

- Opa, all the men in the company who were with me will confirm you that he had insulting remarks to us, Skaven, and the priestesses of Shallya have suffered from his contemptuous remarks about the fairer sex.
Ludwig Steiner sighed wearily. He got up, stretched himself, crossed his arms behind his back, and took a few steps in the office. His varnished shoes creaked the floor under the carpet.

- Yeah... I don’t want to load everything on his shoulders, but maybe things would have been different if he had intervened earlier, indeed. But that doesn’t diminish your responsibility in this case, Kristofferson. Neither yours, nor Müller’s, nor your lieutenants. We shall have to repair the damage at best. To start, we need to find a replacement for Kreutzer.

- If I may, Opa, this replacement is already found. Captain Rudy Müller proved to me that he deserved better than a small barracks like Klapperschlänge.

- Really? Yet, this is not my feeling, after reading his report.

- He has the will, he has the courage! All he needs is self-confidence and someone who lets him prove what he’s worth. You should have seen him fight against this wyvern, or fight the Orcs! Everything seemed lost, and yet he didn’t give up! I can even tell you that he saved my life!

- I see.

Ludwig Steiner moved back to his office, rubbed his nose, and looked up at his grandson.

- This village doesn’t exist anymore. The soldiers have nothing left to protect. I don’t know if others will come to live there, but in the meantime, better the few remaining men settle in Wüstengrenze. I’ll write an edict in this sense. As for you, to definitively settle this story of responsibility in relation to the victims, I announce to you that you’ll place yourself under the authority of this Captain Müller for the next six months. You shall leave with Lady Franzseska. You’ll be in a good position to thoroughly analyse Müller’s qualities and faults, and you’ll help him become capable of handling the entire garrison on his own. You will teach him what you have learned, as well as the soldiers under his responsibility. So everyone will benefit, and that will allow you to make amends in the eyes of Verena, and mine. So spoke the Prince.

The young brown Skaven bowed and took leave of his grandfather. He didn’t immediately retire to his apartments, but went to the library. There, he found prior Romulus, to whom he gave a letter written by the hand of Mother Hannah. He left the room with the satisfied smile of someone who had done a necessary job.

The sun was high in the sky, and the warmth of its rays comforted Jochen a little. Even if he had done everything to remain stoic, the horrors of the Oropesa assault had shaken him. A little peace was not too much for his taste. He especially felt that his black furry friend needed to clear his
head. So the two comrades had made a detour to Sondernach. It was a big village whose wealth
was mainly in the wood sale. All the men of Sondernach were loggers or hunters. The nearby forest
provided them with quality lumber, and a small trading post where customers used to buy their
merchandise had been built. Many developing cities benefited from this lumber, including the
large, far-flung border cities. Huge convoys with a strong escort left Sondernach regularly.

Jochen crossed one of these caravans. He casted a professional glance, and analysed in a few
moments the composition of the caravan.

Coat of arms of Ostentür, twenty militiamen for five chariots... They are probably building a new
construction.

Wood was actually used for buildings, but it was also used for furniture and some weapons.
Certainly, carpenters were careful to use the most appropriate materials according to the uses, but
the Sondernach wood had the distinction of being able to be used to satisfy varied as multiple
needs.

While walking, the tall fellow spotted the house he was looking for. This was the counter from
which the new convoy was leaving. A large log-shaped sign hung above the front door, and those
who knew how to read could see a name painted on it: Baumann. The Baumann were a large
family, each member of which was involved in running the business. The leaders, two Humans in
the prime of life, had raised no less than a dozen children, the youngest of whom had just
celebrated his thirteenth birthday. Although having fulfilled their duty of population for the Rat
Kingdom, Isidor and Ortrun Baumann had wanted to try the experiment, and had volunteered to
adopt a small Skaven. Thus, about eight months earlier, they had adopted one of the Freed Skaven
brought back by Psody and his team.

All the family members had welcomed the event, in fact it was even the children who had
suggested the idea to the couple. Confident, they had referred at the Shallya temple set in their
village. The request went back to Romulus himself. He had seen the opportunity to observe how a
young Skaven raised in a large Human family could evolve. The children of the Baumann had
themselves children who were still young, this could give interesting results from a social point of
view. And so, the Baumann had inherited a little boy whom they had named Gottfried.

Jochen walked out the door and greeted the mature man sitting at the counter.

- Well, the blacksmith has finished shoeing the horses, we’ll leave you, we’ve bothered you
enough.
Isidor Baumann held his business inherited from his father for more than two decades. Thanks to his business sense, coupled with enough luck to avoid the serious unforeseen mishaps, he had prospered well. He was grizzled, sporting a well-cut moustache, and always wore a vest with many pockets in which he used to store his small tools.

The Human replied happily:

- You do not bother us at all! It’s always a pleasure to see you! Besides…

He pointed at the window.

- Look! Gottfried is so happy!

Jochen put his head through the opening, and grinned at a sight he thought to be entertaining and touching at the same time.

The window opened on a small courtyard where a large table was installed, usually used for large family meals. At the end of the table, there was a high chair made to allow a very young child to sit without falling. Sigmund, himself sitting on a chair, was feeding a tiny Skaven on the high chair. This pup was now a good little novena of months old. His coat had grown, and had several shades of brown colour. He especially had a big dark spot on his left eye. He noisily swallowed the soup prepared by his mother Ortrun, and babbled happily between each spoonful.

Jochen couldn’t help to mock his comrade.

- Oh, look at that! How cute!
- Go shush yourself! responded the tall Black Skaven with a poor, annoyed smile.
- What an impressive capacity for forthright repartee! chuckled Jochen.
- He doesn’t need to learn your obscenities, Jochen! replied Sigmund, laughing in his turn.
- Hurry up, the horses are ready, we still have some way to go.
- Coming, I’m almost done.

Jochen disappeared from his eyes. The young Steiner took the opportunity to turn his attention
back to the little child he continued to feed.

- Eeyup... You deserve a better education than this roughneck’s!

While continuing to serve him the soup, his look became distant, while tumultuous thoughts came to tickle his mind.

_Am I better than this roughneck?_

Sigmund sighed, and relived the circumstances that had made him meet this little rat.

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_The Sacherg colony was known to have a modest size. According to Nedland’s observations, this small enclave of the Under-Empire, located on the other side of the border separating the Renegade Crowns from Tilea, was no longer very valiant. A recent assault by a militia, weary of seeing its resources regularly looted, had defeated the few regiments of Clanrats. The Humans had not had the courage to chase the Feral Skaven into the depths of their burrow, but the Halfling scout had done it. Sacherg was moribund. Gabriel’s gas globes had quickly reduced to impotence the survivors who were wandering down the corridors. As all the colonies were designed on the same model, the nursery was located at the end of a long tunnel, and thus out of reach of the fumes of soporific volutes. Nedland, gone ahead, had no trouble finding it, followed by the company led by Psody._

_This time, Psody was accompanied by Sigmund only, there was no other Skaven in the whole team. About fifteen Humans followed them, while Marjan closed the march. They joined Nedland who was waiting for them in front of a heavy, wide open door._

- _Here we are! Two ratwives only, knock-out, both of them. But I’m afraid this Harvest not to be very fruitful. It’s a little nursery, it only has one room._

- _How many breeders? asked Marjan._

- _Four._

_Sigmund’s nose frowned._
- Marjan, why did you say “breeders”?
- Because that’s what they are, Siggy!
- They are women!

Marjan turned to the big Black Skaven. The determination of her gaze, visible through the lenses of her mask, made him uncomfortable.

- Sigmund, I am the first person to say that boys and girls must be treated in the same way. Not these creatures. If you give them an ounce of identity, you only increase the suffering. Especially yours.
- What suffering? What are you talking about?
- Of a reality it’s time for you to face-assume, answered the White Skaven. We agreed with your mother and your grandfather, Sigmund.
- On what? asked the Black Skaven, suddenly frightened.
- You have to see by yourself who the Feral Skaven really are, and why it’s important to fight them.

The Master Mage made a small head movement towards the big opening.

- Go ahead.

Sigmund hesitated a little, but resolved to obey. He went through the door. He found himself in a small corridor lit by globes of light installed by Skryre Warplock Engineers. He saw another door opened by Nedland a few yards away. Behind him, the others followed him, while remaining at a distance. As he advanced, he felt his heart beating louder and louder. It was then that he distinguished raucous and deep gasps. Several creatures, no doubt of great size, were lurking in the room at the end of the way. He stopped, turned to the others. His father, still a few steps from him, gestured to make him proceed forward with a movement of his fingers. Sigmund resumed his march, and finally arrived at the threshold of the nursery. He inhaled deeply, and entered.

- Shallya have mercy!

Several times, the young ratman had asked Psody, Romulus and Kristofferson what the female genitors of the Underground Empire looked like. The different descriptions overlapped on several points, but the horror they had aroused in him was a thousand times below what he was feeling at that moment.
He was in a small, dimly lit room, barely larger than the storeroom of the stables at the family home. The floor was covered with wet, darkened with various fluid stains straw. When he looked more closely around, his coat bristled more in front of a particularly puzzling vision.

A female Skaven was lying at each corner of the room. All four were naked, chained by their neck to rings encrusted in the stone walls. Usually, seeing four girls treated like this would have revolted above all the Black Skaven. But he couldn’t feel anything but a sudden rise of compassion. Tears came to his eyes. Under the effect of ointments, fumigations and other warpstone medications, the four breeders were frightfully deformed. Huge, weighing no doubt several hundred pounds each, they were lying on their backs, motionless, arms and legs apart because of the cylinders of grease that encased their limbs.

This sad picture was not only pitiful, it was also aberration in the eyes of the young ratman. For him, the concept of Skaven girl was associated with his mother, or sisters, especially Bianka, the closest to him, who herself entered adulthood at the same time as him. He couldn’t accept the slightest connection between them and these pathetic, shapeless creatures.

He felt his father stand beside him.

- Will you be alright-alright?
- What... I... I don’t know what to say. I cannot believe it.
- Lucky for you, with your mask, you don’t have to bear the smell.
- It is... monstrous! Abominable! These poor girls…
- “Breeders”, Siggy. You have to get used to say “breeders”.
- They are not animals, Father!
- The Feral Skaven turn them into reproduction machines. They have no other function.
- One of them gave you birth! And another did the same for Mother! You can’t call my grandmothers “reproduction machines”!
- Yet, that’s what they are. You’re right, your mother and I were born by such creatures. I don’t deny it. But I remind-remind you that one of the objectives of the Rat Kingdom is precisely to do everything so that what you see to be history. These poor things have no name, no rights, and are too befuddled-brain-damaged by drugs to experience anything but pain. Not any girl of the Skaven people should end up like this. And for that, we must found a new society. And you are facing the first step.

Sigmund remained silent, looking at the females, without saying a word. His father agreed to
- It’s hard to say, I know it, but you must not associate them with the girls of our Kingdom. This may make your task even more difficult-tricky.

- What task?

- What do you think?

Four of the Humans entered into the room approached one of the layers. Near it, on the ground, five new-born Skaven were piled on the litter. All were naked, about the size of a Human infant, and appeared to be in a semi-comatose state, barely moving.

- Only boys, Marjan grumbled.

At least she already gives them a Human identity, Sigmund thought.

- This nursery has no girls, Nedland commented.

- You sure?

- The Skaven put the girls in a separate nursery, where they feed them with warpstone milk. It gets them used to receiving it in larger quantities when they are old enough to give birth.

- Wait, Nedland... you mean that Mother has... been...

- She was. Nourished with warpstone milk, no doubt, replied the Halfling. Fortunately, not enough to affect her health. You are the proof.

- Stop talking and start acting! intimated Marjan. What do you think, Psody?

- They don’t look too infected-sick. Let’s hope that the surface air invigorates them. Take them all!

And the Humans delicately picked up the pups to deposit them gently in their stuffed baskets. One of them moaned softly, but was silent once on the cushion.

Marjan asked:

- Is it over?

- Not quite, replied the White Skaven.
He tiptoed towards another layer lying at the bottom of the cellar.

- Sigmund? Come here.

The Black Skaven obeyed, and re-joined his father.

- Look.

The young ratman had a gag. He felt his hatred for the people of the Under-Empire growing with his disgust. How could a people inflict such treatment on their female half? His reaction comforted him a little.

We have the same blood, but in my heart, I will never, ever, have anything to do with these animals! Besides... even animals do not inflict such treatment on females!

- I know-know, son.

- What?

- You just spoke, didn’t you realize it?

- Uh... ah. Right. But... you’re not like them, neither!

Psody tapped his son’s arm gently.

- Don’t worry, my child, I’m aware of it. Come on, let’s get down to business. You shall now Harvest him.

- Who... oh!

Sigmund had not noticed right away, but there was something on the huge female. He saw a tiny rat, a baby boy probably born recently. Just one. It was clinging to one of the gigantic udders of the breeder, sucking its milk.

The Black Skaven approached a step. The little rat, like the others, was completely naked, and still
covered with uterine fluids. It didn’t seem to notice him. At the same time, was he aware of anything except its mother’s presence?

It reminded him the first time he had seen his younger brother, Gabriel. He had been delighted, and had promised to protect him just as much as his sister Bianka. But what he saw didn’t inspire him with the same joy.

Psody’s voice pulled him hard from his thoughts.

- Take him.
- What?
- Take him!
- Uh...

- We are here for a Harvest, Sigmund. Today, it’s up to you to accomplish the mission. Take this little one gently, and put him in a basket.

Sigmund wanted to obey. He reached out with both hands, slipped them under the small Skaven, and pulled gently. But scarcely had he raised it from the flank of the breeder than he uttered such a scream that the Black Skaven released it hastily to cover his ears.

- Careful! You almost let him fall to the ground! his father reprimanded.
- I... I did not think that...
- You’ve heard that kind of scream, though!
- Never! Every time I went down to a colony, I stood guard in front of the nursery! And when the Harvesters went out, the babies were sleeping because of the gas!
- Indeed, but at home-home? A younger brother and two little sisters make a terrible noise!
- It is not the same thing.
- Enough talk! Pick him up!

Psody became impatient. Sigmund clenched his teeth, but wanted to do well. He moved cautiously towards the female, without daring to look at her. He ran his fingers under the rat’s paws, then raised his hands again. He lowered them quickly and took refuge in a corner of the room when the screeching of the new-born lacerated his eardrums again.
Psody sighed in annoyance, clenched his fists, but did not lose his composure. The cries had stopped, but the Black Skaven was still shaking to the end of the tail.

- I cannot believe you’re the son who uses to slay Clanrats without weakening!

Sigmund looked up.

- Do I have to do it?

- That’s part of the mission. Your brother has been in the same situation, but he has stood firm! If you want to be a Harvester in your own right, you must be able to harvest a Skaven!

The Black Skaven approached the huge female, planted himself in front of his flank, where the pup rat was clutching, and did not move.

- Come on, Siggy, come on!

- I cannot...

- Of course you can!

- Let’s wait until he’s finished his meal!

- No, the others will eventually wake up, if you drag-hesitates too much!

In front of the urgent look of his father, he decided to put his hands on the baby rat again. The latter had instinctively understood what the contact of these fingers meant, and screamed, screamed again, clinging to its mother’s breast. The Black Skaven felt tears rising to his eyes under the lenses of his mask.

- I cannot! It’s too hard!

Sigmund looked away, without letting go. Psody explained in a voice that he made soothing:

- Look, you can do it!

- I do not want to... deprive him of his mother!
- It’s normal! You’re right, Siggy! But think about what will happen! If you leave him there today, the day after tomorrow at the latest, he’ll be snatched from this poor thing by a Skaven from a Clan! The little pups never stay more than three days in the nursery. This one could fall between the claws of the Clan Eshin assassins, or worse, that of the Pestilens Plague Monks! If he survives, he will become a war machine thirsting for blood-violence! You can offer him a better future!

Sigmund opened his eyes, and suddenly saw something that ended to chill his blood. He saw the flabby-cheek face of the female, and clearly distinguished tears that pearled at the corners of its eyes. Worse, it let out a deep roar, charged with all the sadness of the Under-Empire, as if the little consciousness that remained to it allowed it to understand what was going on.

It was too much for Sigmund.

- NO!!

The tall Black Skaven stepped back, waving his hands as if his fingers had caught fire. He walked some other clumsy steps, and turned his back firmly to the breeder.

He anticipated the worst when he heard his father’s voice.

- Siggy... look at me.

- No!

- Siggy, I’m asking you, listen to me and trust me!

As the tall Black Skaven did not move, Psody sighed and stood in front of his son.

- Today, it will hurt, because you separate him from his mother. It’s a done fact. Instinctively, they both hurt. But it’s inevitable. Very soon, they will be separated, either by you or by the Feral Skaven. The difference is that if you do it now, you will offer him a life with brothers, sisters, then a wife, children... a real family!

- Can’t... can’t we really... take the mother?

- Look at it. It is an eternity that it is no longer a Skaven. Maybe it doesn’t have any longer. In addition, she is so bloated-ballooned that we could not even get it through the door. Now you have a choice-choice to make for its child: let him become a Feral Skaven and face him in a few years, or offer him a better life in Vereinbarung. In both cases, this little one has no choice, it’s true. But
if he comes with you, then he will know love, and will be free to make choices. In the Under-
Empire, nothing of all this will ever happen, Siggy. Give him what he really needs: a real home.

Sigmund turned, thought for a long time, and decided to stop thinking. He leaned toward the
female. He gently passed his hands around the new-born baby, and whispered in its ear, his throat
knotted with sobs:

- I am sorry.

Then he resolved to pull it off the bottom of the breeder, doing everything possible not to pay
attention to its terrified squeaks. The breeder bellowed again. Sigmund hastened to join Nedland,
who was tending an empty basket towards him. The Black Skaven put down the little rat inside, and
ran out of the room. He barely heard Psody say to him:

- Well done, son!

The whole company followed the Black Skaven. As each time, when the Harvesters left the nursery
to return to the exit, the small rats fell asleep under the effect of gas still floating in the air.

And yet, the cries ploughed Sigmund’s eardrums to the exit.

A few hours had passed. The Harvesters were only a few hours walk from the Renegade Crowns.
The Tilean forest was not as deep as that of the Empire, but it still remained a good place to hide
for the night. Since it was a small mission, the company didn’t need to use the trick of the convoy
of prisoners. The next morning, they could cross the border of Tilea through the mountains to
reach Hoffnungshügel, where the young Skaven would be cared for.

Humans celebrated this little victory with a few beers and songs. Nedland took the opportunity to
start a little joke, as usual:

- Hey, do you know how to call a Dark Elf with a repeating crossbow?

In front of the interrogative looks, the Halfling declared:
- You call him “Mister”!

The whole group burst out laughing. Nedland searched for the one he wanted to comfort, but couldn’t see him.

- Hey, where’s the little black rat?

The laughter stopped immediately, to give way to a heavy embarrassment. The scout asked a young woman who seemed to hesitate to speak:

- Silke, did you see him leave?
- Uh... I think he went in that direction.

She gestured to a group of trees a little apart. Psody stood up.

- I’ll talk to him.

It only took Psody a few minutes to spot the tall figure of his son. Sitting on a tree trunk, his head was stuck between his two strong but delicate hands, his fingers clutching the metal mask he had not yet removed. Hissing sounded irregularly through the filter spout. Approaching, the Master Mage felt his heart squeeze when he realized that these hisses were sobs.

He stopped right in front of the Black Skaven, and murmured:

- I’m very proud of you, Sigmund.

Sigmund didn’t react. The White Skaven continued:

- You took the right decision. Never doubt it.
Sigmund looked up and tore off his mask, revealing streams of tears on his furious face. He yelled:

- We are child thieves! And you convinced me to participate! Now, I’m a monster!
- Calm down, my dear. This is not true-true.

The White Skaven spoke in a voice that was initially rather strong, but softened as he explained:

- If they were children with real loving parents, you’d be right. But they are Skaven, raised to satisfy the Horned Rat. There is no sense of love or compassion in them, Siggy. I remind you I spent the first four years of my life among them! They convert them into warriors, destined to ravage the world, or to die-die their mouths wide open trying! This little one would have become a Feral Skaven which kills all those it doesn’t like, devours all it can, and rapes all the girls it’s allowed to approach. You have broken an infernal cycle that has lasted for generations. At the time, it hurt him, and you, too. But it will pass! You probably saved the life of that child! And I can guarantee you that you did what was good for him! Remember that all your friends have been in the place of this little baby. Do you think they are unhappy?
- Are you sure I saved his life? By tearing him from his mother’s arms?
- Oh, but you saw it yourself, son! He didn’t have any mother anymore! Frankly, how could? Besides, it might be not have for a very long time to live!
- What makes you say that?
- There was only one baby on it. This means that everyone else in the litter was not viable, or that this one was the only one. In either case, the breeder can no longer spawn a flock of pups at once. It means that it has become useless. And you know what happens to useless mouths, among the Feral Skaven.

The Black Skaven shook his head awkwardly.

- Now, I’m going to show you the result of what we did today. Follow me.

Obediently, Sigmund followed his father to a large tent in front of which were two Humans. They moved aside to let in the Skaven. Inside, the Harvesters had arranged in a circle half a dozen baskets, each containing a Skaven. The babies were all sleeping soundly, in a snoring concert. They silently approached one of the baskets.

- Here, look at him! See how calm and serene he looks! He would never experience that in a burrow of the Under-Empire.
Sigmund went around the basket, and gazed intently at the little rat, which was moving gently under its blanket.

- He is… cute?

- Of course, he is. And maybe he’ll be a handsome lady-killer, in a few years. With real parents and a real home, I assure you he will live very well. You’ll tell him your meeting, and I am sure he’ll be the first to thank you! Well... I should say “the third”, his parents will before.

- You... do you think?

- I know it, trust me.

The tall black Skaven didn’t answer, and focused on the baby.

I hope you are right.

*

Sigmund sighed. This memory had lost nothing of its drudgery. This day was the first time he picked up a small Skaven, and the last one. He never dared to go back to any nursery. The cries of the little rat had remained engraved in his memory, like the streaks of an iron gauntlet on the surface of a mirror. Subsequently, each time he had participated a Harvest, he had stayed behind, watching, while others filled the baskets.

Fortunately, his father was not mistaken. He had earned the thanks of the entire Baumann family, when Isidor and Ortrun, along with three of their blood children, came to pick up the newcomer a few days later. Subsequently, Sigmund used to come to Sondernach at least every six weeks. Each visit was a moment of happiness for him.

- Siggy!

Sigmund startled and turned around. He just saw Jochen’s arm through the window, which indicated the exit with an energetic thumb.

- All right, all right, I’m coming.
The tall Black Skaven grumbled as he noticed the bowl of soup was completely empty. Fortunately, the child seemed satisfied, and no longer claimed.

- I have to leave, Gottfried.

The ratman put the wooden spoon on the table, and murmured:

- I hope that if you don’t forgive him, you’ll understand that big, idiot Siggy...

- Siggy? Siggy!

Sigmund’s heart stopped dead. No mistake! The little Skaven had just spoken to him! Called him by his name! Surprised to the highest degree, he was almost frightened, and retreated to the door leading to the counter. Therefore, the owner was shaking hands with Captain Gottlieb.

- May you greet your little sister for us, Sir Jochen!

The tall young man’s eyes widened, then he burst out laughing.

- “Little”? You consider she’s little? For a woman, she’s still damn huge!

- Uh... yes, but... Aren’t you her big brother?

- Absolutely not, Master Baumann! On the both of us, it is she who came out first of the belly of our holy mother! Hey, from the first moment, she showed that she has not a patient character, nor she’s the kind of gal who leaves a man to pass in front of her!

The two men laughed together. Jochen met Sigmund’s uncertain gaze.

- Ah, it’s about time! Come on, hairy nanny, we go now!

- We’re on. The little one has eaten everything, Master Baumann.

- Perfect! With you, there is no whim, it’s so much easier!
The Black Skaven in turn shook Isidor’s hand.

- Above all, do not hesitate to come back! It will really please Gottfried!

- I’m counting on that, Master Baumann.

And the two friends took leave. Ten minutes later, they were on the main street of Sondernach, and approaching the bridge that spanned the river that bounded its perimeter.

Sigmund threw a last gaze above his shoulder.

You’re worth the best, Gottfried. The best.
For the fourth time, Bianka Steiner re-read the birth records for the month. As each end of the month, it counted the number of new inhabitants of Vereinbarung, reported the results of individual cards in recapitulative tables. Size, weight, sex, place of birth, name and profession of father and mother, everything was there.

Well, well… a third of births of female babies for two thirds of male babies... Come on, gals, a little effort, and you’ll manage to maintain a gender equality!

There was even a box “particular signs”. Until now, Bianka had used it to specify “Black Skaven”. Unlike regular Skaven that came into the world without fur, Black Skaven could be quickly recognized from their first moments, these ones were much larger than average, with a dark fluff. Yet, for the first time, she had to fill the box “particular signs” with the mention “horns and white coat”.

Hmm... No other White Skaven beside the little peasant of Hemsbach, but it will come, no doubt? I wonder if Father will really take action?

Three knocks sounded on the wooden door. She raised her nose.

- Yes? Who is it?
- It is Eusebio Clarin, señorita!

Immediately, the ratgirl’s heart started racing, and a smile instantly lit up her face.

- Come in, please!

The dashing diplomat walked through the door, still as smiling and elegant as in the memory of the Skaven girl. The latter realized that she wore the austere outfit of the archivists, and hardly repressed an annoyed grinding.

- How are you, madam?
- Wonderfully, Excellency! You will excuse me for not receiving you in forms, but I was at work.
- Oh, please, my lady! You are always elegant!

He made a movement, and like a prestidigitator, pulled out a bunch of flowers from under his cloak.

- And here is a pale reflection of your charm, my lady!

Bianka’s smile twitched. She held out a nervous hand, grasped the bouquet, and inhaled its perfume. Clarin thought she was looking for their origin, and thought it right to precise:

- They grow in Estalia, Prince Calderon has imported seeds.

- Oh, I... they are very... pretty. Thank you.

The Human, without losing his smile, felt his forehead wrinkling.

- I hope I do not bother you, Lady Bianka?

- Oh, no, no! On the contrary, it’s up to me to apologize. You’re giving me a very beautiful gift, however... oh, it bothers me a lot!

- Don’t worry, speak sincerely.

- Well... I don’t really like bunches of flowers. This involves interrupting their life cycle by picking them up, just for coquetry. My mother likes to practice horticulture, I don’t.

- Oh... I should have listened to your brother, he had warned me.

- It doesn’t matter, your attention remains touching.

- So you don’t like bunches of flower.

- I’m sorry for you, señor.

Bianka nevertheless consented to put the bouquet on a small pedestal table, waiting to do something else with. Clarin’s gaze suddenly sparkled with a mischievous gleam.

- Maybe I will have more success with this?
He drew from his leather bag a big case which he handed to the girl. She put it on her desk, opened it, and immediately her eyes flashed.

- Oh! What a magnificent present!

Bianka had in his hands three thick volumes. She knew immediately that they were missals. One carried the decorations proper to Manann, god of the oceans, that the Estalian invoked regularly. The second was devoted to Myrmidia, the Tilean goddess of war. The third compiled the words of Taal and Rhya. She opened it, flipped through it, and saw:

- They are written in Estalian... but the texts are the same from one country to another, aren’t they?
- With a few slight differences, nothing to notice them. So you can grasp the basics of my native language, and maybe learn to speak it?
- That would be wonderful! Thank you a thousand times, Master Clarin!

She did not hesitate to jump on his neck to hug him.

- I cannot let you go with empty hands! Listen, I’m going to ask Father if he would allow me to let you leave with some texts written in the language of the Under-Empire?
- You mean he owns books written in Feral Skaven tongue?
- Yes, during Harvests, he regularly confiscated some, and translated a few. I’m sure he will allow you to take one with its reikspiel version.
- That would be very kind from him.
- By the way, for your information, the language of the Feral Skaven is called “Queekish”!
- Ah? I didn’t know. Thank you for telling me!
- At your service, Excellency.
- I must take leave now, I think your grandfather and your father are eager to hear the story of what we saw in Oropesa.

At these words, Bianka felt a twinge in her stomach.

- Have you had any casualties?
Clarin didn’t smile anymore.

- Alas, some. This is the lot of those who choose to put their life at the service of their fellow citizens, my lady.
- What about my brother? How is he?
- Oh, he took a few blows, but nothing serious.
- He didn’t come back with you?
- He preferred to stay with his friends, they are at the inn.

The narrowing of her heart widened to become a clear twist.

- Did he? I hope he won’t come back too late?
- He recommended not to wait for him for supper.

*Very promising!* Bianka thought with annoyance.

- You, by cons, I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you at our table? Your father has asked me to transmit you the invitation.
- Oh, of course! Anyway, I’m done with my counts, if you do not mind, I’m just going to put away my cards and I’ll join you.

* The dinner went off without incident. Eusebio Clarin narrated what had happened in Rabarena and Oropesa. The members of the Steiner family listened with attention and concern – at least those who were sitting at the table, because two chairs remained empty.  

* Once again, Gabriel awoke with a start. He scratched his head, and thought. Did he just heard Bianka moaning again? Or was it his imagination? No way to find out.
His stomach gurgled, he grimaced. The little bit of soup he had quickly swallowed up in secret once the strange Estalien gone had not been enough to satisfy him. Maybe he should have been more daring and go get some cheese in the kitchen? He sat down sadly on his bed, and sniffed.

*Damn ambassador! Damn hungry! Damn fear of people!*

He wanted to think of something else. He went to the window, spread the curtains, opened the glass panel, and saw Mannslieb’s light through the interstices of the wooden shutters. It was still dark. The little ratman scurried back to his bed, curled up under his blanket, and closed his eyes. Gradually, sleep dragged his mind into limbo, slowly, deliciously... when bursts of voice brought him back to reality.

*I don’t believe it!* he said to himself, tapping his palm on his mattress.

He was about to bury his head under his pillow, when he recognized the voice that had snatched him from the restful repose, and had a frightened shiver. He leaped to his window, opened the shutters wide, and stood petrified before a sad spectacle.

The silhouette of a Skaven zigzagged along the path that led to the Steiner dwelling, stopped in front of a tree, and urinated copiously on it, without stopping to sing. The few words that reached the chaste ears of the light gray Skaven made him shudder with disgust.

*Siggy?*

It was the big black Skaven, completely drunk, who staggered awkwardly, bawling a bawdy song.

- *And long live Prince Rodeo... Rodo... Raw Dinero Cold Iron!*

Behind him, a Human was hurrying to catch up with him: Jochen Gottlieb, the son of his mother’s best friend. Jochen wanted to support Sigmund, but he rejected him.

- *I need nobody, pal! I’m the tallest, and the strongest of the Rat Kingdom!*

Gabriel jumped to the ceiling when his grandfather’s voice burst into one of the windows below.
- Sigmund! What are you playing?

The Black Skaven stopped short, tilted his head, and shouted to the Prince:

- It’s not a game, Opa!
- And you’re arguing me? How dare you?
- I dare, because I saw the true truth, Opa! We do not play anymore, we’re at war!

The young engineer then perceived something in his older brother’s voice that made him cry out: laughter gave way to sobs.

- The Feral Skaven have declared war on us! And I’m ready to demolish them all! I shall kill with my bare hands a hundred of these monsters for every little girl whose throat would have been cut by them! I am a Human, Opa! You raised me like that! I am a man, a real one! That’s what Enrique said, my friend the Estalian I saved! We will live in peace, forever, when we have exterminated these crap, even if I had to take care of it by myself all alone! And all the Rat Kingdom will live in peace and harmo...

Sigmund could not finish his sentence, shook abruptly by spasms. He fell on his knees, put his palms on the pavement, and emptied all his guts for long seconds before collapsing into his own vomit. Kristofferson and Jochen took him each by one arm, and dragged him to the gates of the manor. Gabriel couldn’t bear more. He leaped into bed, burrowed under the blanket, and spent long minutes moaning softly, before getting lost in tumultuous dreams.

- You tell Prince Calderon that we are already looking for a way to purify the Nichetti estate, would be kindly. Once he has found the solution to this problem, my son will come on the spot, under escort.
- You’ll just have to send me a message when he leaves, so I’ll welcome him at the border.
- By the way, I invite you to find him in the library before your departure, I think he has something for you. I wish you a harmless trip back Sueño.

A formal way for the Prince to give leave to the emissary. The Estalien bowed respectfully.
- Your Highness, it is a real pleasure to deal with the people of Vereinbarung.

- I hope to share this pleasure with your sovereign in the coming months.

The Prince gestured lightly to one of the servants, who accompanied Eusebio Clarin to the scriptorium. The White Skaven was plunged into a thick volume, placed on the worktop, in the middle of three other books of the same size.

- So, how are your research?

- It looks longer-harder than I thought! It will probably take me several days to write a purification formula!

- You mean that the College of Jade doesn’t already have written such a formula?

- This is a warpstone contamination. The Druids never had the knowledge of the Grey Seers to better know-tame it. I have. It gives me an advantage. Even if I need several weeks, I’ll do it.

The Master Mage supported Clarin’s gaze, who could see his own reflection in the big pink eyes of the White Skaven.

- I promise-promise you that I’ll save this domain myself, Master Clarin.

- I have not the slightest doubt on this question, Master Mage Steiner. In the meantime, I’ll make sure no one gets in or out.

Psody relaxed a little, and asked blankly:

- Tell me, Master Clarin, you’ve spent a few days with my son Sigmund... what do you think about him?

Clarin pretended to be caught off guard. Inside, he gloated. In truth, he had been waiting for this question to be able to say what he had on the heart since their first meeting.

- Will you allow me to speak frankly, Master Mage?

- I’m praying you to do so.
Clarin thought, carefully chose the words he was going to use, and said:

- He’s a few ordinary man. Really. He had a rather negative first impression about me, and yet he just went all-out against the Feral Skaven to help us save our people. He even mourned the loss of a small village girl. In Oropesa, he was in the front line. He is frank and keeps his promises. But I feel that he is animated by a kind of passion, not necessarily the most positive. There is a lot of anger and sadness in him, I’m afraid.

- And you’re right-right, Master Clarin. Sigmund is a good son, but he bears a rather heavy burden: his legacy.

- Is it so hard to be a Black Skaven?

- Some of them are naturally... very They have that in their blood. This is called “Black Hunger”. My son has this peculiarity. And his personality is not turned towards optimism. It’s a rather risky-explosive combination. You must have realized, Master Clarin?

- I didn’t dare to tell him, but... sincerely, he scared me when he killed that chief in Rabarena. I cannot say that this scum didn’t deserve to die, but your son didn’t just fight him. He slaughtered him furiously, as he was possessed by a Demon of Khorne!

- That doesn’t surprise me. Therefore, it’s not anger that drives him the most, but sadness. In fact, he is naturally sad. He sees the darkest side of the world before seeing its qualities. We know-know that it’s a pain for him, but he forbids himself to let this sadness speak, even without being aware of it. And so, he hides this sadness with excesses: he can spend hours laughing out loud with his friends, as he can get into impressive states of anger and fend off his enemies with a twist without slowing down. I wish I could soothe this pain-pain that mishandles him.

- I’d like to talk to him before I leave. Do you know where he is?

Psody gave a little angry sigh.

- In his bed, sleeping. He spent the night drinking at the tavern, he came back home at three in the morning. I hope, moreover, that he didn’t awake-awake you?

- Oh, my... Don’t worry about me, I’m sleepy. But did he need to party so late?

- It was supposedly to “celebrate the engagement of his friend Fritz”, but I can’t believe it. He wanted to drown his sorrows in alcohol.

- How sad. A young man like him, behaving like that...

- That’s what I told-confided you, Master Clarin. It’s a way for him to muffle his sadness. That explains his conduct, but it doesn’t excuse-justify it, and I’ll try to remind him when he’s up.

The Human seemed sincerely touched.
- Please do not be too harsh. We have seen really awful things.

- He saw other awful things during the Harvests. And the grandson of a Prince-Prince must behave like the grandson of a Prince-Prince, not like a ruffian!

- If I can do anything to help him...

- That’s very kind of you, answered Heike, who had heard the conversation as she entered the library. Unfortunately, we, his parents and siblings, don’t really know what to do. Bianka is the only one who can reason with him when he warms up. She is the only person not to be afraid of his anger. No doubt thanks to their twinness.

Clarin nodded with a small embarrassed pout.

- It’s time for me to go back to my prince, my Lady.

- You will always be welcome here, Master Clarin.

- Oh, I was about to forget! Psody realized.

The White Skaven picked up two books on a small pedestal table.

- My daughter asked me to give you this. I think she likes you, which is rather rare, especially for someone from far away.

- I admit that I appreciate her company, me too. I hope to be able to keep relations of simple friendship.

- That would be incredible, indeed.

The Human leafed through the first book, and frowned. The characters that evolved along the pages seemed incomprehensible to him.

- Is this Queekish?

- It is. You will find some notions about the geography of the Under-Empire and its inhabitants. The other book is the translation I made. I would have liked to give you a religious book, but the Feral Skaven do not have any.

- Please, it’s already very generous of you. But... wait, you mean there is no sacred text about the Horned Rat?

- On the contrary, there are too many! Every Grey Seer has his own vision of things. There are many outlines like “men-things must die” and “obey those above you and kill-kill those below”
handed down by oral tradition, but unlike Human priests, Grey Seers don’t swear by a single-official book. And the Seer Lord is careful not to be clear in his sermons.

- It gives him a better control over his subjects, Heike said.

The Human considered the work with respect.

- I’ll take the greatest care before you return it.
- You can keep it! I have lots of others like that. By cons... darling?

The White Skaven pointed to a leather roll against a writing desk near Heike. The latter slipped a sheet of paper into the furniture, and gave it to Clarin.

- Their alphabet is not ours. Here is a help to understand it.
- Our linguist will undoubtedly be delighted. But... Master Mage, do not you mind giving us the opportunity to understand them?
- Why would I bother-disturb? The more you know them, the better you will fight them! And I’m not afraid to see Humans understand-using their technology; as long as it works with warpstone, no Human will be able to enjoy it.
- And after seeing with my own eyes what warpstone can cause to us, I can assure you we’re not close to do it!

With these words, Eusebio Clarin greeted the couple before leaving the mansion. When he went down the little path towards the entrance gate, he distinguished the two guards and the coachman in full discussion around his carriage.

- A problem, Sanchez?
- Just a slight incident, Excellency, said the first guard.
- We caught a little ratman prowling around the wagon while we were looking somewhere else.
- I’ve just checked, my lord, he has done nothing wrong, added the coachman. He just watched. As soon as we approached, he scooted away.

*The young engineer, no doubt... How pity he’s so scared of me.*
- Should we refer to the Prince, Excellency?

Clarin shook his head.

- It’s just a little curious, very timid child. A slight incident, you said it. Let’s go home, we must not keep our Prince waiting.

- At your service, Excellency!

* 

A porcine grunt sounded in the bedroom. The breathing stabilized, the eyelids rose very, very slowly, revealing eyes red with fatigue.

The first thing he saw was the daylight passing through the laths of the shutters. A sunbeam warmed his face.

Shit! I didn’t draw the curtains. Urgh, my head!

An abominable pain had just irradiated his foggy brain. His throat was drier than a sandy well in the middle of the Khemri desert. He reached out to grab the small jug of water he kept on his bedside table, spilled its content on his head, and shook himself. Outside, the birds of the park were singing.

Sigmund extricated himself with a thousand efforts from the four-poster bed in which his brother and his friend had thrown him unceremoniously a few hours earlier. Despite the hangover that undermined his skull, he struggled to collect his memories of what had happened the night before.

Damn it... Clarin... the dinner... Father will be really mad!

He scratched furiously. It was never nice to spend a whole night dressed up. He opened his wardrobe, took a spare costume, and headed for the bathroom. He spent a long quarter of an hour refreshing himself, then he dried himself, put on his clean clothes, and hurried down the stairs to the common parts of the house.
He passed a clock in a hallway. He took the opportunity to check the time.

*One hour in the afternoon... I hope it remains something to eat!*

He stepped to the dining room with hesitation. When he opened the door, he swallowed. Three people were still at the table: his parents and his twin sister, all three having tea. At his sight, the White Skaven nervously twirled his spoon in his cup.

- What a joy to finally see you, after such a long-interminable waiting!

- Sorry, Father, the Black Skaven mumbled.

- “Sorry”? “Sorry”? It is I who am sorry! I should perhaps have forbidden you to drink alcohol as soon as you were old enough to! Or else getting you drunk up to the ethylic coma, to make you pass the desire to do it again! So, you wouldn’t have presented such a lamentable-distressing spectacle to an ambassador who came to negotiate agreements with our country!

- Psody, Master Clarin told us he hadn’t been disturbed, Heike interfered.

- He did, but it doesn’t mean it was true! Maybe he saw everything, but he behaved polite-comprehensive enough to avoid an incident. An incident you could have caused, Sigmund!

- It’s not as if I had insulted his Prince, Sigmund said softly.

Psody hit the table with the palm of his hand. He took a deep breath, then swallowed the contents of his cup, and lowered his eyelids. A few long seconds passed, seconds during which no one dared say anything. Then, little by little, the White Skaven breathed in long gulps. His face gradually untensed. Finally, he opened his eyes, and said more calmly:

- Well, I shall go back to work, I have to write-compose a ritual. It will allow me to think about something else.

He got up and left the dining room, leaving his son alone with his wife and daughter.

Heike looked more sorry than annoyed. She asked:

- Is it really necessary to smash your head and stomach that way?

- I’ll hold on, Mother. I am a Black Skaven, I am more enduring than others.
- It’s so obvious! his sister quipped.
- Bianka, please, leave us.

The girl got up without a word and left the room. Once out, the Black Skaven changed his attitude. He seemed much sadder. His deep voice was strangled by sobs when he murmured:

- I know I look shabby, but it’s better like that.
- No, Siggy. Getting drunk is never “better”. You don’t have to play tough guy in front of me. Why do you feel obliged to drown yourself in wine?
- I am so tired, Mother. It hurts! At least, this way, I can’t feel anything anymore.
- But why, by Shallya’s pity, why does it hurt you so much? What is this problem that puts you in this state?

The ratwoman was beginning to lose patience.

- I see it well, we all see that you have a problem, Siggy, but if you don’t say what it is, we cannot do anything to help you solve it! And it is not by molesting yourself like that you’ll arrange things! So what?

The Black Skaven hit the table with his two fists clenched and shouted:

- I do not know!

The ratwoman became frightened. Sigmund was panting, his eyes bulging. For someone who wouldn’t have given him to the world, he would have been scary to watch. He looked down at his hands bruised by the wood, slowly loosened his fingers, and then collapsed on the furniture. He couldn’t speak anymore, only emit little sad whines. Heike went around the table, and stroke his back.

- Listen, I promise you that we will do all we can to help you, when you have told us precisely what is so painful to you.

The Black Skaven did not move, nor did he utter a single coherent syllable. His mother drew back, sighed, and lowered her head, distressed by her own impotence. She heard her son get up and leave.
the dining room. Alone in the big room with the crackling the flames in the fireplace for only company, she decided to take another cup of tea.

She moved to the tray where the cups and teapot were placed, reached for the little crafted container, but suspended her gesture. Her delicate Skaven sense of smell spotted an unusual odour, not unpleasant, but not part of the composition of the tea she had prepared herself.

*Looks like a medicine? A poison?*

Was it an attempted murder? Her heart beating, she lifted the lid of the teapot and sniffed more carefully. No, the smell did not come out of there. She realized that this fragrance was escaping from the cup in which her mate drank.

*All right, calm down, my daughter. You made this tea, you served it, only Psody touched his cup. So, it was he who put this in without your knowledge. But what is it? It’s ... strange, it reminds me of something.*

She concentrated. That’s when she remembered. Indeed, that smell had been part of her life for a while. While, at a very young age, she couldn’t yet speak Reikspiel, nor she couldn’t spend a night without reliving the horrors that the Feral Skaven had inflicted on her. Fortunately, Steiner had quickly noticed it. At his request, Romulus had given her each evening a bowl of hot milk, in which a few drops of a potion that lightened the mind were added, and this allowed her to sleep better.

*How did he call that again? Ah, yes! Esmeralda’s calming nectar!*

It has become all too clear: Psody was taking drugs. Certainly, a concoction relatively harmless, but actually present.

*I need to talk about this with Romulus!*

- Then the captain, furious, goes down to the hold, and shouts with all his might on the rowers: “You bunch of rascals! Come on, row, and stronger than that!” One of the sailors moans: “But, Captain, we wanted to tell you...” “Nothing at all! Two fucking days you row, we didn’t even leave
“The rower, exhausted, begs: “Captain, please, just two words!” “Right, two words, quickly!” “Cast off!”

The guards burst out laughing. Nedland filled his beer mug and swallowed the amber drink in a single gulp.

- Come on guys, we have to go back, said Jochen. It may not be war yet, but we must stay vigilant.

The men-at-arms left the inn, one by one, or in small groups. There remained only Nedland and Jochen. The Halfling raised his glass.

- Cheers, captain of my balls!
- Go fuck yourself, you dirty little thug! sneered the Human. You’ll finish on the block, and by me, bet on it!
- Oh no! I’ll die by poison.
- How can you be so sure?
- Because I will choose the precise moment of my death.
- Well, how would you do it?
- If ever I see my end arrive too slowly or too painfully for my taste, I just have to break the false tooth I have in the bottom of my mouth. It will release a very violent poison gas that kill me right away.

The tall man raised his eyebrows.

- You do have a dose of poison in your mouth?
- I have.
- And since when?
- About fifteen years. I’ll say more, there is enough poison in to kill someone who would be within reach of my breath. I call it “Nedland’s Last Trick”.
- You’re taking me for a ride, naughty midget. How could you have a hollow tooth and gobble food like a pig without breaking it, if you’ve had it for fifteen years?
- Because I have been training since then to always chew on the same side, big idiot. As I’m doing right now.
- And you've never been afraid to bite the bad tooth?

- I first spent a year with a false tooth that contained blueberry juice. I broke two, but when I ended up not touching it, I had it replaced by the one charged with poison.

- You're totally insane.

- If I had been given a gold coin each time I was told that, I would be at the head of all the Renegade Crowns!

- And that would be their end, then completed a voice.

Nedland and Jochen pivoted simultaneously, and discovered Kristofferson’s silhouette in the doorway. The latter had an impassive expression.

- I came to say goodbye, my friends.

- Are you leaving us?

- I’m leaving for Wüstengrenze. It is time to assume the consequences of my actions. I’ll be back in six months, time to reorganize the spot and make it a place worthy.

The two friends nodded. Jochen got up and shook hands with the brown Skaven.

- So, good luck, my brother! May Uric protect you!

Kristofferson looked down at Nedland, who asked in a hesitant tone:

- How is he?

- How do you think he is? answered the brown Skaven harshly.

- Maybe we shouldn’t have let him raise his elbow at this point?

- It’s nice from you to worry about it, Jochen, but Sigmund is mature enough to know how to temper. At least, that’s what I thought until yesterday!

- Have fun, big boy, Nedland concluded.
- Do you understand why it’s so important for me to go there?
- Eeyup, I do...

Kristofferson felt his patience diminish. It had been two whole minutes since he had the impression of wasting his own saliva. The atmosphere of his brother’s bedroom was still saturated with the toxic fumes of alcohol, even with the windows wide open.

- And so... hey, Siggy?

The tall Black Skaven had just served himself a glass of wine for the third time. His hand was shaking. Kristofferson raised his voice.

- Did you hear what I told you, or not?

Sigmund jumped, pinched his lips, before uttering a powerful eructation.

- By Verena’s balance, Siggy! I’m talking to you seriously, and you’re drunk again? I remind you that you are noble blood! You must behave like the grandson of a Prince, not like a drunkard!

These words immediately inflamed the already heated nervous system of the young Black ratman. He jumped up and tapped his palm on the table.

- I don’t need that, right? I already have Father, Mother, Bianka and Opa Ludwig behind me! So, the “big-benevolent-and-responsible-of-his-younger-brother”, shut up!

- You’re ruining your own health, Siggy!

Sigmund gritted his teeth.

- Damn you, Kit! You have no idea what I’m living! Every time I close my eyes, I see the face of this little girl who was cut-throated in front of me, and I was not able to do anything to avoid that! You didn’t live such a situation!
Kristofferson’s patience reached its limits. He answered in a voice whose tone went up as the words came:

- No, indeed. I saw an entire village slaughtered by the Orcs. They were far too numerous. The only thing that helped me out was the intervention of a racist, jerk captain! The worst part of it is that I could have avoided that, if I only had the idea to shelter the villagers for the night. I’ll have to live with that on my heart for the rest of my life, and I accept it! I’m leaving for Wüstengrenze to make myself useful and make it a real garrison. So, excuse me for preferring to go forward instead of whining over the victims!

Surprised by such violence, the Black Skaven calmed down. He repeated:

- A... “racist, jerk captain”?

- The captain who could have avoided this tragedy if he had taken the villagers seriously from the beginning doesn’t like Skaven. And when I reported it to Schmetterling, I had the impression to disturb him!

Sigmund piaffed like an old horse, but seemed to worry more frankly. The brown Skaven took the opportunity to restart the attack on the issue that concerned him:

- Listen, Siggy, all I want is your well-being.

- It’s very nice from you to worry, but I’m fine, okay? I am a Black Skaven, I am more enduring than you, I hold on. And the day I’ll need a shoulder to really “whine” on, it will not be yours! Now, get out of my room! Go and take care of your garrison, and leave me alone!

Kristofferson lowered his head, and dragged his way through the door. Before closing it, he murmured again:

- Maybe this is the last time we see each other, Siggy.

- Don’t bullshit me!

- I’m serious. What if the Orcs come back more numerous? Do you want our last conversation to end in an argument?

The brown Skaven only had time to slam the door to avoid receiving on his snout the wooden goblet thrown at him by the Black Skaven. He breathed slowly to calm the rhythm of his heart, and just saw out loud:
- I guess it is a “yes”.

Before going down the stairs and leave the family home.
Worries of Tomorrow

Daughters and Sons of the Horned Rat,

I pray you to forgive me, I had some minor annoyances in recent weeks. Nothing serious, don’t worry about that, but what to delay somewhat my work. No doubt the effect of Geheimnisnacht...

Anyway, I didn’t stop the writing, on the contrary. I admit that this chapter has caused me some problems of “white page syndrome”. I hope the fanfiction won’t lose in quality, and that I won’t lose your kind attention.

Thank you for your loyalty, the adventure continues and won’t definitively stop too early.

Glory to the Horned Rat!

Morrslieb was high in the sky, while Mannslieb was declining. For the people of the Old World, this alignment was a bad omen. Every citizen of the Empire, every inhabitant of the country of the High Elves, Norsca, Lustria, to the icy and mortal mountains of Naggaroth, everyone knew the harmful influence of the warpstone moon. Only the Feral Skaven didn’t curse its sight. And so, the guards patrolling the streets, around Steinerburg and on the castle walls, were always more vigilant during this period, even if they were not always aware of it. Superstitions often generate contradictory or beneficial behaviours. Who could say?

Larn, in any case, tried to keep this idea in mind. For him, as for his people, Morrslieb bore good luck.

Larn of Clan Eshin was about to accomplish the greatest of all exploits, and make all his peers die of envy and admiration. He had prepared himself for six long moons, had concocted the most violent poisons, grinded his sharpest knives. Then there was the journey to the hideout of the infamous Psody, the greatest traitor of the Sons of the Horned Rat, the Blasphemous One, before finally reaching his hutch.

While delicately sharpening the blade of his dagger in the darkness one more time, the dark grey
Skaven recalled the previous few nights.

His Nightleader had declared it in front of all the members of Clan Eshin of the community: the whole Country of the Apostates to the Horned Rat was a trap. These false brothers had been removed out of their legitimate burrows when they were mere pups, and more, had also been deprived of the future of the Skaven race. The men-things had violated their domains, and then captured the Sons of the Horned Rat.

These could have been forgiven by the Skaven god if they had just been loosely eliminated, before they were old enough to defend themselves. But the worst had happened: the men-things had turned them to larvae, poor soft slugs, unable to fully feel the luck they had to be the instruments of a god as fair and perfect as the Horned Rat. The Nightleader had said it in a voice tensed with anger and sorrow: the Skaven had fallen to become men-things.

Larn couldn’t bring himself to believe such an aberration. How could real Skaven show such cowardice, such weakness, such ingratitude? No, the Nightleader couldn’t have told the truth. He had lied. Or he had been lied to. But when the dark grey-haired Skaven had been volunteer to leave the burrow to end the life of the Blasphemous One, he had sunk into this province of the surface that was nicknamed the “Rat Kingdom”. And he had seen with his own eyes the true horror.

Thus, tamed by the men-things Skaven behaved like them! They dressed with the same clothes, spoke the same language, and on top of that, had the nerve to fully live this way! None seemed ready to break his chains, regain the Under-Empire and claim what was his right. None seemed unhappy at the idea of being reduced to the status of poor, harmless sheep.

Everything was the fault of the Blasphemous One. He would pay very soon. And the price would be his life.

Larn didn’t have much difficulty in reaching the main city where men-things and traitors used to coexist. The hardest thing was to move in the open air. These miserable false Skaven didn’t have tunnels. They were therefore forced to bear the offensive light of the sun. He had moved only at night, and had taken care to quickly dig a burrow to hide as soon as the horizon cleared. But he had taken the time to observe the false Skaven. These didn’t seem at all bothered by the celestial, hated by the Sons of the Horned Rat fireball. On the contrary, they laughed, they lived without thinking of fighting to determinate who the strongest was. They were all softened, unable to honour their Clan in any way. Anyway, they didn’t have any Clan. No Skryre technology, no Eshin trick and intelligence, no Moulder flesh improvements, and no Pestilens concoctions. And above all, no spiritual guide chosen by the Horned Rat to guide them. Once, in a hamlet, he had even seen from a distance a gathering of men-things around a small altar dedicated to one of their shabby gods, and the Skaven had sat in the service with the same passion as the men-things had shown!
All were really doomed to be roaches, happy to be exploited by men-things. And the main culprit was the worst of all the traitors: a White Skaven!

Just by thinking of such ingratitude, Larn felt his blood boiling. Thousands of Skaven were ready to kill to be born with the Grace of the Horned Rat. No, in fact, all the Skaven were ready to kill, except for the weak and the foolish. And this one proved the latest ingratitude by thus disdaining the most sacred gift of the only true God.

It was time for all this sacrilegious folly to stop.

The great city of men-things where the Blasphemous One was hidden was equipped with a sewerage system. Everything was new, it was work crafted by dwarf-things, no doubt. They had first brought vital water through a huge aqueduct and then built this network to allow it to circulate. A lot of work that had probably mobilized a lot of labourers.

Larn didn’t know it, but the Dwarves who had developed this system had to work “quickly”, and content themselves with doing the essentials, without any decoration. They had not been particularly pleased with the result, but Steiner had given them enough money to lull their pride. The people of Steinerburg had wanted solid, practical and efficient sewers quickly, they were not as demanding as the Karak people.

This network had allowed the Skaven of Clan Eshin to sneak up safely to the edge of the traitor’s property. Thick grills encased in the ducts had prevented him from going further, but he was determined not to let himself be stopped. He had waited for the night to slip out of the sewers and lead into a dark impasse a few yards from the entrance.

It was time to take action. The sight of Morrslieb’s green glow warmed his heart. He was going to fill his Clan with pride and admiration.

First, he had to get inside. Piece of cheese cake for the Gutter Runner. After three jumps, he was on the roof of the large building facing the perimeter wall that circled the estate. He quickly spotted three sentinels patrolling each one of its side. He smiled cruelly; his plan just gained a new possibility.

He took momentum, and made an immense leap to receive himself with suppleness on the rampart. He slipped silently to the porch of one of the turrets crossed by the walkway. Quickly, he jumped to hide under a big support beam. Then he waited, ordering his heart to slow down. It only took a handful of seconds to it to beat the measure as if nothing had happened.
The sound of footsteps increased, louder and louder. The shadow of a softened Skaven stood out under the semicircle of the porch. By the time it was right under the Gutter Runner, its life stopped. Larn slumped down on it, and in the movement slapped a hand over its mouth, before slitting its throat with a jerk of his curved dagger with his other hand. The prey didn’t have time to understand that it was already dead, and flaccid on the arms of the Eshin Skaven. Larn hurriedly took off its chainmail and its helmet to put them on. He glanced over the parapet, inward. A huge park surrounded the property where the Blasphemous One was miserably hiding. With bushes.

Larn had to hold back a sneer. He made sure to be out of sight of the other guards, then dropped the body of his new victim in a big bush. The remains disappeared in a rustle of foliage.

That was almost too easy.

Larn observed for a long minute the other guards, thus assimilating their way. Then, he tried to keep himself upright, as man-things did needlessly. This piece of armour forced him to do it, anyway. He picked up the spear that fell on the carved stone, threw up his chest, and took the path that probably the freshly dead sentry should have followed. He entered the field of view of the other guards. Now was the moment of truth. His helmet concealed his features, and he managed to walk back to the green moon as much as he could. His heart was pounding at once with apprehension and excitement when he was within earshot of a traitor-Skaven.

He crossed it.

This one didn’t react.

One step further, then two, then three...

Still no reaction.

This time, victory was ineluctable.

Of course, he couldn’t enter frankly in the property, his belonging to the Under-Empire, and therefore his physical and mental superiority, would be noticed. Which would cause the Blasphemous One to hide behind his army and his magic. But he wouldn’t continue playing the traitor-Skaven game for long.
He spotted a dark corner in a backyard, next to the property. He could go there, get rid of the stuff made by men-things, then reach the Blasphemous One window, and put an end to his miserable existence.

He paused for a brief moment, to find the round wall staircase which was the closest to the big house, visualised the path to take, the one that would allow him to stay as much as possible in the shade, and set off, the slight clatter of his outfit partially concealed by the distant singing of an owl.

While approaching, he took care especially not to slow down the pace of his steps, nor accelerate. The guards were on the lookout for the slightest suspicious movement, the least unusual attitude. He had to be invisible. Stay upright, and stay calm. The small insects that usually fled the burrows streaked the night with their unpleasant buzz, which tickled Larn’s sensitive eardrums. But he had heard worse. Above him, a bat flew, and even gave a little cry echoing the owl’s ululation. That was a good omen more.

Larn felt his ear spin as the night bird burst the silence with its characteristic sound again. The Gutter Runner was more accustomed to scraping caverns, noisy rattling of huge tregaras, or subterranean rivers water flow. He nevertheless found with relief this particular sound. Men-things made water flow by statues bearing the image of their feeble deities and their pathetic heroes. He precisely distinguished some of these weak idols.

Finally, he found himself in the backyard. The owls continued their choir, it became almost annoying. One of them even sang not far from his position, so much so that he slipped in a moment behind a pile of bundles of wood, faster than a snake.

He let a long minute pass, then when he decided that there was definitely nothing to fear, he put down his spear, let his chainmail slip to the ground, then his helmet. Finally, he looked at the big building.

*Lots of glazed openings. Only one leads to the Blasphemous One. I must not be wrong-wrong!*

And to avoid that, there was a simple and effective way.

Larn took out of his pocket a fragment of cloth that his Nightleader had given him. In its fibres was impregnated the smell of the Blasphemous One. He stuck the silky piece of fabric in his nostrils, and inhaled frankly several times. Once he was sure of himself, he took the fabric off his muzzle
and ate it in one bite. Then he concentrated, and soon the smell was as clear to him as if a cloud of fireflies had materialized in front of the right window.

*Fourth floor!*

And as if the Horned Rat himself wanted to help him, a thick, black cloud passed in front of Morrslieb. A shadow engulfed irresistibly the surroundings. It was now or never.

Larn leaped from hiding secretly to the foot of the wall. The rough stones and the timbering were so many catches that facilitated his ascent. He glanced at the park. Nobody seemed to have spotted him. The sentinels were still patrolling. He reached the window.

The Eshin assassin had already killed men-things in full sleep. He had all the necessary tools to clear any obstacle in silence, including the windows. First, we had to open the shutters. He fumbled in his satchel, took out a small iron bar with a hook, and tried to lift the latch that held the shutters. He slowly turned one of the wooden panels. Then he gently grasped between his fingers a small piece of diamond, and cut cleanly a hole in the glass panel with. He was able to pass his hand through the opening, and open the window. Then he entered the room, making sure to receive himself as lightly as possible on the wooden floor.

The room was still dark, but Larn could analyse it. It was spacious, included some furniture. A tissue carpet insulated his toes from the floorboards. And a few yards away, no more than half a dozen, the Gutter Runner spotted a bed.

However, the sense that reacted mostly was not his sight, but his sense of smell.

No mistake.

The characteristic odour of the Blasphemous One floated in the room.

*He’s there! Don’t know precisely-precisely where, but he is there! You’re dead-dead!*

Larn looked at the bed. He knew that men-things slept on mattresses laid on this kind of wooden frame. The traitor had adopted the same custom, without any doubt. He distinctly saw a shape nestled under the sheets, and his smile stretched into a frightful grimace when he spotted two long horns that protruded to rest on the pillow. He put his hand on his belt, closed his fingers on the
handle of his dagger, and took it out of his scabbard, millimetre after millimetre. When the blade of iron covered with dried blood was at the height of his muzzle, he drew a small vial from one of his pockets with his free hand, uncorked it, and poured over the whole length of his weapon the poison that he had concocted. Manticore venom mixed with warp bat blood, with some glitter of warpstone. No chance of survival for whoever received even a drop in its heart.

Larn carefully wrapped his tail around the dagger’s handle, slowly flexed his legs, and concentrated. He mentally calculated the energy he would have to put in his legs to make a jump long enough to land next to the bed. In the swing, he would take a turn on himself, and whip down his dagger on his target. The Blasphemous One would only take a few seconds to die. He would take his head, and bring it back to Skavenblight, and win the finest reward a Skaven could dream. Dozens of breeders, mountains of warpstone, and perhaps a place in the Council of Thirteen? Everything was at hand.

Once he was sure of it, he took a deep breath and started. The poisoned blade zinged to the bed. But instead of the short, dry noise that usually sounded when a knife was stuck in a piece of meat, there was a loud bang and a disturbing hiss, while a cloud of gas escaped from the bed and rose quickly to the nostrils of the Gutter Runner. Distraught, Larn felt his legs wobbling under his weight. The whole world twisted around him. He felt dizzy. It was then that he saw a silhouette bending over him, the figure of a Skaven with its face covered with a metal mask resembling those of Clan Skryre globadiers. He just had time to notice two horns above the mask, then the world collapsed around him.

An icy slap woke up the Eshin with a start.

- So, you really thought you could carve me so easily?

Larn shook vigorously his head. He had such a headache that for a moment he was afraid of having his head split in two. He opened widely his eyes, and saw two Skaven. The first, the closest to him, was a Stormvermin. Much taller and stronger than he was, it still held in its hands the bucket of water from which it had just cast the contents on his face. It wore a tunic with puffed sleeves, like those of men-things. But its figure seemed bulky under the coloured stuffs. Its gaze didn’t suggest any compassion. The Eshin quickly focused on the second, and his blood just boiled.

The Blasphemous One was in front of him. He was ridiculously small, and skinny. Really, the Horned Rat had doubly a strange idea in granting his most sacred blessing to an individual as weak physically and with such treacherous ideas. Really, he was not terrifying, he was just a shabby little ingrate.
And yet there was in his pink eyes a determination Larn had never seen anywhere, not even in his Nightleader’s or Warlord. How could someone so inconsistent demonstrate such assurance? His only small, weakling body was a great reason to be ashamed to live.

The slightly faint tone of his voice translated more frankly this inner strength.

- You’re pretty talented, Eshin. Good equipment, a certain ability to have managed to go up to my apartments... Your Nightleader has trained you well. But not enough. And now, you are our prisoner, in the back of the best kept barracks in the whole Rat Kingdom. You have no chance of escaping, so forget your hopes straight away.

The Gutter Runner lowered his muzzle, and fully realized the situation in which he was: tied to a torture easel, completely naked, his ankles and wrists tight to hurt by thick metal bracelets. The White Skaven continued:

- I understand your purpose. You have been sent to reduce me to silence. And you almost succeeded. I expected it, and for that, I’m not angry. I would almost like to congratulate you, if you had not killed a brave soldier and put the life of my family in danger. Normally, my wife sleeps by my side. If I had been in this bed with her, I suppose you would have killed her, too? No annoying witness, and anyway, the Eshin love to see the blood squirt. You threatened my love. And that, for me, is unforgivable.

Larn was appalled, but like all the Skaven that were caught, he wouldn’t let his fear appear.

- You’re the Blasphemous One, Psody! Traitor-impostor!

Psody advanced calmly, stood beside the easel, and whispered in a honeyed voice:

- Ah, I’m a traitor-impostor? And you, you think you’re better than I am? Do you know how we use to call you guys from the Under-Empire? “Feral Skaven”. For us, you are brutes-assassins, rapist-devourers, a wretched vermin we vowed to exterminate. That’s right-right, I’m a traitor, and I turned my back on all of this when I realised it wouldn’t lead us anywhere. The more I obeyed my master, the more I was proud to serve him. The more I was proud to serve him, the more he hated me. Until the day he ordered my execution! I escaped his anger. I understood that all that stimulates the Skaven of the Under-Empire is only fear-hate! But it leads to destruction, nothing else! If they continue like this, the members of your kindred will eventually destroy themselves! But it’s something you’re not close to understand, are you? Your Nightleader
doesn’t see it, neither your Warlord, nor the Grey Seer of your burrow! Even the Council of Thirteen did not understand it. Otherwise, they would have stopped everything for a long time! But their inability to question themselves will cause the doom-doom of the Under-Empire!

The Gutter Runner was shaken. It was then that he remembered the advice of his Nightleader: “Beware, the Blasphemous One is able to bewitch you with poisonous-toxic words! Above all, do not listen, because it will make you doubt the Horned Rat!” The Horned Rat... Yes! He absolutely had to cling to the only true Skaven guide. Also, he yelped:

- The Horned Rat is furious with you!
- Are you sure?
- He told me!
- Did he? To a common Eshin? Don’t make me laugh-laugh!

The White Skaven knew the psychology of his former peers as well. His trick worked. The prisoner spat:

- My master told me!

Larn realised what he just had done, and panicked again. He closed his mouth, and didn’t emit any sound more.

- Who is your master?
- ...
- Do not force him to repeat! Sigmund barked.

Larn jumped when he heard the voice of the Black Skaven for the first time. He loosened his teeth to defend himself:

- I saw how the Skaven behave here, filthy traitor! You turned them to poor sheep! Miserable slugs unable to defend themselves or to honour the Horned Rat! You have deceived them.

- I deceived no one. If they really want to live in the Under-Empire, let them go. But they won’t, because they know what they will become if they integrate-integrate it.
- They will be true Sons of the Horned Rat! For now, they are weak-shabby!

- They are happy-fulfilled. It makes them much stronger. Skaven people have every interest in collaborating-harmonizing with the Human people if they want to live. This Rat Kingdom is the proof of it. What you saw is only the beginning, Eshin. One day, we’ll be an entire people, big enough to subdue you and force you to change-change. You shall all live, but no more Council of Thirteen, no more Clans, no more warpstone, and no more violence. Whatever you think, we’ll do it. Now, for the last time: who is your master?

Larn no longer pronounced a syllable. Psody leaned toward the prisoner, taking care not to be within range of his fangs. He narrowed his eyes, and murmured:

- You know that before being this “Blasphemous One”, I was a Grey Seer. A Chosen-Chosen One of the Horned Rat. My master was Grey Vellux Prophet. He used to boast of being Thanquol’s son. You know Thanquol, don’t you? The whole Under-Empire knows Thanquol. All that Thanquol knew, he transmitted it to Vellux. And Vellux taught me everything he had learned from Thanquol. And I was a very skilled student. I killed my first slave when I was only two seasons old.

Sigmund was jubilant. He knew there were a lot of lies in what his father had just said. But for a Feral Skaven, it was credible. Moreover, he had put such a conviction in his words that someone who knew him only by reputation couldn’t deny it.

- I know Clan Eshin Skaven are trained to resist pain-pain. My blood brother Klur was one of them. He was gifted, but my other blood brother Chitik killed him. I don’t know how he did, but he did indeed. And if a Black Skaven tied to me by blood can kill another Skaven tied to himself by blood, can you imagine what I can do to a Skaven who doesn’t even have a blood tie with me? Come on, you’re smarter than that, Eshin. I want to know what your name is, who your Nightleader is, what is the name of the Warlord who rules your burrow, and the location of the place where your bunch is hiding. If you tell me all this right now-now, I may be willing to let you go without too much pain. Otherwise, you’ll have very big problems, and that’s for sure-certain! So?

As his answer, Larn inhaled, and spat with all his might to the Blasphemous One. The White Skaven didn’t lose his calm so far. He wiped his cheek worthily, and murmured:

- Siggy?

The Black Skaven advanced as well, and inflicted the assassin a violent slap that stunned him. The whole world fell around Larn, who heard nothing more. He nevertheless perceived the voice of the traitor to the Horned Rat who articulated:
- Very well. If you want to play-play whoever will crack up first, we will play-play.

- This fellow is definitively so obstinate!
- He was trained to, Father.
- Maybe, but now...

Ludwig Steiner didn’t really know what to think of the show that was offered to him. He could see through the bars the prisoner, still attached to the easel. Near it, a musician was playing flute, under the watchful eye of Sigmund who was standing near the Feral Skaven, his arms crossed. The Human played a rather merry air, and tried to stay focused despite the prisoner’s grunts, hisses, and screeches.

- It’s been over an hour since this concert lasts!

The Prince spoke to the minstrel.

- Sorry to impose you such a bad audience, my friend!
- Your Majesty may be reassured, a real artist must be able to exercise his art in any circumstance! And then, it’s not every day that I get paid for a simple rehearsal!

And he resumed his music more beautifully, and the prisoner Eshin moaned more. Sigmund displayed a scornful grin. On the other hand, his grandfather had some doubts:

- Are you sure this to work?

- Feral Skaven hate the sound of flute, you know it. It reminds them of the legend of this flutist who vanquished an entire army by hypnotizing them with his bewitched music.

- Maybe, but even if he’s an enemy and he’s trying to kill you, I do not particularly like to see him suffer. It’s still torture, Psody.

- The only thing tortured is his superstition-naivety. If I wanted, I could torture him in a way that would be far more violent-brutal than that. Vellux was a good teacher. And don’t forget he could
have hurt your daughter.

- Yeah... Anyway, I don’t want to question your knowledge of the inhabitants of the Under-Empire, but it seems to me to remain impervious to this attempt.

- Alas, I’m afraid you’re right-right, maybe it’s time to change the method?

Psody entered the cage, and stared at the prisoner with a stern eye. He applied to stretch his mouth in a disturbing smile.

- Rather thick-headed-thick-headed, huh? Never mind! Let’s try the next step, shall we?

Larn was detached and pushed to the deepest cellar in the barracks. It was a big low ceiling room. For all furniture, there was a forged metal throne attached to the centre, with wrist, ankle and neck bracelets. Sigmund firmly forced the Feral Skaven to sit down, then tied him unceremoniously. The handcuffs clicked coldly as the Blasphemous One explained, still an ugly smile on his lips:

- This room was designed for the most recalcitrant Sons of the Horned Rat. I can assure you that you’ll tell us your whole life since the day you left the nursery when we have finished-finished.

Two men-things, one of them had its chin covered with an impressive tuft of hair, brought a pot with a strong odour emanating from. The two Skaven recoiled, and the two men-things swayed the contents of the pot on Larn. The Feral Skaven was covered with a thick mash that exhaled an awful smell that reminded him of the day he had ventured into the Pestilens Pit. The two men-things took care of spreading the odious mixture over his whole body with the help of large brushes, and then withdrew.

The Blasphemous One leaned toward Larn.

- I leave you. You may have survived music, but you won’t be able to resist-endure them.

And he hurried away to the door, followed by the Stormvermin. The door slammed shut, the key was turned in the lock. Larn felt his heart beat so strongly it was about to break his ribs. What would those cursed traitors to the Horned Rat be preparing for him?

A small hinge gnashing caught his attention. He turned his head painfully, and saw at the foot of
the wall a small trap, two feet high, which had just risen, revealing a dark opening.

Larn then heard a slight snoring. Then a short, sharp, whiny sound echoed through the cellar. Instinctively, he understood without believing that it was one of the worst dangers that the valiant Skaven people could fear. And his worst suspicions blazed into a terrifying certainty when he saw the glimmers of little wicked eyes watching him. A pair of eyes. No, two, three, four...

*By the Horned Rat! NO!* 

A small hairy creature with a long, wavy tail, entered the room. Its four legs didn’t emit the slightest sound as it moved over the cold stone. It raised its head, revealing two big eyes that looked at him with greed. It licked its lips, eager to snatch a finger or an ear from the Eshin. A second creature sprang up, and advanced towards the chair. Larn felt his bladder empty at the sight of three other striped monsters. The Skaven moaned at the sight of the quivering whiskers, the small, pointed like needles teeth, and the claws concealed in the legs of these ignoble beasts.

- Ah... Oh... No! Stop! Go away! Get out-out!

He moved with all his strength on his chair, despite the shackles. He yelped, foamed, tried to spit on the little furry horrors. But these monstrous things were not afraid of him. Or rather, they seemed too hungry to give up such a feast.

One of them then uttered a long, high yowl, which was echoed by the others. Larn’s blood froze, his opened so widely eyes threatened to fall to the ground. Mad with horror, the Eshin writhed with all his strength, so much so that the iron of the handcuffs that held him scratched his skin.

- Help-help! Mercy-mercy, get me out of there!

The door opened, and the voice of the White Skaven rang out in the room:

- What is your name?
- Larn! Larn of Clan Eshin!
- Who is your chief, Larn of Clan Eshin?
- I… must not…
- Tell me his name, or my faithful pets will eat you alive!

The Eshin didn’t think more. His survival instinct triumphed over his Gutter Runner pride.

- Dalwos! Dalwos! It’s Lord Dalwos!

There was no answer. One of the vicious creatures climbed onto Larn’s lap, which shook himself to make it away.

- It’s Dalwos of Clan Skab! Dalwos of Clan Skab!

The Stormvermin spoke in turn:

- What about Blokfiste of Clan Moulder? Where is Blokfiste?
- Don’t know! Don’t know any Blokfiste! Don’t like Moulder!
- And your Nightleader? Who is your Nightleader?
- Don’t know his name! Strong-scary! Cruelty without limit! Scares even demons!

It was again the Blasphemous One who questioned him.

- And your burrow? Where is it?
- I don’t know!
- Don’t bullshit-screw me! You have not reached my home by flying from Skavenblight! Where is your colony?
- Can not say! I... was... brought by... other Skaven. Have brought me... to a point... where I have to find them! But... do not know... way between terrier... and this place!

Larn squeaked again when one of the monsters poked his tail.

On the other side of the door, the two Skavens and the Prince concerted. Steiner, indisposed by the screaming of the prisoner, grumbled:
- Are you sure we can believe him?

- Given the state in which he is, I think so. The Eshin are careful not to divulge-reveal too much information to their goons, so if they get caught, they’ll talk less. His Nightleader may hide his name to his own minions.

- And on the fact that he does not know where his lair is?

- It is very possible that a group of Feral Skaven put him blindfolded a few days walk from here. He would have come back to the same place with my head so he could have been picked up.

- It is a possibility. Hey, but what if this Dalwos of Clan Skab had decided to abandon him?

- And lose any chance to get the prize-reward? Feral Skaven are pitiless to their weak-losers, Father, but they are not all stupid.

- What’s so special about this Clan Skab? asked Marjan.

- It’s a minor Clan, one of the most important with Clan Mors. Its members are mainly well-trained and sturdy warriors. They produce more Stormvermin than the others, and sell them willingly to whoever can pay.

- Mercenaries? Jochen wondered. They know the concept of dogs of war?

The White Skaven stared at the young man with a little cynical look.

- It seems you’re forgetting Feral Skaven make use of anything-anyone.

Marjan rubbed her chin.

- Your Highness, we should perhaps convince him to take us to this rendezvous spot?

- Um... Maybe, indeed. But I have to think about it.

Sigmund felt more and more embarrassed by the ordeal the poor Eshin was enduring. The cries and tears eroded his eardrums.

- In the meantime, if he really said everything, I guess we scared him enough!

- Father? asked the White Skaven.
The Prince waved his hand.

- Come on, that’s enough. Put him back in a cell.

Larn was scared to death. He cried without restraint, and begged the Horned Rat to grant him a quick death. Suddenly, the door opened. The two men-things entered, followed by the Stormvermin. The two men-things clapped their hands, whistled, and yelled to ward off the monsters. The Gutter Runner expected them to jump on the big Black Skaven and cut it to pieces. But no smell of fear oozed from it. On the contrary, it remained very calm. The terror of the Eshin gradually turned into a supreme stupefaction when he saw the Mighty walk among the hungry creatures without the least hesitation, and without being attacked. Worse, it leaned forward and took one in each hand to drop them out of the room. It evacuated a good half-dozen of them so.

When there was only one cursed creature left, The Stormvermin picked it up gently and presented it under Larn’s nose. He no longer knew what to think. Fascinated by the glittering eyes, he jumped when the voice of the Black Skaven said:

- A good lesson for you, idiot-moron: cats do not represent the least danger for rats sized like you.

Fear quickly gave way to a terrible anger. Furious at having been fooled in this way, Larn burst into angry sobs again, and a torrent of insults, all more colourful, spurt out of his mouth. It was intense, but brief: a punch of Jochen on his neck stopped at once his invectives.
Bitterness

Three knocks sounded on the door of the little house. It was a home in the Hammer Quarter, where shopkeepers and members of the guard with a family used to live. Not one of the largest mansions, but maintained with military rigour. The door was opened by a ratwoman with features weighted by fatigue and sadness. She had to raise her eyes, surprised to face such a tall interlocutor.

- Frau Tenenbaum?

- Yes, who are you? the ratwoman asked in an exhausted voice.

- Captain Marjan Gottlieb, I represent the princely stewardess.

Without saying a word, Mrs. Tenenbaum let in the tall blonde woman and guided her to the living room. The latter couldn’t help feeling butterflies in her stomach when she saw in a corner of the room a young ratman barely older than the last son of the Master Mage who was hugging two girls younger than he was. They were crying without restraint on his shoulders.

Conscious of doing a dirty job, Marjan decided to abbreviate.

- Your husband has nobly accomplished his duty. Thanks to him, we arrested a dangerous criminal.

- I thank you, Lady Gottlieb, but what’s the point? Whether he died in battle or in the arms of his mistress, the result is the same! What will we become? Our Human parents are dead, the four of them! I don’t have any work, my children are still too young for this! We are done!

Marjan hesitated between compassion and annoyance. Other poorer families had already their children at work although they were younger than hers. She took a purse full of gold crowns from her satchel.

- Here, take that. This is the double of the monthly salary of your husband. And I invite you to go to the barracks treasury the first day of each month, from now on. You will be given the same amount of money, until the end of your days. It won’t get your husband back, but at least you won’t be in need.

The ratwoman calmed down a little. The blonde woman took the opportunity to continue:

- The Master Mage is aware of being indebted to this soldier. That’s why he’s willing to help you if
you need someday.

- Oh, excuse me if I could appear...

- No, Mrs Tenenbaum. You don’t have to apologize. On the other hand, if you allow me, I have some instructions to give you.

- Yes?

Marjan took her breath, and tried to explain:

- Where there is a Feral Skaven, there may be others. This one was an isolated killer, but maybe it has partners. For the sake of all, it is better to avoid for the moment that this story gets out. Humans and Skaven can panic, and this could create serious tension between our two races. There is probably no very important group, otherwise we would have spotted them, I guess. We shall organize patrols in the sewers. That’s the ways they use, they cannot afford to walk to the surface. But I’ll ask you all to remain vigilant. If you hear any unusual noise, if you smell a strange odour, if something really weird catches your attention, I’ll ask you to come and tell us immediately. And above all, stay discreet. If someone questions you about this, answer your husband was killed by a fugitive Human criminal. Understood?

Mrs. Tenenbaum nodded without saying a word. It was then that the boy released his sisters and approached Marjan.

- Captain Gottlieb, can you tell us... how it happened?

- Do you really want me to describe the whole scene?

- I would like to know how you arrested his killer.

The tall woman pouted.

- Indeed, you have the right to know that, anyway. You allow me to sit down?

On the invitation of Mrs. Tenenbaum, the captain took a seat on a stool and began her story:

“Larn’s mistake was to think like a Feral Skaven, and not to put himself in the shoes of a Skaven of Vereinbarung – manner of speaking, Skaven usually don’t wear shoes. So, he sneaked in, he stole your husband’s gear, but there is one thing he didn’t think about: the smell. Larn went through the sewers, he still had the smell of dirty water and garbage on him, but he was not paying attention,
because he is used to this smell, and thought it was the same thing of all Skaven living in the city. A brother-in-arms of your husband, Private Ernst Sonnenkopf, felt it, which puzzled him. Then he followed the instructions asked in case of unusual detail: he imitated three times in succession the howling of an owl. The other guards heard him, and responded in the same way. This alarm signal has reached the property. A servant woke up the Master Mage and the Prince. They then applied the security directive."

“A few months ago, the Master Mage asked his son to craft a Feral Skaven trap for him: a leather bladder grain bag-sized filled with a gas of his invention. This booby-trap is always ready to be used in a small closet. Prospero and his wife hid, after leaving the balloon in their bed, with even a fake pair of horns on the pillow. When the killer came in, he thought he was looking at the Master Mage under the sheets. He threw himself on him to stab him, and burst the balloon. The gas that was inside quickly put him to sleep.”

“Since we arrived here, we are prepared to welcome people like him. His target could only be the Master Mage. No Feral Skaven would leave his burrow to venture so far into the Renegade Crowns, except to catch the only Skaven to have left their society to live among the Humans. The only question was: "when?" Now we know it.”

Marjan stood for a moment at the eyes of the four pairs of eyes of the Tenenbaum family, then stood up. She didn’t want to stay longer.

- Now, if you don’t mind, I leave. Good luck.

The Skaven widow didn’t answer, could just blow her nose. Marjan found herself outside. But as she took the reins of her horse, she saw the little young man approaching.

- Captain, in a few months, I will have reached my majority. I want to honour my father! Tell me I can serve under your orders!

The tall woman opened wide eyes surprised.

- You can’t be serious, son?

- I am very serious! I want to join the army!

Marjan ran her hand over his face.

- Wait, I think you do not realize the whole stuff. If you really want to honour your father, don’t do what he did.
- Why, why? I have been thinking about it, I want to fight!

- You didn’t think at all, otherwise you would have already seen that you would condemn your family! You want to engage yourself on a path whose consequences remain totally unknown to you.

- The Master Mage is indebted to us! That’s what you told my mother! I want him to integrate me in your regiment! I want to become a soldier! I want to make myself useful against this misfortune!

- So, stay with your family, son.

The young ratman winced.

- You think I’m not able to, don’t you? I am a man, a real one!

- That’s not the point.

- And you? Would you have become a captain if you had listened to someone who tried to discourage you? What did your parents say?

These words brutally heated the backbone of the tall woman. She put her hand on the Skaven’s arm, looked at him in his eyes, so intensely, that his expression became hesitant. As she felt a fault, she didn’t hesitate to exploit it.

- What is your name?

- My name is Holger. At your command!

- So, listen carefully to me, Holger Tenenbaum: first, you’re not at my command. Then, your mother has just experienced the worst moment of her life, and your sisters too, and I guess you did too. Don’t forget that joining the army is risking your ass every day. Losing her husband is a very tough ordeal. Losing a child... no parent can experience worse suffering. If you really want to be “a man, a real one”, then act responsibly and don’t think about joining the army! My parents ordered me to join the army. I am noble by birth, my father was a lord, I had to prove myself according to his will. He had his throat cut just like your father when I was your age. My mother insisted for me to be able to defend myself, and that’s why I became a soldier. But it is really not a sinecure. I assume, but maybe I would have preferred parents who don’t send their children to death for the honour of their family. So, if you love your mother and your sisters as much as they love you, don’t take the risk of reviving this hell. Get yourself an honest and safe occupation. For that, the Master Mage can help you.

Holger didn’t answer. He remained silent a few moments, almost dazed by the frankness of the huge Human. Finally, he nodded slowly.
- Maybe… you are right.

- Maybe, and maybe not. But I give you my opinion, and I hope you’ll consider it seriously at least the time it will have to take to avoid you to commit a stupidity.

- Want to serve the crown is stupidity?

- Want to engage into one of the riskiest careers in the world when you have everything to lose is pure stupidity. Especially when you have other choices.

- Ah...

Marjan knew that she had touched the heart of her interlocutor. Holger sighed deeply.

- And... what will become this killer?

- We’re thinking about it. But in any case, you’ll never see it again. As for you, take care of yourself, stay close to your family, and no longer think of risking your life to be a soldier for the wrong reasons.

The young Skaven didn’t reply. The tall captain left him on the doorstep and returned to the barracks.

*#

Half an hour later, Marjan was in the stewardship, empty of any soldier by order of the Prince. She finished telling the monarch her conversation. Jochen, Heike and Psody were also listening.

- And I did everything to dissuade him from joining the army. This kid has better things to do.

- You’re absolutely right, young girl, Steiner agreed. I have enough soldiers for the moment.

- I only hope we’re not at the dawn of a war, Heike whispered. But, tell me ... you didn’t tell them how Larn found our bedroom?

- No, my friend, be sure of that. It is useless to frighten them more.

- This is a problem we’ll have to settle as soon as possible, said the Prince in a dismal tone.

Nobody added a word, but everyone knew exactly what to expect.
After years of advanced study, the three editors of the *Encyclopaedia of the Children of the Horned Rat* knew the methods of the Clan Eshin assassins. To make sure he did not make a mistake, Larn had managed to get a piece of cloth with Psody’s scent impregnated on it. It was unlikely, however, that he would have taken the risk of stealing this sample himself. Most certainly, he had bribed someone to do it for him, and handed him a piece of clothing, a napkin, a sheet, anything that had been in contact with the Master Mage.

And so, that meant that there was a traitor within the borders of the Rat Kingdom.

- Maybe... Larn eliminated his accomplice? Jochen dared.
- It’s possible—possible, but even if he did, there could be others.
- Be that as it may, prudence is imperative, said Steiner. We’ll all have to redouble our attention, because this threat is much more insidious than a band of Feral Skaven attacking head-on. We must invite others to be very careful, without too much being too explicit. Otherwise, a wind of panic could be caused, or a traitor could be warned involuntarily.
- I’ve already sent Kit a missive, said the White Skaven. On the other hand, my friends, Father, my children, we talked about it, Heike and me. And we ask you not to say anything to Gabriel and Isolde.
- Why, then? Bianka asked. Your life is threatened, they have the right to know!

The captain had the surprise to see Sigmund’s twin sister. Bianka had no trouble to make her brother tell the whole story when she had seen his embarrassed face, and had insisted to her parents to be in the confidence.

It was Heike who answered her daughter:

- It’s not so simple, darling. We must take this situation seriously, and be more vigilant than usual, but we must also be careful not to worry them. You are mature and responsible enough. Otherwise, you know Gabriel, and his nervousness. As for Isolde, she is far too small to accept the concept of a permanent threat. If they ever learn that a Feral Skaven has come into our house to kill your father, they won’t be able to sleep at night, eat, or go to a dark place without a terrible fear in their stomach. I don’t want them to suffer that.

The young girl pouted thoughtfully.

- Well, I have a reclassification to finish. May I dismiss?
- I beg you, replied the Prince.
- Perfect! I don’t want to discuss such a subject any longer.

- You are the one who insisted on that, Sigmund reproached.

Without a look to the Black Skaven, the Skaven girl got up and left the office. It was the moment Marjan asked:

- And so, what should we do with this prisoner?

- My son, you are the one who is best able to answer this question, said the Prince. I let you solve this problem as your wish.

The White Skaven was a little surprised, but nodded.

A few minutes later, Psody, his son and the Twins were in front of the cell where Larn was still confined. The tall Black Skaven was shocked. The Gutter Runner was seated in a corner of the cell, prostrated, his head buried between his knees, looking more miserable than ever.

Sigmund had never suspected that he could feel anything but hate or determination against the inhabitants of the Under-Empire, these cannibalistic, rapacious, opportunistic and cowardly monsters. And yet... he saw one who was clearly experiencing terrible fear and sorrow. He felt something cracking in the depths of his mind.

- Ho! Are you listening to me?

The voice of the White Skaven made him start.

- Uh... yes... what...

- I said-said it would be safer to kill it.

A thrill electrified Sigmund’s back.

- Yet... he could lead us to his accomplices!
- It’s very uncertain, Siggy. In my opinion, those who brought it here already forgot it.

- You sure? Jochen asked.

- Skaven are not the kind to worry about those of them who disappear. If we get rid of this one, it won’t bother us anymore. If it is allowed to leave, it may come back with reinforcements, having told all it knows. Let’s kill it.

- No! Sigmund exclaimed suddenly. If we do that, we shall not be better than him.

In the cell, Larn raised his head. Even if he couldn’t speak Reikspiel, he guessed that the four friends were in the process of consulting each other on his fate. The tone was rising. The big man-thing with the hairy chin was getting upset.

- Sigmund, we have confronted Feral Skaven enough times to know their methods and their lack of loyalty. Your father is right; for its burrow, it is already dead!

- Jochen, listen, please... tried Sigmund.

- It’s an assassin! added Marjan. It probably knows nothing interesting! We must show the Under-Empire what we do to assassins!

The Gottlieb brother walked to the cell with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

- Don’t!

Sigmund stepped between Jochen and the cell door.

- Don’t do that, Jochen!

- It’s a Feral Skaven! One more, one less, what’s the difference? And then, I thought you were “ready to demolish them all?”

- It’s not the same thing, with this one!

- Feral Skaven are bad, Sigmund, Marjan said harshly. You know it, you already fought lots of them!

- Come on, look at him, he’s scared to death! He won’t hurt anymore! If we execute him, we won’t be better than him!

- It tried to kill your father!

- But he didn’t succeed! He doesn’t deserve death! And we are not murderers!
- Go to the Tenenbaum family and repeat that! spat the blonde woman.

- Tenenbaum would like us to stop an invasion! Thanks to Larn, we can!

- Would you really trust the progeny of the Under-Empire?

Sigmund turned his head to his father, and begged him with a supplicant stare to speak in his favour. The two Humans remained silent, waiting for the answer.

The White Skaven thought for a moment, took his breath, and spoke in a low voice.

- The Prince has charged me to make the final decision. This is a first for me because there are issues. The life of a Feral Skaven, and a threat to Vereinbarung. On the one hand, you’re right, Sigmund. We are not murderers, and perhaps it could allow us to stop an invasion attempt. On the other hand, the Twins have good arguments. It killed an honest citizen, it has probably already been abandoned by its peers, and if it disappears, no one will care-worry about it.

The White Skaven paused, then said:

- We let it live...

- It is a mistake! protested the tall blond woman.

- But we won’t let it go as if there is nothing amiss, said Psody, a tone higher.

The White Skaven turned to his younger son.

- You insist for allowing it to live. Very good. But we cannot keep it, or take the risk it to do damage or manage to get into its burrow.

- Can’t we really... make him one of ours?

Psody had a wince.

- Have you looked-looked at it? Impossible. I remind you it came to kill me. And then, it’s not different from other Feral Skaven.

- You told him you wanted to submit Feral Skaven! Let’s start with this one!
- As long as it has the hope that its comrades to be able to avenge it, it will never be able to change its mind about us. It's too early for it. We'll see when there will be only a few moribund colonies left.

- What if he understands that he has no chance to be got back?

- What if Karl Franz propose to build a temple to the Horned Rat in Altdorf? Jochen quipped.

- Shut up! Sigmund barked.

- Jochen, please, asked the Master Mage. Sigmund, here's what I propose-propose to you: you will accompany Larn to the meeting spot.

- I'd be surprised it to spit it out, Marjan grumbled.

- Don't be so sure. Feral Skaven are ready to do anything to prolong their lives by a minute, including betraying their burrow. Given his condition, it should not be too difficult to convince this one. Once in the right place, you'll capture one of his pals to force it to reveal the place of their colony.

- Do you think many of them to wait for him?

- Probably no more than a couple Eshin. If there are more-more, it wouldn't be discreet.

Marjan showed dubious.

- How can you be so sure?

- I was a Grey Seer. I don't know all the secrets of all Clans, but Vellux taught-learned me basics. Gutter Runners never move more than half a dozen when they infiltrate an enemy place. Especially when they are in unknown territory.

- If that's the case, there will be half a dozen assassins to get Larn back, Jochen recapped. Siggy, you know if you'll be able to deal with so much?

The tall Black Skaven didn't answer. He just groaned with a pouting pout.

- Right, you know you'll be able to deal with so much.

- We'll feed it with drugged meat, said Psody. Given its condition, it will throw itself on without thinking. We'll put it in a box to transport it discreetly out of the city. I'll let you some reserves of dried meat, so it doesn't die by starvation during your travel. I shall also give you a water bottle.

- Right.

- Once you've caught an Eshin, you'll go to the nearest barracks with it and Larn, then you'll let us know. I'll come with a battalion, and we'll make speak the other Eshin together. We'll leave there
both of them, and we’ll take care of their burrow. And if this plan succeeds-works... Larn will be permitted to leave.

The two Humans sighed in annoyance. Sigmund, his throat knotted, murmured painfully:

- Thank you, Father.

- Don’t thank me too quickly, Siggy. You’ll be the one to explain to the Tenenbaum widow that the murderer of her husband has been freed in exchange for a greater victory over the Under-Empire.

- I will, replied the tall black Skaven

The Gottlieb looked at each other. Each one detected a serious doubt in the eyes of the other one.

As Psody had imagined, it didn’t take much time Larn to tell all what he could in exchange for few food. His explanations were vague, but after a long ten minutes, the Master Mage and his friends understood that he had come from the southwest. The first thing the Gutter Runner had spotted was a “big building of ruined stones with four large canvases stretched over a wooden cross”. Most likely an abandoned mill, as there were a few - some parts of the Kingdom of the Rats remained deserted, especially those in the south, the farthest from the province of Barak Varr, the largest port by which arrived most people come to try their luck in the Renegade Crowns.

Then he devoured in a few seconds the meatballs prepared by Romulus, before collapsing, overwhelmed by drugs. Romulus had observed, not without satisfaction, that he had not forget how to calculate the doses according to the individual to be transported.

Sitting on the seat of the cart, Sigmund was a little annoyed. He didn’t want to travel without his trusty mare, Okapia. On the other hand, he had no intention of making her do such a thankless job as dragging a cart full of old rags that hid a wooden box in which was locked a Feral Skaven. At least he wouldn’t have to impose on his mount Larn’s smell.

While Jochen and Marjan finished laying the tarpaulin on the cart, Psody told some last recommendations to his son.

- Be careful, Siggy. Go only in the middle of the countryside. Never stop near an inhabited place.
- Yes, Father.

- A citizen Skaven could smell the stench of this murderer if he stays too close. Or worse-worse, Larn could feel a citizen Skaven. If it happens, you can be sure he’ll do anything to get his attention.

- Even if it means me to break his head?

- A cornered Feral Skaven doesn’t think, Siggy. He acts according to his instinct.

- Right.

The Black Skaven noticed that his father’s face tinted with worry.

- Please don’t play hero; I don’t think so, but if they are more than half a dozen, let it go and go stash with Larn. I’d rather have a failed plan and a son still alive than a son killed by Clan Eshin rogues.

- Yes, yes.

The White Skaven put his hand on the wrist of his son.

- The most important thing remains-remains... never trust it. Never.

- Do you believe he could drag me into a trap?

- I don’t believe anything at all. I know any Feral Skaven in its situation would do anything to save its ass. Even if it looks completely helpless, even if it’s all the way-day long whining, do-not-trust-it-ever!

Sigmund sighed, but nodded.

- Are you sure you do not want to be accompanied? Jochen asked.

- I’ll be able to regulate this story by myself, replied the young ratman.

Without further ceremony, the Black Skaven cracked his whip. The nag neighed slightly, and the hitch left the property, under Psody’s worried look.

Bianka, leaning out of her bedroom window, felt her heart tighten as she saw the cart go.
Two hours later, the wagon was on the way to the village of Fischbach. It was a place the Black Skaven had never seen. He smiled. Discovering new places was a small personal pleasure. He would see new landscapes, without crossing the border, and therefore take the risk of being attacked by Humans.

He was suddenly drawn from his thoughts by a series of screeches and loud blows. The horse pawed with panic.

No doubt, Larn was awake.

Sigmund stopped the cart, put his head under the canvas behind him, and scolded in queekish:

- Stop right now, or I tear your head off!

The noise stopped. Larn’s wheezing voice groaned under the rags.

- Why am I in there? Where are we? Where are we going?
- We’re on the way to where your friends should pick you up, Larn.
- What? Why-why?
- Once I’ve found the building where the other Eshin have to take you back, you’ll bait them.
- Huh?
- I want to know where Dalwos of Clan Skab is, and you are going to help me to discover.
- But... If I do that, you’ll slaughter my whole burrow!
- Either you obey-obey, or I kill you here-now. Make your choice!

The Feral Skaven didn’t answer. Sigmund decided to hit the road again.
After a few hours, night fell. The Black Skaven spotted a small wood nearby. He decided to camp there, in order to stay away from the road. Once the cart had stopped, he tied the reins of the horse around a tree, climbed to the back of the cart, cleared the heaps of cloth. A strong smell of urine stung his nostrils.

For a moment, he was afraid to see the prisoner dead in one way or another, but he was not. No sooner had he opened the small hatch at the top of the cage than the Feral Skaven immediately yelped:

- I’m hungry-hungry!

Sigmund dropped a quarter of raw meat into the opening before folding the flapper.

- Enjoy, you Eshin scum!

He came down from the cart, and took his own meal from his backpack. But the Feral Skaven complained again.

- I cannot eat!
- Make an effort! Eat it on the floor!

Larn was securely tied with chains and handcuffs on his wrists and ankles. He had to twist and lie on his stomach to be able to grasp the food between his long teeth. Finally, the complaints and the chewing noises stopped.

Sigmund thought he would sleep soon, when he heard another characteristic sound. It had to be obvious: once again, the prisoner was crying.

The tall Black Skaven grumbled. He returned to the cart, and asked:

- What is it, now?
- I’m scared-scare.

- What are you afraid of? My father promised to let you go if you lead us to your fellows-accomplices!

- Blasphemous one... big liar!

- Hey, he has flaws, but he’s not a liar. And I’d like to remind-you that I am the one who insisted you not to be executed on the spot! Unlike your Nightleader, I will keep our promise. I am a Skaven of his word.

- Afraid of the reaction of the Nightleader! Mission failed! Nightleader will kill-kill me! And my pals that you force-oblige me to betray? There are Sons of the Horned Rat that I don’t want to see die-die because of you!

- You, friends? In the ranks of Clan Eshin? You all are traitors.

- No-no! I have Clan friends! There is Rotrug, Tifyay, Ghuill...

- All right, I got it!

Sigmund sighed.

- My father, whom you call “Blasphemous One”, had an Eshin brother. He should have been closer to him than a friend. Instead, he tried to kill him. He backstabbed him. Like the Eshin traitor he was. Now shut up, I want to sleep.

Thus ended the conversation.

* *

The journey resumed the next morning at dawn. The cart horse wasn’t very energetic, and time passed slowly, slower than expected. Sigmund was watching for any building looking like a mill, but those he saw were all functional. He carefully avoided passing through populated places, small villages, relay inns, and continued tirelessly in the same direction.

Two days passed thus. Curiously, Larn was quiet, so much so that Sigmund had to check several times if he was still alive in the box. The smell of urine and excrement became difficult to tolerate, even in the open air, and it put him in a bad mood.

The third evening, the third Black Skaven grumbled when he realized that his supply of dried meat had dangerously declined. He promised himself to buy some at the next village he would see. He was especially worried about finding no trace of the so-called meeting point.
- Still no mill in ruins as we approach the border, Larn. I hope-you didn’t lie!
- No, no! I swear, O Mighty of the Horned Rat!
- I don’t worship the Horned Rat! retorted Sigmund.

They continued in silence for a few minutes, when Larn’s voice timidly asked:

- Are you happy of yourself, Stormvermin?
- I am, so much. Thank you! Sigmund replied wickedly.
- But... “much” how? What is it, to be “so much happy”?

The Black Skaven agreed to answer:

- No fear tightens my stomach as I live.
- Ah...?

The voice of the dark grey Feral Skaven reflected perplexity. Sigmund noticed it, and wanted to take advantage of it to make him think.

- If you had been born in one of the nurseries we explored, you would be happier today, Larn.
- But the Skaven traitors are so weak-soft! How can they be happy?
- They are free, Larn. They live normally, that is to say without being afraid all the time of everything that surrounds them. They work honestly, and always have something to eat-dress. The Sons of the Horned Rat society doesn’t work this way.
- How do you know? You’ve never lived in a burrow, have you?
- I haven’t, but I explored borrows. I saw the conditions in which your kindred live. No wonder you are all like this! Condemned from birth to kill or be killed! We are trying to break this curse that stifles our race.
- I see…

Half an hour later, night had fallen. Sigmund then spotted the remains of a sheepfold that had been abandoned for a long time. The Black Skaven thought:
He stopped the cart near the small building.

- Here, we’ll take some rest there.

Larn didn’t answer. Sigmund pushed back the rags, and opened the hatch.

- Yuck! It stinks!

He stepped back as he heard buzzing flies.

- Hurts… too much. Want to... breathe. Let me... let me sleep outside!

Sigmund sighed.

- Right, come on, you really pain me.

He took from his pocket the key of the padlock that closed the box, and unlocked it. He opened the cage wide. Larn was really pitiful, chained and lying in his own droppings.

- Since you’ve been a good boy, tonight, I’ll grant you a *little* favour, Larn.

He grabbed Larn by the chain wrapped around his chest and lifted him out of the cart. He put him on the ground near a tree.

- Listen-listen very carefully, Larn.
Sigmund took his sword and his spare dagger and put them in the box. He locked the padlock, then tied the key to a string that he knotted to his wrist. He picked up his musette resting on the seat, and finally approached the prisoner.

- Just make a wrong move, and I kill-kill you.

With the key, he unfastened the padlock that encircled the Feral Skaven’s feet, slackened the chain, slipped it into his own belt, and relocked the padlock on Larn’s ankles. Finally, he slipped the key into the sleeve of his shirt.

- This time, I’ll let you sleep outside. But I warn you: try to touch this key, try to cheat-cheat me, show any sign of the slightest rebellion, and immediately, I crush you in two! Got-got it?

- I’ll be nice-nice! Promised-sworn!

- Good.

Sigmund gave some more dried meat to his prisoner.

- It’s a pity-pity that Feral Skaven are so dirty! You stink like a couple of squigs!

- Cage too small! protested Larn in a limply way.

The Black Skaven grumbled. The dark grey Skaven raised his muzzle.

- I already saw the sky at night. More reassuring-sure than when this huge golden ball dazzles everything.

- And yet, this ball is very useful. It warms us when it’s cold outside, and grows our crops. So many things that don’t exist in your stinking burrow.

- Yes-yes, but... pretty little sparks in the sky. I like. And above all... the warpstone moon!

- Are you talking about Morrslieb? For us, it brings misfortune.

- I know-know. Lucky charm for us. But it didn’t bring me fortune when I...

Larn didn’t dare finish his sentence. Sigmund took charge of it.
- When you tried to bleed my father.

- Should not have, I’m sorry! Dalwos of Clan Skab said that men-things only think of killing us, or making us their slaves.

- Do I look like a slave?

- No-no, benevolent master!

- Don’t call me “master”, Larn. I am not your master. I killed the last slave who called me like that.

- Oh…

Larn lowered his head.

- Blasphemous One more generous-clement than I thought-feared. Maybe not so evil?

- You saw the Skaven of my own, Larn. I told you, we are free-happy. We live in peace.

- Never-ever arguments?

- Um... from time to time, yes. But no internal war. Murder is forbidden, theft is forbidden, and yet we live well.

- Ah... I really could have been... like you? If I had been abducted at the nursery?

Sigmund felt his face wrinkle in spite.

- I would have liked to save all the little pups, Larn, but it wasn’t possible. There were too many of them in too many different burrows.

- What a pity.

The Feral Skaven gave a bitter sigh. His guardian couldn’t contain his own empathy. An idea suddenly appeared in a corner of his mind.

- You know what, Larn? If we succeed in catching your comrades, and you avoid us an invasion attempt...

- Yes, oh sublime-grandiose figure of authority?

The Black Skaven hesitated. He was about to make a commitment that no one but himself would approve, for sure. He decided to assume.
- I’ll ask... you to live among us?

The Feral Skaven became stun.

- What... me... at your home?

- Yes, you at our home. If you show us that you want to change your life, if you help us fight against the Feral Skaven, you could become one of ours.

Sigmund had a pang in his heart as he saw a small tear sliding on the dark grey Skaven’s hairy cheekbone.

- If I behave... quiet-wise, will I... become like you?

- I’m a man of his word, Larn. If you prove that you can be a citizen-citizen of Vereinbarung, I’ll ask the Prince to pardon you. Good night.

- Good night... kind Master Steiner!

Sigmund waited, and when he saw that Larn was sleeping peacefully, decided to do the same.

The Black Skaven woke up, and narrowed his eyes. The sun, already high in the sky, warmed the fur of the skull. He straightened up, yawned loudly and stretched.

- Good, come on, Larn! On the road again. I hope for you that...

Suddenly, Sigmund’s heart stopped dead.

The chains and padlocks lied on the ground at the foot of the tree. And Larn had vanished.

He looked from all sides, more and more feverishly. Not a trace of the Feral Skaven.
He yelped again with anger and disbelief. How could Larn have freed himself from his handcuffs? Even out of his box, he had always been securely fastened from head to toe, so he had not been able to steal the key, which was anyway still attached to his wrist. He went to the metal bracelets on the grass, and noticed something stuck in the lock. It was a nail. A long nail.

Sigmund leaned over to examine the small, pointed object.

*It’s probably with this thing that Larn picked the handcuffs. But where did he get it from? We searched him before we left, and he was not wearing anything on him! This nail could not be at the foot of this tree?*

It was then that the large Black Skaven remembered another story of his father concerning the Eshin Clan. He had once explained that it was customary for a Clan Eshin Gutter Runner to always have a small picking tool on him, even to keep it sunk somewhere in his own flesh, concealed under a thicker tuft of hair, or between the rings of his tail.

*He had it on him from the beginning. He waited for the right moment to use it!*

That was, the moment when, having released his defences, the huge Black Skaven finally took him in sympathy, and allowed him to rest in a more comfortable position... and in which he was not locked in triple turn. He just had to wait. Once his guardian asleep, Larn had removed the nail from its hiding place, undoubtedly under his skin, judging by the visible traces of blood along its length, then had picked the handcuffs, and disappeared without a sound.

Sigmund had been searching during a whole hour for the slightest track to the eye or to the nostril. Nothing. Larn had definitively escaped him.

The Black Skaven raised his fists to the sky, and roared:

- You ungrateful piece of shit! You filthy bastard! Damn you, Larn! May Sigmar’s Hammer smash your little liar face!

Completely disappointed, the Black Skaven lowered his head, and had a stomach ache as he thought about the logical sequence. He sighed deeply, climbed back on the wagon, and turned
back to Steinerburg.
Weighted Hearts

Letter from Sister Carolina Kuhlmann, priestess of the Shallya Temple of Wüstengrenze, to Sister Judy Hoffnung, priestess of the Shallya Temple of Steinerburg, written on the twenty-seventh Pflugzeit of the year two thousand five hundred and thirty of the Imperial Calendar.

My dear benefactor,

It’s been a few weeks since we have somehow resisted the terrible assault of the Orcs. Lady Franzseska Gottlieb has practically completed the inventory, as well as the macabre list of citizens of Vereinbarung deceased under the weapons of the Orcs. In addition to the villagers of Klapperschlänge, many soldiers from Steinerburg fell, and even reinforcements from Wüstengrenze suffered losses. We have treated all of the injured who survived, but the heart sores are still wide open. All the villagers of Klapperschlänge received a burial in respect of the sacraments of Morr, dispensed by Brother Herschel, the priest of Morr of Wüstengrenze. But the surviving soldiers didn’t let themselves go to despair, and redoubled their efforts to restore its brilliance to Klapperschlänge. As you may know, this village is located near land made fertile thanks to the enchantments of the Druids hired by the Prince three years ago. The Greenskins didn’t take the time to burn down the land, they directly attacked our compatriots. Wüstengrenze’s minds got together, and decided to settle a few volunteer villagers in Klapperschlänge – some dissatisfied with life in Wüstengrenze saw it as a new start.

This idea was greatly approved by the Princely Steward, Lady Franzseska Gottlieb. When she arrived with Master Kristofferson, Captain Müller explained the situation to her as well as this reconstruction project. She entrusted him with the management of the construction site. I only knew Lady Gottlieb by reputation, but I see that she is formidable in her field of activity. No one dares to challenge her authority. I would have liked to meet her earlier, because she seems to me to be a particularly strong woman! I took advantage of a short break to exchange opinions on the condition of us women in Vereinbarung. Her ideas are less flexible than I had hoped, but at the same time I don’t forget she’s the widow of a lord, and not the most tender, she confessed.

This person has my admiration, however. Before I took the bleeding heart dress, you know it, I was myself a child of the high society of Talabheim, and I saw with my own eyes the result when a home is run by the iron fist of a warlord, with the examples of several of my friends or sisters. Until now, I thought the result was always the same: the unhappy woman was quickly mentally broken, if not physically too, whether by dangerously suffocating discipline, or desperate neglect from the husband.

This is not the case for Lady Gottlieb. She made it clear to me with a knowing little smile that the late her husband, Lord Wilhelm Gottlieb, was feared by everyone except her. She didn’t hesitate to brave his anger, respond to his threats, and make him understand that it was in his interest to take off with her. And the day he raised his hand to her in order to submit her, she immediately returned him the favour – he would have had difficulty going where you know for three days, the pain caused making any evacuation particularly harsh.

Their children, the twins Marjan and Jochen, had a severe, strict education, but Lady Franzseska loves them deeply, and has always taken care to show them. Both of them give her back this love. When she told me about them, Lady Franzseska seemed more serene, less sad. She doesn’t seem to regret Lord Wilhelm. This one would never have ventured into the Rat Kingdom anyway, he had too backward ideas to accept to see the Skaven become our friends. I don’t know if Romulus told you about it, but once again, Vereinbarung owes him a debt of gratitude: when the Master Mage
Prospero, then simple little Grey Seer of the Under-Empire, turned himself over to the Gottlieb couple, half a dozen years ago. Lady Gottlieb was one of the people the most determined to execute him, which would no doubt have happened without the direct intervention of our common saviour. And without Prospero, we probably wouldn’t be here today!

More seriously, Dame Franzeska has all my admiration. I would really like to see other young girls who were unwittingly married to disrespectful lords to be as resourceful. May those who don’t have the physical capabilities of a northern female warrior be clever enough to subdue their husband, and control him with words that would be sometimes sweet, sometimes threatening.

Obviously, when I say that, I probably don’t please Shallya. But if we want to live in a balanced society, it is important to lay solid foundations, and equality between men and women seems to me essential. Perhaps in a few centuries we’ll be able to afford the luxury of achieving this balance through education. However, for the present times, our world is still too violent, the people too anchored in superstition and terror of the perpetual threats of Chaos, Orcs and others. And so, we are forced to build this edifice as the Dwarves build a karak: by making a building with no frills, massive, huge foundations, which will gradually be embellished, until it becomes a masterpiece called to hold standing for centuries.

I also had the opportunity to speak several times with Master Kristofferson Steiner. He’s a man who cares about doing the right thing. When he arrived, he had a hard time looking the soldiers waiting for him in the eye. The first thing he did was admit his wrongs about the villagers of Klapperschlänge. The fact that he is the eldest son in the family pushes him to take on his shoulders more responsibility than he really should. After all, we all agreed that he didn’t have to assume on this fault alone; several elements led to this carnage, in particular the negligence of the former captain Kreutzer.

Kristofferson is also a cultured young man, who has a much more humble face when we speak informally. He’s a little amazing person. In terms of age, technically, he hasn’t lived so many more years than I have, and we have the same physical and intellectual maturity. And yet, I have the impression that he lived three times what I’ve experienced to now. He told me about his many marauding in the burrows. He volunteered when he reached the age of majority, which his mother didn’t like very much, you probably know. I vacillate between admiration and compassion, because I think that many other good people who would have faced the same thing as him wouldn’t have such a cheerful character. Unless this is a way to hide his own sadness? Indeed, I couldn’t help detecting Kristofferson’s certain melancholy, especially when he thinks back to the villagers of Klapperschlänge. As I told you before, we have repeated him several times that he shouldn’t blame himself so much. I sincerely hope him to fully accept it.

Fortunately, Kristofferson can be a very pleasant company. The moments when he is most radiant, according to me, take place at the end of the day. Once the training over, the supervision of resources done, the work complete, then he allows himself to relax a little. Everybody appreciates his true nature: a happy fellow always ready to cheer up with a joke, and with warmth. I’ve already had the opportunity to see leaders attract the sympathy of people, but they nevertheless remained cold and distant, a bit like Lady Gottlieb. He’s just the opposite. Of course, he’s careful not to go overboard, and I’ve never seen him drink more than one glass of alcohol a day. But he is still able to cause laughter quickly and frankly.

I suspect his life not to be always fun from a family point of view; as the Prince’s grandson, there is all the formal side to be respected. We talked about his family. He notably shared with me some concerns about his younger brother, Sigmund. The second son in the Steiner family would be someone very sad, far more than he is or the rest of the siblings, he told me. I guess I’m not teaching you much, you’re probably the Human who knows the Master Mage’s children best,
apart from the Prince himself. His best friend, Master Walter Klingmann, told me a few anecdotes about their moments spent together during their childhood, and confirmed the formal side of the young years of the elder son of Master Mage.

Kristofferson also said to me that his younger sister Isolde is so heartfelt, and she regularly asks her parents for their blessing to join our order. Again, you are in a better position than I to confirm this or not. But by his words, if she’s not yet old enough, she’s passionate. After all, why not? There are already a few Skaven between the walls of the Shallya temple in Steinerburg, mainly orphans who have had little choice in life. But if individuals feel the vocation rising in their heart, and voluntarily wish to wear the robe, why prevent them from doing so? As you know, Shallya loves all living things except those who follow Nurgle, so why she wouldn’t for a little girl steeped in love?

Anyway, Kristofferson is a good person. In a way, I even find him attractive. Of course, I have no intention of going any further than chaste friendship with him. I don’t know if the gods would approve a union between a man and a woman so... different? If certain peoples may possibly mix, I’m not sure Skaven and Human could... well, that seems impossible to me. But I remain satisfied to be among the people he enjoys company. I hope his heart to heal completely one day, and I’m sure Shallya will help him. We know the magnificence of His Majesty Ludwig Steiner manifests itself through this young man. He’s a good person, and I’m happy to have him as a friend. Besides, he also told me that he got along very well with Lady Franzseska’s two children. They wandered together during the Harvests, it created ties, I guess. When he talks about Lady Marjan, his eyes sparkle with a special glow. Strange...

Speaking of far less fortunate people... We saw the sad figure of ex-Captain Kreutzer lurking around the barracks. The last time he appeared to us, he looked completely haggard, staggering, with a strong smell of alcohol floating around him. I think he found refuge in the small inn in Klapperschlänge, which has remained intact. He must pick up into the beer and wine reserves that have not yet been moved. He will have to be dislodged when the new inhabitants come to settle.

The last few days have left me optimistic, but a shadow still hangs over us, it can be seen in the looks and the voices. The Orcs threat remains present. Certainly, our warriors have beat them back, but there is much to fear that others will return. Captain Müller explained to Lady Franzseska that he hadn’t seen a particularly tall and sturdy barbarian during the night of the battle. The steward explained to us that all Orcs follow a great leader, the kind you can easily recognize from afar. An Orc chieftain is generally twice as tall as a man, and has enough muscle to break a horse’s back. It is very likely that this chief is somewhere in the region, preparing for an assault three times more formidable.

We are all afraid, but with Lady Franzseska, Captain Müller, Kristofferson and his friends, the light of hope shines faintly, but distinctly, in every heart. Other soldiers should also join us as a precaution. Lady Franzseska is counting on them to reinforce the fortifications that the peasants are preparing, helped by the soldiers. We are about to fight again against the Greenskins, and I feel that this new fight will be much more deadly than the last. But the gods allowed us to build Vereinbarung, they will allow us to keep it, I’m sure.

I sincerely hope that, on your side, things are going well; Kristofferson hesitantly murmured that there had been tensions at the border of the principality of Sueño. I know that His Highness Prince Steiner will be able to remedy this additional complication, and that we will be able to benefit from enough reinforcements to repel and definitively defeat the Orcs.

My sister, thank you for your attention. Under the benevolence of Shallya, may her be praised, I wish you to be well, and to continue to give the best benefit to the inhabitants of Steinerburg thanks to your multiple talents.
- I guess it is a joke?
- It is not, Father, replied Sigmund in an embarrassed whisper.

Psody was mad. He wanted to be sure he understood what his son had just told him.

- You really allowed this Feral Skaven to leave its cage? Moreover during your sleep?
- He... he looked obedient.

At these words, the White Skaven’s anger burst out.

- I must be dreaming! So, by your fault, not only is there now a Feral Skaven on the loose-wandering in our kingdom, but in addition we won’t manage to find its allies-accomplices! Well, great! I congratulate you!

The Black Skaven lowered his head shamefully.

- Fortunately, it didn’t take advantage of the situation to kill-cutthroat you!

Sigmund felt his heart freeze at this thought. He looked up nervously. His father remarked his anguished expression, and continued:

- It could have done it. It was only because it was too afraid to miss its try that it didn’t. You escaped death, so I’m not going to punish you right away. But I’m warning you, Sigmund: if ever a peasant comes to find us to say that a Feral Skaven has devoured his cattle or attacked his family, you’ll be the one to pay for the damage!
- I will, Father... But I really thought I was doing the right thing. He seemed so miserable!
- Of course it seemed miserable! Feral Skaven are experts in whining-whining! The more convincing they are, the more it extends their life expectancy! And you, like a fool, you were tricked! This is your biggest problem, Sigmund: you get too overwhelmed by your feelings!
- Without my feelings, I would be as feral as they are! Sigmund retorted.
- I should have listened to the Twins, and had it executed! There would be no risk of problems, and the others would have got the message.
- Killing him would have been murder!
- It infiltrated our kingdom to eliminate me, remember? This sentence would have been only justice-justice.
- Precisely, you say it all the day long! “Be fair”, “be Human”, again and again! Well, you’re right: I am a citizen of Vereinbarung, not a heartless murderer who kills a poor defenseless guy without the slightest mercy!
- I’m not saying that having mercy for it was wrong! You had a human reaction insisting that we let it live, that’s understandable. But you were too confident! One day, it will really play a dirty trick on you! All it takes is a Feral Skaven pretending to burst into tears in order to make you sorry-pity, and you stop thinking in a blink!
- He wasn’t pretending.
- From the moment it took advantage of your leniency to get away, it ceased to be a terrified repentant, and became a shameless manipulator, Sigmund. I repeat: Feral Skaven use to acting like this, so much that it is their way-way of life.

The Black Skaven wanted to protest by showing an unconventional meanness:

- You are well placed to know it, aren’t you? You are a Feral Skaven by birth! That’s why you have so much determination to eliminate them! Because you reject what you are!
- I definitively don’t! You’re right, I was born as a Feral Skaven, and I lived-lived as such for four
years. But I learned to be Human, little by little, and we raised you as a Human, your mother and I. If I have “so much determination to eliminate them”, it is not under the influence of hatred-grudge, but prudence: I know their way of thinking, and I know how to deal with them. I remind you that I almost died by the hand of your uncle Klur! He backstabbed me before trying to drown me in a swamp! This is how it works, among the Feral Skaven! It’s the most deceitful-traitor who survives the longest! The problem with you is that you see Feral Skaven too much like Humans. But they are not like Humans, much less like we are!

- That is not what you told us at our first Harvest!

Made tired by his son’s argument, Psody paused. He sighed deeply, and said in a softer voice:

- You’re right, but I was speaking about the blood point of view. Our blood and theirs are similar, we are not more or less strong-intelligent than them by nature, it is true. But there is a difference: what we have in mind! You must stop identifying with them! It’s like during the Harvests! As you are talking about it, remember: you thought we were child stealers. But that was not the case, I explained it to you! We didn’t steal the pups from their parents, we gave them parents! About our relationship with the Feral Skaven, it’s the same thing, you must stop considering them as Humans! Have you seen how they live in their burrows? The Under-Empire is not the Human Empire, and its inhabitants are rabid creatures, trained to be like Larn barely out of the nursery! This is why I want to eliminate them all! Feral Skaven are monsters, thirsty for violence, who torture their wives and push their children to devour everything they can! If I fight against them, it’s not by revenge or redemption. I fight for your mother, for your sisters, for Teresa, for all the girls of our kind! And unless one day, an entire community that reason like us come to ask us for a covenant, which would really surprise me, there is nothing good to hope from the Sons of the Horned Rat. Siggy, I want you to gain a bit of maturity, and accept the Feral Skaven as they are! It will avoid you to do again such a mistake!

Sigmund didn’t answer this time. He thought back to all the skirmishes against the Feral Skaven during their Harvests. He imagined Larn running away with a sneer, satisfied to have fooled the one who had the weakness to trust him. His ear twitched when he heard his father’s voice again.

- My opinion joined the one of the Gottlieb’s, but I wanted to give you a chance to prove to me what you were worth. I got my answer-answer. It disappointed me greatly. Until you are more responsible, I’ll never allow you to harm others, Siggy. Let it serve you as a lesson!

The young ratman got up and groaned:

- Excuse me for giving a chance to a prisoner who begged for his life!

He was about to leave the office when he heard his father call him back. He decided to ignore any invective, and his hand had already lowered the door handle, but the words his ear received kept him at the last moment.

- When you went back from Rabarena, you were ready to kill all the Feral Skaven on the continent, Sigmund.

Without looking back, Sigmund replied:

- I said silly words. I was drunk.
- And yet it made you more clairvoyant!

The Black Skaven spun on his heels, both incredulous and annoyed.

- So, now, alcohol make some sense, Father? It reveals the worst in us! Even good guys can beat
their wife, when they drink too much!
- It’s not alcohol that turns them violent, Siggy. Alcohol only externalizes the violence that sleeps in them. “Good guys” never beat their wife, even under the influence of alcohol. They have enough reason to hold back, or they fall into an alcoholic coma. You’re a good person, even if you don’t always respect yourself. Whenever you drink too much, you remain lucid-conscious enough not to raise your hand on anyone. On the other hand, it reveals this sadness you bury under a cloak of anger, by pretexting-invoking Black Hunger. And that demolishes you. And I can assure you that we are all very sensitive to that! Your mother, your sisters, your brothers… all of us, we want you to get better-better!

Sigmund felt tears come to his eyes. Psody stood before him.

- My boy, promise me you won’t get drunk this time. The bottle only moves the problem on.
- I promise, articulated the Black Skaven, his throat tight.

The White Skaven sighed in relief. His son asked again:

- Do you think he’ll join his den?
- Maybe, and maybe not. It depends, if it is, the meeting point was still far-far away. But it can take it out on someone on its way! It must be hungry and eager for kill-kill. If it attacks a Human, that could sow discord-discord! Some Humans are just waiting for an opportunity like this to create problems for the Crown! Hope it won’t upset your grandfather too much.
- I... I’ll confess everything to him.

Sigmund had beforehand seen Prince Ludwig angry, and knew the so cordial Human could be truly frightening when he was upset.

- Forget it, retorted his father. I’ll take care of this. Go to your apartments, and think about what has happened today.

The tall Black Skaven left the office without adding a word.

But he didn’t return to his personal quarter. He climbed up the stairs of the family apartments wing to the top floor. He needed to get some air. Indeed, the rooftop of the building had been arranged in terrace, with wooden benches and fences high enough to avoid an accidental fall, but allowed to appreciate the view. And the view, Sigmund loved it. Especially when he needed to take his mind off things.

The huge Black Skaven took a few steps over the well-kept marble slabs that made up the floor, and looked around. He never got tired of this picture. The whole city of Steinerburg was at his feet, and lived, breathed, laughed... He didn’t see himself as a god, a benevolent father, a superior spirit, he had no such ambitions. He felt that he was fully a citizen, concerned for his well-being and that of the people to whom he was attached. He knew that Feral Skaven could never experience such a connection with their kindred. His true kindred were here, honorable men and women who had worked together for six years to build and make the Rat Kingdom prosper.

He remembered an evening, a couple of years ago. His grandfather had brought him to this space. His pipe in his mouth, he had told him about the people, and the importance of the life of the citizens. They were fortunate to live more than comfortably, thanks to the resources and hard work of the patriarch, who had been able to make the money from his own father work. “Nevertheless, money is not all”, said Steiner. “Remember, Siggy, all of this wouldn’t have been possible without all these men and women under our feet. You weren’t born when it happened, but they worked
very hard to make these lands a good place to live. We are the sovereigns, but we need the
subjects. Without the citizens, we would be nothing. Never forget to show them the respect they all
deserve. They will respect you just as much.”

He approached the barrier, and his heart warmed a little. The setting sun dazzled the roofs, streets,
water tanks, and towers of taller buildings. He distinguished the different districts of the capital of
Vereinbarung. Even the Mousetrap had its most beautiful face. He was particularly fascinated by
the long and regular shape of the dwarf-built aqueduct that brought the water. Over time, huge
reservoirs had been installed here and there, in order to always guarantee water supplies for the
inhabitants in the event of a siege, and above all the destruction of the aqueduct.

When he turned to the other side, Sigmund faced the cliff. The Steiner Estate didn’t have to fear
much from this side, for sure. The cliff was far too high and too steep, unless you were an
exceptional climber. Or to fly, with magic or on a winged mount. The young ratman’s lips
wrinkled in an ironic grin. The Feral Skaven, used to underground tunnels, didn’t have flying
machines. At least, not to his knowledge. On the other hand, he had heard about the Goblins, and
their catastrophic inventions. Much more hazardous than those concocted by his brother Gabriel.

Sigmund felt his heart tighten when the worried face of his younger brother materialized in his
mind. Several days had already passed since he returned, and he hadn’t taken the time to come and
speak to him, alone. Appreciate his inventions, ask him what he had done during their absence...
Small things, but little things that made up the cement that consolidated this so dear to the Black
Skaven concept: family.

Young Steiner loved his family, each one of them. And yet he couldn’t help but speak more rudely
to them than he wished, to get mad at them for trivialities. Last time he had seen his older brother,
he had told him to go away. And he had just had an argument with his parents.

Damn, how? Why? Is this... my difference?

The issue of Black Hunger, again, to come and haunt him. He nervously slapped his own temple to
think of something else. Suddenly his ear pivoted when he heard the voice of Isolde behind him.

- Siggy? Is something wrong?

Sigmund turned on his heel. The little girl was before him, looking worried, a doll in her hands.
Bianka stood by her side. The young ratman painfully swallowed his saliva.

- I... just wanted to breath a while.
- Father looked angry.
- It’s nothing, really nothing. I just made a mistake.
- Is it because of the killer?

A shard of ice ran through the heart of the Black Skaven. He stammered:

- What... what are you...
- She knows, cut Bianka. She heard the Twins talk about.

Sigmund didn’t know whether he should be frightened by the seriousness of his little sister though
she still was a child, or be furious at his friends who had not taken precautions enough. Bianka took
advantage of this state of indecision to force him to face up to his responsibilities.

- Now I want you to explain to her what happened, and what you plan to do.

Sigmund knelt in front of Isolde, and gently put his hands on her shoulders.
- I wanted to give this Feral Skaven a chance. Unfortunately, he cheated on me, and fled.
- You... do you think he’s going to get revenge?

She was already trembling, and tears fell from her wide eyes.

- No, sweetie belle. He’s too far away, and he’s too coward, anyway.
- But... others could come?

The Black Skaven gently wiped his tears with his thumb.

- We do everything to avoid that. We’ll find their hiding place, and we’ll drive them away.
- What if they’re hiding in the city?
- No, we would have spotted them already. And you don’t have to be afraid. As long as I am there, there is absolutely nothing to harm you, sweetie belle. Remember that I am the strongest Skaven in the Rat Kingdom. I’ll sweep the whole house with the buttocks of the first Feral Skaven who will dare to threaten you.

The little girl smiles painfully between two sobs. Sigmund turned his head to Bianka.

- What about Gab? Is he aware, too?
- Not yet, but it won’t be long.
- What about our parents? Do they know she knows?
- I’ll talk to them.

The Skaven lady shivered.

- It’s getting late. Are you coming, Soso? Bedtime now.
- Yes, Bianka.

Sigmund hugged his little sister one last time, and the two girls returned, leaving him alone. Night had fallen, and the two moons were shining. The wind was blowing, and the clouds were racing at top speed, intermittently obscuring the stars.

The tall Black Skaven got up, and thought:

*Kit, Siggy, Gab, Soso... Too bad Bianka didn’t accept a nickname!*

- All of this is rather annoying, as a matter of fact…

Prince Ludwig Steiner took a puff from his pipe. The cloud of tobacco rose above his head.

- And so, the children are aware of.
- Alas, Father. Bianka confirmed this to me.
- Well, the secret didn’t last long.
- I’ll remind-remind the Twins the meaning of the word “secret”, muttered Psody, annoyed.
- Oh, they would have learned it somehow. Between hallway noises, rumours, superstitions... and I don’t mention the damage Larn could do!

The ratmother bit her lip.

- Hope there are not too many consequences!
- The worst will be relationships, Heike. Personally, I don’t think a lone, weakened and unarmed Feral Skaven to represent a real danger. The main problem is that it could generate serious tension!
- What do you recommend? asked Romulus.
- Continue to keep it secret for the moment. No scandal, you have to cover up the issue, at least until Larn is arrested. The ideal would be to eliminate him without anyone to know it. But if he ever creates problems, then we’ll have to punish him severely, and publicly. Our fellow citizens must understand we will not tolerate the presence of any Feral Skaven within our borders! And, Romulus, I want you to warn the Lorekeepers of the Empire. If necessary, they can help us to confine the problem inside Vereinbarung.
- I trust you, Father! Heike declared flatly.
- I appreciate your kindness, my child, but I’m not perfect, I admit it. Managing a kingdom is something I’ve been doing for six years, and so far I’ve never had to deal with this kind of crisis. There’s a first time for everything. Also, any help will be good to accept.

The prior left the Prince’s cabinet. The latter allowed himself to take a more concerned look.

- I hope Sigmund will get something out of it this time.
- I hope so too, but that’s not what worries me the most. Father, we’re going to have to prepare- brace ourselves. Others will arrive! We already know that they infiltrated Sueño, to see some here- here is the logical continuation.
- For six years, we have been living according to a new way of life which involves Skaven, summarized Heike. Humans are little by little aware, and what Humans know, the Feral Skaven know in turn very quickly. The Council of Thirteen learned of the existence of Vereinbarung, it was fatal.
- They even gave your companion a rather suggestive moniker. “Blasphemous One”... I heard more original.
- Feral Skaven don’t care about being original, Father. Their methods are always the same. That’s why I’m sure-certain there’s a contingent somewhere nearby. We have to find it!

The Prince’s forehead widened with worried furrows.

- Even so, these are far from the Empire! They are daring!
- Other Feral Skaven have travelled much further before, Father, Heike reminded. Remember the Pestilens who left for Lustrie, or the Eshin for Cathay. They’re probably not more special than others. However, this doesn’t mean that we have to relax our vigilance.
- You’re absolutely right, darling. This intruder didn’t fall from the sky. Psody, do you think there would be a colony in the Rat Kingdom?
- Not under a big city, otherwise we would have felt it. Local Skaven citizens would have complained of unusual bad smells, there would be disappearances, that sort of thing. But we should be doing country patrols. Brissuc was a burrow under a small village, I think we’re dealing with a rural colony.
- I advise you to warn the other neighbouring princes, too, Heike added.
- They’ll all declare war on us! Psody assumed. They will reproach us for having drawn the Feral on them!
- If we lie by omission, and our neighbours find out, they’ll surely take it very badly, my son. Verena wants us to remain honest. Anyway, as you said, Sueño is already submitted to a Skaven invasion. Better to prove to the princes of the surroundings that we recognize our wrongs in this affair and that we are ready to assume them.
- Even if we don’t have all the wrongs either, replied Psody.

But had he done it to reassure his father and his wife... or himself?

The two Skaven were about to sleep. Heike was already under the sheets. But his companion, who
was finishing putting on his nightgown, headed for the door.

- Where are you going? Come on, come over here!
- One minute, I have a precaution-precaution to take.

He left the bedroom, a candle in his hand, then went down to his office. He walked over to a small piece of furniture in the corner of the room, pushed it, and revealed a hiding place in the wall. In this cache awaited a small casket. The White Skaven placed the ornate box on the desk, opened it, and picked up a pistol from. He loaded it slowly, mechanically, then put the box away, took the small defence weapon by the barrel, and returned to his bedroom.

Heike opened wide, frightened eyes when she saw the gun.

- Is it really necessary?

The White Skaven turned to his wife, bitter in his look.

- They tried to kill-kill me, darling. Larn failed, but someone else will try.
- Why a weapon? You have your magic.

Psody made a face.

- Two reasons-reasons, sweetheart: I practice the magic of Ghyran, the magic of life. There is no question of using it to kill a living being. Toast a demon or a brainless Mutant, or even an undead, I can. But I won’t use it on any living being.
- You can neutralize a living being without killing it, can’t you?
- I can, but this is the second reason: using magic requires at least a few seconds. Next time I see a Gutter Runner at the window, I won’t have a few seconds. Defeating an enemy without killing it requires the luxury of having time to think. Shooting a threat with a pistol takes only half a second.

He slowly opened the drawer of the bedside table, and carefully placed the weapon in it. Then he took his turn in the bed, and let out a deep sigh.

- Don’t worry, Psody. We have overcome everything so far. You escaped your Feral Skaven life, and I survived a forbidden life in the Empire. We have worked very hard since we came here, especially you, who risked your life many times during the Harvests. Today, we are gathered in a kingdom that was created for us, we have five wonderful children, loyal friends, and a people who trust us. No one can take that away from us.

She ran her slender fingers across his chest, first, gently, then sensually. The White Skaven felt his lips rise in a knowing smile. He raised his hand, caressed her cheek, then her neck. She chuckled when he slid his knuckles into the collar of her nightgown. It didn’t take more to rush things. She folded the blanket, straightened up on the bed, and threw her sleepwear over her shoulder. Psody sneered in turn as he furiously ripped off his shirt. When the ratwoman threw herself on him, all the worries of the last two days vanished into the night, through the window.
The Flaming One

Daughters and Sons of the Horned Rat,

I’d like to tell you how really sorry I am, I’ve fallen behind the pace I’ve set for myself. The fact is that the past few weeks have been very long. My work is more and more difficult, the situation in terms of employees, atmosphere and means has deteriorated, and it won’t get better. So I try to spend time with my family and friends, go for a walk to relax, or let off steam on video games, which means that the writing has slowed down a bit.

I’ll try to maintain a steady pace. I understand you can be a bit frustrated when you see the publications become more spacey. Above all, don’t hesitate to send me feedback, positive or negative, provided it is constructive, or to ask questions. I feel like I’m getting less reviews than with *The Enfant Terrible*. And I would be happy to answer them. Also, be sure to check out the DeviantArt ChildrenOfPsody page, or even offer me your drawings – the best ones may even become canonical, like the Pixpins’ painting that gave Schwanlin Finston her true face.

Thank you all for your understanding. I invite you to taste this new chapter, hoping to be able to serve you the next ones without making you wait too long.

Thank you for your loyalty. Long live Prince Steiner, and Glory to the Horned Rat!

The wind was blowing, taking with it the first petals of the cherry blossoms. The weather was splendid, the sun at its highest point. The air was heating up and heralded a summer that promised to be radiant. The people of Vereinbarung got used to the gentle warmth of this breeze from the Black Gulf, spotted at the west. It was market day, and the streets were full of activity. The large Karl Franz square, in particular, offered a particularly lively spectacle, twice a week. The children played chasing themselves or chasing after the hens, geese and sheep, the adults made their purchases, and the merchants who had just returned to work after their dinner recharged their stalls.

Three young common women, their arms laden with baskets full of fruit and vegetables, were joking. The eldest talked about her husband’s awkwardness, too dullard to be in a position of strength at night, in bed. The second recounted the last stupidity of his young son who had seen fit to help his father by trying to colour the dog with the paint intended to be brushed on the front door. The third, a little dreamy, confided that a young shopping boy had caught her attention. Should she respond to his advances? Surely, replied the oldest, herself married for a dozen years.
The second was going to add a dirty little joke, but something suddenly caught her eye. Her gaze focused on a shape that was slowly advancing in their direction. Her two friends in turn distinguished the odd silhouette to say the least.

Heads swivelled, voices gradually silenced, the atmosphere suddenly seemed much cooler.

The regular snapping of the horse’s hoofs ricocheted off the walls of the tall houses which demarcated the public square. It was a superb chestnut stallion, distinguished, in excellent physical condition. On its back, installed on the saddle carved with exceptional care, a great figure was holding the reins. Its face couldn’t be seen by anyone, because it was hidden under a hood of tanned leather, at most its thin and beardless chin. However, it looked very tall and thin. The murmurs around it became more worried when the inhabitants of Steinerburg saw that it was not alone on the mount. Indeed, a Skaven with dark coat was lying on the rump of the horse, completely naked, with strong handcuffs on the wrists and ankles, and a canvas bag on the head.

Without the slightest consideration for the inhabitants of Steinerburg, the stranger advanced, and passed the market place. He spotted a small lane between two blocks away. He stopped his horse there. He listened, and only heard a few rumours in the distance. He turned on his saddle, leaned towards his “passenger”, and murmured in queekish:

- We’re almost there. Continue to be very still-wise, and you may not suffer.

The prisoner stirred, and uttered a small groan of terror. The man gave a satisfied sneer. He heeled his horse.

He arrived at the Chalice Quarter. This place brought together the main temples of Steinerburg. In the Rat Kingdom, the same gods were prayed as in the Empire, but only the main Human deities had their temples. Six of them were thus privileged:

First, the traveller in search of spirituality was greeted by the temple of Shallya. This huge, white-stone-crafted building was sober, like the goddess it honoured. However, this construction had a large dormitory, separate cells for the dozen priestesses who stayed there permanently – usually the single ones, the married temple members had the option of living in a purpose-built building two blocks away. Most often, the unfortunate people who needed the services of this temple came from the Hammer Quarter, where the craftsmen worked and could have an accident, or they came from the Dove Quarter, more modest and less well attended. The poorest and the ailing ones didn’t dare to leave the Mousetrap, but those who braved this fear were not forced to cross the whole Chalice. In front of the temple was a large fountain blessed by the Matriarch of Shallya, an old woman named Mother Luana. This equipment had a reputation for always providing clean water.
The second god to receive recognition from the people of Vereinbarung was Morr. His temple and large garden were opposite the Shallya temple. Life and death are always closely linked, and the lives that died out in the house of the goddess of Compassion quickly found refuge in the immense protected park which collected the carnal envelopes. The building was even more austere than the Temple of Shallya. It was also darker, built with dark stones, with a roof covered with black slate. Few priests occupied this medium-sized building, directed with coldness and precision by the prior Wenceslas.

Taal and Rhya, the famous couple of gods affiliated with Nature and its forces, occupied a special place in the Chalice Quarter. In truth, they were the gods worshiped by the majority of the inhabitants of the Rat Kingdom. Farmers, stockbreeders, trackers... all the professions that approached the countryside, in short. Ludwig Steiner was himself from Talabheim, the city of the Empire where the largest known temple dedicated to these two deities was located. Even though he himself swore more by Verena, he had chosen to favour the most worshiped by the people gods. The topography of the Chalice Quarter had this gigantic building as its central point; the Temple of Taal and Rhya even had a large stone wall, and a closed-circuit river surrounded the area. There was a grove of trees within the grounds of this area where priests and priestesses could practice their rites, a menagerie, a flower garden with incredible colours and scents. The temple itself was imposing, its tall towers were covered with climbing plants. Its bell tower, in particular, almost disappeared under a sprawling mass of branches.

In the Libra Quarter, the richest district of the city where the Steiner domain was spotted, the pilgrim could pay homage to Verena, the goddess of Justice and Truth. The Grand Tribunal acted as a temple, as was customary, and all cases, from the mildest to the most serious, could be resolved there. The stranger knew that this temple sheltered some members of the sect of the Lorekeepers, among others the provost Tomas. The Lorekeepers gathered all the knowledge they could, and no knowledge was to be deliberately destroyed. This sometimes involved taking the risk of preserving dangerous, corrupted by Chaos, artefacts. A rather painful memory came back in memory of the hooded man, but it hardly stayed there. This scar, although still present in his mind, had not bothered him for a long time.

There remained a god who didn’t have the same recognition as the others in Vereinbarung. It was Sigmar, the youngest god of the whole Human pantheon. The priests of Sigmar were known to be the armed arm of the gods against any heretic and impious creature. Orcs, Mutants, Goblins were sworn enemies for the First Emperor who became the Last God. Sigmar was renowned for his extremism. As much as Ulric was detached from mortal affairs, preferring just to indulge in the brutality of combat, the sacred scriptures presented Sigmar Heldenhammer as a severe and intolerant god. The moderate worshippers tried to see Sigmar as a defender, a bulwark against all threats, but the most zealous were fanatics ready to exterminate without judgment or hesitation anything that seemed a little heretical to them.

It was therefore hardly conceivable to have Sigmarites in a kingdom where Humans and Skaven lived together. However, to avoid upsetting Emperor Karl Franz, and out of respect for the Humans who had followed him, Prince Ludwig had agreed to have a small building restored to dedicate it to
Sigmar in the Hammer Quarter, near the military barracks. However, he had imposed the firm condition for his priests never to consider ratmen as inferior to Humans. So far, there had been no problem, but no Skaven had entered this order yet.

Other gods like Myrmidia, Ulric, Manann or Ranald were regularly invoked, but none had an official temple. Which was normal for Ranald, the god of thieves. There was most likely a secret temple in every major city of Vereinbarung. Indeed, bandit networks existed everywhere, including and especially in the renegade kingdoms.

The foreigner did not need to go very far into the district. He approached the temple of Shallya. He saw three figures in front of the wide-open doors: two priestesses dressed with the “doves” white dress, a red-haired one and a blonde, and a little, blond boy aged a handful of seasons. When he turned towards the building, he saw the red-haired priestess pushing the child inside the building, and his ear heard her whisper: “Jehan, go wait for me in the refectory. Hurry up!” He couldn’t suppress an ironic pout. He visibly inspired distrust, and he didn’t mind. Without stepping out of his mount, he nodded politely and spoke in a clear, melodious voice.

- Good afternoon, my sisters.

The blonde priestess had a lightly-tight smirked.

- Welcome to the temple of the Goddess Shallya! I’m Sister Astrid, and here is Sister Judy!

Sister Judy Hoffnung had been back from Hoffnungshügel with the last orphans of the last Harvest, and had returned to her place at the Steinerburg temple. She had found her husband and their child, not without emotion.

- Do I feel like I’ve seen you before, sir? murmured the red-haired woman.

- You do, replied the hooded figure calmly. A few years ago, I came to visit the Prince. I have known him for years, my sister. No doubt you saw me at that time?

- It’s quite possible. So, what can we do for you?

- I came for Prior Romulus. I have to recalibrate his balance.

- Excuse me? asked Sister Astrid.

Sister Judy’s reaction was quite different.
- Of course! Copper trays always need a blow of wax!
- Should I also dust the weights?
- Absolutely, the ink on the parchment has just dried.

The two interlocutors nodded, and the hooded stranger asked:

- So, can I see him?
- You won’t here, sir. He’s working with Master Mage Prospero, at the Prince’s mansion. You’ll have to go there.
- I know the way. My sisters, I salute you.

Then he turned his horse around, and the mount left the place and set off at a walk towards the Libra Quarter.

Once disappeared from their field of vision, Sister Astrid asked Sister Judy:

- You really know this individual?
- I do, well... From a distance.
- And you managed to recognize him despite the time passed and the hood?
- It’s precisely thanks to the hood. If I’m not mistaken, he’s a Bright College Mage.

The blonde girl had a little shiver.

- He scares me a little…
- If this character is the one I’m thinking of, then luckily you don’t know his story. There you would be afraid.
- There was something wrong with him. His size, his build, that voice… He looked physically young, but with a much longer-lived experience in the way he stood and spoke.
- No wonder, he must have been in existence for over a century.
- A century? But no Human could live so long without being a ruin!
- I didn’t say he’s a Human, Sister Astrid. Have you never seen an Elf?

The girl’s eyes widened.

- An Elf?

- I’m surprised you haven’t seen him before, by the way. You have lived in the Rat Kingdom for longer than me, you should have crossed him?

- Must we believe that Shallya considered that it was not important for my mission to be in contact with this individual?

- I guess it’s a way of consider things.

- By the way, what did this gibberish mean?

- Gibberish? Ah, yes! Our little chitchat? Oh, nothing at all. It is a mean for the Lorekeepers of recognizing themselves. A succession of four sentences which cannot be pronounced by chance, and sufficiently abstruse to confuse those who do not know them.

- Oh, I see. A tit for tat response therefore means that you are both part of this Order?

- Yes, it was even thanks to the Lorekeepers that I have been involved in the draft constitution of the Rat Kingdom of the Rats.

- Have you seen? He was transporting a prisoner.

- I have, but I learned to see only what concerns me.

- Um... I hope this stranger doesn’t bring misfortune with him.

Sister Judy didn’t answer, but she couldn’t help thinking the same thing.

The stranger headed slowly but surely to the top of the hill. As he got closer to his goal, the hooded character appreciated the change of architecture. He went up streets whose houses were getting bigger, more and more worked and solid. The horseshoes of the horse slammed, the cobblestones replaced the clay under its hooves.

*They should still think about opening Colleges of Magic here...*

It was something that cruelly lacked in a worthy city, in the spirit of the Elf. He hadn’t actually seen any construction that came close or far to a school of magic. Now, if Master Mage Prospero
Steiner was known as the only Skaven able to use magic, could there be Humans with such dispositions? What if other Skaven prove to be able? So many questions he intended to share with the Prince.

Finally, when he arrived at the large gate which demarcated the Libra Quarter, the man stopped his mount, and spoke directly to the guards in a clear voice.

- Greetings, gentlemen.

The two soldiers immediately felt uneasy, moved by a bad feeling.

- What do you want, citizen?
- I would like to see Prior Romulus.
- He must be at Shallya temple.
- I’m coming from, I was assured that he was working with his Excellency the Master Mage this day.
- Who are you? replied the other one.

Without saying a word, the individual held out his right hand and prepared to remove his glove. The two guards immediately stepped back, harquebus pointing towards the visitor. The latter stopped, and whispered with a small smile:

- Don’t worry, I’m just showing you an official seal that her holiness the High Priestess Marieka van der Perssen of the Temple of Verena in Altdorf entrusted to me.

He gently pulled the leather glove, and presented his finger. The first guard stepped forward, narrowed his eyes, and stared at the ring, and the small carved metal disc that adorned it.

- This is rightly Verena’s seal. Have I never seen you before, around here?

When he looked up, he could see the stranger’s eyes. They sparkled with a purple glow. The man on horseback ran his hand through his hair. For a moment, the guard thought he saw a lock of hair under the hood fabric reflecting the sunlight with an orange glow, like a piece of coppery silk.
The other guard called:

- Pat!

A third, younger man-in-arms immediately arrived.

- Fetch Prior Romulus. This gentleman says he is with the Master Mage. Move on!

The sine blade whistled through the air and fell on the training dummy. Once, twice, three times. At the head, then on the right side, then in the left leg.

- It must have hurt a lot! Bianka’s voice quipped.

Sigmund lowered his trusty sword and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He turned to his sister who was watching him training, sitting on a fence.

- Your strikes are precise, too. You always manage to type in the same places. Like what, you are really applied, when you don’t lose your head because of Black Hunger.

The young ratman approached the girl, picked up a water skin on a crate, and took a few sips. Then he whispered quietly:

- You haven’t seen anything yet, sister.

He took a deep breath, then turned, sending his arm forward, like a whip. Heart of Unicorn whipped through the air and whipped right into the torso of the mannequin. Again, he looked at Bianka. She had lost all indifference. She frankly applauds.

- Well done, well done!

- You look cute when you smile.
Bianka stopped immediately, and made a face.

- You idiot! Still, you’re really good!

The young ratman drew his sword from the mannequin.

- Say, how would you like to fight as well as I do?
- What? You’re kidding! replied the rat girl in a pinched tone.
- I definitively don’t. If you want, I can give you some advice, so you know at least how to grip a weapon.

She dropped from the barrier, and adjusted her dress.

- Oh, that wouldn’t be right.
- What do you mean?
- A well-bred girl of my rank doesn’t roll in this mud.
- Marjan is high ranked, too, and that doesn’t prevent her from knowing how to fight. It is not because you are a girl that you should stay in your library or on your loom!

Bianka bit her lower lip.

- Frankly, what would I look like?
- A strong, handsome woman. A woman who knows how to fight can be very beautiful. Have you ever thought of attracting boys?
- Oh, why you big...

They laughed together. Sigmund looked at his sister from head to toe and added:

- You will have to be dressed for that. No way I’m training you with this outfit.
- Ha! Do you see me half naked like strigany acrobats? Ah, sure, to entice the boys...

- No, rather with practical and solid clothes which protect well. Look at Marjan: when she wears her armour with her helmet, there’s no way to tell the difference with a man!

- Me, with an armour? How funny you are! How do you want me to stand with dozens of pounds on my back?

- There are padded leather clothes. I’m sure it would suit you perfectly!

Bianka pouted reflexively.

- After all... maybe I should know how to defend myself? The next time an Eshin assassin tries to enter our house...

The Black Skaven smiled satisfied. He was going to get a wooden sword from the rack when he heard a servant calling him.

- Master Sigmund?

- Yeah, Andreas?

- Your father, as well as his Highness the Prince, require your presence in the laboratory.

- Oh, right.

He turned to Bianka. His sister gave a little shoulder movement.

- Next time, perhaps, brave warrior? In the meantime, maybe I should sew for myself more… suitable clothes?

- Great idea, approved the great Black Skaven.

He sheathed his sword, and strode briskly toward his father’s laboratory.

When he entered the small building, he saw Psody and Steiner talking to a third person he had never seen before. It was a certainty for him, because he could never have forgotten a person with such features.
Before him stood a man, tall, so tall, taller than his grandfather. He was unusually thin, without appearing rickety or sick. On the contrary, he seemed to be in great shape. He wore a tunic made of precious fabrics abundantly decorated with golden threads, polished copper nails, leather straps, and patterns which regularly returned a symbol that the ratman couldn’t identify – a kind of stylized key with a rounded bit. His pants were matching, and his boots were impeccably waxed.

- Ah, there you are! This is my second grandson, Sigmund. I would entrust my life to him without the slightest hesitation. My child, I present to you Master Brisingr Steadyhand.

Master Brisingr Steadyhand bowed with a small wave of the hand. His movements were precise and distinguished, his fingers supple and graceful. He looked up, and his amethyst eyes held the wary look of the Black Skaven. What troubled most the latter was the stranger’s hair. They were a fiery red. Indeed, the word was not too strong. More or less vivid reflections seemed to run through the guest’s dishevelled mane, and the wicks moved slightly on their own, like the flames of a chimney fire.

- Aren’t you from here? ventured to ask Sigmund.

- He isn’t, replied his grandfather. Our friend lives in Altdorf, but he was born on the island of Ulthuan, the land of the High Elves.

It was then that Sigmund spotted the individual’s ears, slightly pointed. No more doubt, this man was not human. Psody continued:

- Master Steadyhand is Magister for the College of Fire, it is the school of magic where people learn to channel-use the wind of Aqshy.

- He is an expert in whom I have absolute confidence, added the Prince. He is one of the few people who found and brought your mother to me, years ago.

- Oh… nice to meet you, whispered Sigmund, less and less comfortable.

- He came to bring some documents to Romulus, which will help me write-compose an enchantment to purify the soil of the Nichetti estate, explained the White Skaven.

- And I’m also taking this opportunity to bring you a present, young man.

At these words, Sigmund frankly raised his eyebrows. For the first time, he had just heard the voice of the Elf. It was a soft, light, melodious, almost singing tone. In fact, it perfectly fitted with the character’s grace. Even without being Human or Elf himself, the Black Skaven understood that he had before him someone whose physiognomy would undoubtedly disturb more than one person
sensitive to the beauty of the body. This didn’t reassure him, he had heard of the beauty that could hide the worst darkness, like that of the slaves of Slaanesh.

Psody stepped back to a corner of the laboratory, toward a curtain. The curtain hid a small cubbyhole where he used to store his instruments and his parchment sheets. Sigmund felt his heart tense when he realized something else: the sight of the Elf had distracted him so far, but he had a characteristic odour in the room. A smell that is both familiar and unpleasant. The sliding of the wooden rings on the curtain rod re-focused his attention on his father.

The White Skaven had drawn the curtain, and revealed the cubbyhole, as well as a stool on which sat a completely naked Skaven, handcuffed to the wrists and ankles, with a canvas bag that covered his head.

*He’s the one who stinks so!*

The Elf approached the prisoner.

- I found him devouring the carcass of a cow. He couldn’t run very far, considering all the meat he had in his stomach.

And he snatched the bag with a quick gesture. Sigmund felt his blood catch on in his veins when he recognized Larn’s face. The latter opened wide, terrified eyes, and tried to scream. The chain gag stuck in his mouth prevented him from doing so, he could just make a muffled roar.

- You!

Sigmund raised his hands, his nails stretched out like claws, and advanced with a nervous step towards the Feral Skaven. Immediately, Brisingr raised his hand, and a sword with a blade of fire shot out in a crackling fire noise. The Black Skaven jumped back, arms crossed in front of his face.

Without losing his composure, the Elf murmured in a soft voice:

- Your Highness, please forgive my audacity, but I prefer to prevent an unfortunate accident rather than having to repair the damage, if it is even possible.

- You are absolved, Steadyhand. In truth, I wanted to avoid telling you, but my grandson has just
one small flaw: he tends to favor action over reflection.

The Elf replied with a small nod, then the fiery sword vanished in a snap. Sigmund caught his breath, and felt shame rise to his cheeks. He wanted to diversion by refocusing the conversation on the miserable prisoner.

- Did you have to follow him for a long time?

- It didn’t take me more than half a day to find this fugitive. Oh, it’s part of my Magister job; I am trained to track down every prey the Bright College is looking for. I fight Chaos in all of its forms, but when a friend asks me for a hand, I can give it to him. This one didn’t pose me any problem, I knew adversaries much more frightening.

- Are you a professional hunter?

- My game is everything that threatens the Empire and its allies, my hunting ground has no limits. I would go to the end of Naggaroth to find my target.

Brisingr’s mouth wrinkled in a strange little smile. The discomfort of the Black Skaven increased a notch. His grandfather’s voice make his ear swing.

- Did you have to face his accomplices, Master Steadyhand?

- No need to worry about this, your Highness: it hasn’t had time to find other individuals of its burrow. Its kindred must have abandoned it.

- And... was there damage-casualties?

- I’m afraid, Psody. Several heads of cattle were massacred, a sack of wheat grains soiled, one of the farmhands was taken a nasty blow, and I don’t mention the moral prejudice... I gave the farmer a hundred gold crowns of compensation.

- Do you know what that means, Sigmund?

The Black Skaven bowed his head.

- Yes, Father. Master Steadyhand, I’ll give you back this money later.

- I expected nothing less from you.

- Um... Father, can I speak to you in private?
The White Skaven shot a questioning look at the Elf, who just shrugged. The two Skaven found themselves in the park.

- How did he find Larn so easily?

- He’s very good at hunting unwanted people. His specialty is magical-magical creatures. This is not the case for this one, but as I expected, it lacked caution.

- Yes, but still! It was such a good coincidence!

Psody gave a little annoyed sigh.

- In fact, as soon as we captured Larn, I immediately sent him a missive through Brother Tomas. Brisingr Steadyhand is also a member of the Order of the Lorekeepers. I asked him to follow you discreetly to ensure that you accomplish your mission, while specifying to him in which direction you were gone-gone, so that he finds you directly.

Sigmund felt a violent whip in his spinal cord.

- Did you get this Elf to follow me?

- I did.

- You didn’t trust me!

- I trusted you by letting you take Larn! Brisingr would have returned without showing to you if you had been all the way, and I would have greeted him normally. Or else, he would have helped you if Larn’s accomplices were too many for you. But you failed, and you let an Eshin run away! Fortunately, this Elf was there, he minimized the damage! Right, have you finished with questions?

- Yes.

- Very well. Now go get two guards. You’re going to order them to put-throw Larn to the dungeon, where he will stay until the day he is beheaded publicly-

The White Skaven then raised an authoritarian index towards his son.

- And I strictly forbid you to approach him. I don’t want you to be less than a hundred yards from him until his execution. If you ever thought of disobeying me, you’d regret it! You understand?
Sigmund didn’t answer, he just grunted in his beard.

- Do you understand? articulated Psody, two tones louder.

- Yes, Father, I understand! Right! Me not approach small vermin before execution! Very clear-limpid! Go get guards!

The Black Skaven left towards the main residence with a furious step.

* 

In the evening, the Prince invited Brisingr Steadyhand to his table for supper. The Magister was thus presented to the sisters of Sigmund. Gabriel, once again, was far too scared to dare to go down to the same floor as the newcomer, and was not present.

- In truth, it is really very pleasant to see two peoples so dissimilar build a common history hand in hand. I feel like I’m seeing a tremendous development from what we started with Heike years ago.

- It may not be that simple, then observed the Prince. The Rat Kingdom has been in place for six years now, and we have recently observed tensions between Humans and Skaven. We are working to resolve communication issues, but we will have to remain vigilant.

- It will indeed be necessary to ensure that these “communication issues” do not gain too much scale to become out of control. And since we are talking about “control”, Your Highness, I would like to draw your attention to magical questions.

- That is to say, Steadyhand?

The Magister took his inspiration, and explained in one go:

- Your kingdom seems to be developing well, and Humans like Skaven seem to live there harmoniously, except for the little worries you just mentioned. But since my arrival, I noticed that if the gods have their house well, it is not the same for people who can perceive and tame the winds of Magic. All along my way to you, I have regularly felt the presence of these winds, they blow well within your borders. And so, I’m pretty sure there are people who can handle these energies. It’s mathematical.

- You can be frankly sure, my friend, replied the Prince. Learn that a couple of Skaven came to see my son a few days ago. They introduced him to their firstborn. The baby had white fur and two small horns.

- Oh… the characteristic features of the Skaven who don’t need warpstone to tame the winds of
- If there was one, there will probably be others, and I’m not talking about, please note, my fellow Human beings who could also become mages!

- The child you are talking about... is it a boy?

- Yes.

- Um... too bad, I would have been curious to see a girl with the characteristics of the White Skaven.

- Patience, this is only the first one. Will there be others, maybe fair sex?

- In the meantime, I’m asking you, your Majesty: do you plan to open colleges?

- It’s not a priority yet, but I think about it more and more regularly. I was able to hire the services of a druid to teach Psody the magic of Ghyran, but for an entire kingdom, that won’t be sufficient. I should write a letter to Emperor Karl Franz to get his agreement. Maybe he would agree to send me some volunteer mages?

- If I support your request to him, it will be a certainty, your Highness.

As they finished the dessert, Psody stood up.

- If you allow me, I’m going to bed. The day was long-long. Besides, tomorrow I have to get up early. Long work awaits us, Master Steadyhand.

- I wish you to have a good night, my friend.

The White Skaven left the dining room without adding a word. The tall Human yawned.

- I will also go. The gods forgive me, but with age, I tire faster.

And the Prince went out in his turn. Isolde had retained the “the gods forgive me”, and this expression awoke in her a furious surge of curiosity. She asked without hesitation:

- And what god you use to pray, Master Mage?

This unsubtle interrogation did not fail to annoy Heike.
- Come on, Isolde! You shouldn’t ask that kind of question! It’s very rude!

Isolde jumped, and remained frozen, surprised by the brutal raising of her mother’s tone. She realized that the matter was serious when she saw her asking the magician, all confused:

- Please, Master Steadyhand, forgive my daughter’s indiscretion.

Fortunately, the Elf did not seem offended.

- It doesn’t matter, little mouse. I appreciate curiosity when it is not tainted with bad feelings. It is true that some people could be angry if you approach this subject in this way, but I know what kind of interlocutor I am dealing with, in this case a child, admittedly a bit direct, but completely innocent.

Brisingr spoke directly to the little girl.

- Remember what your mother just said: there are subjects that not everyone can talk about freely, and religion is one of them. So you have to be sure you are close enough to someone before you question them about it. You understood well?

Isolde nodded nervously. The Elf’s smile widened a bit.

- Come on, I can answer your question: I believe in Hoeth. He is the god of knowledge and learning for my people. For magicians, he is also the closest god to magic. Humans know Shallya, Ulric, Verena or Taal, but they have no god that is directly related to magic. You know why?

- Uh… no.

- Because Humans didn’t know magic, when they started to hear the voices of their gods. If I’m not mistaken, Sigmar is the youngest Human god. He was such an exceptional man that the gods decided to make him one of them. It was over two thousand five hundred years ago.

- Oh, it’s been a long time!

- For you, maybe, and for me too, but for the gods, it’s not that long.

The Elf cleared his throat and raised a learned index finger.
“The Elves gods appeared a little time before the Human gods. And since always, the Elves know how to use magic much better than all the other people. It’s like that. So humans didn’t know how to use magic. And then, one day, there was a very big battle, two hundred years ago. The Emperor of Humans was called Magnus the Pious. He had to face a huge army, constituted with demons, rabid warriors, and fierce monsters. This emperor then asked the Dwarves for help to craft weapons, armours and war machines for him. And he begged the Elves to send in reinforcements. At that time, apart from a few villages in the forests, the Elves did not live in the Empire, but on a large island in the middle of the sea, the island of Ulthuan, where my parents were born. The High Elves, as they are called, did have a small army to send, but most of all, they had magic. The Phoenix King sent a whole troop of magicians. They were led by Archimage Teclis, the greatest magician the Elves had ever known.”

The eyes of the captivated by the story little girl shone like a pair of shooting stars. Heike herself was surprised to see the magician tell the story with a conviction that Yavandir Palebough wouldn’t have disparaged. Brisingr continued:

- Teclis was so powerful that he was able to summon the greatest storms, to shake the earth, or to make flames rain. They threw themselves into battle alongside the warriors of Humans and Dwarves, all together against the army of Chaos monsters.

- And... who won?

- Humans, of course, without that, you wouldn’t be here today, and neither would I. Emperor Magnus understood the usefulness of magic. He asked the Elf mages to stay a while to teach Humans how to use it. This is how they created the Colleges of Magic which are in Altdorf. Each magician who practices the magic of one of the eight Colleges can therefore thank the Elves.

- Even my father? He no longer uses the magic of the Feral Skaven.

- Indeed, Heike intervened. Your father learned to use Jade magic.

- The magic of life... yes, it’s better than the Warp. So, magic has only been in the Empire for two hundred years. It’s not much compared to the existence of this Empire. And Humans have always viewed Hoeth as an Elf god. They did not want to venerate him, even if they tolerate his presence at their home. I thank him for all that I have been able to accomplish thanks to magic. And that’s why I think it’s important to open schools of magic here.

- My daughter will guide you to your room, Master Steadyhand. Bianka, can you take our guest to the Poppies room?

- Certainly, Mother.

- I’m going to bed your sister, and... join your father.

- Good night, Mother, good night, Soso!
A few minutes later, the girl-rat finished presenting the bedroom to the Elf.

- If you need anything, pull the cord, a servant will come in the minute.
- Thank you very much, young girl.

Bianka bowed a little, and was about to leave the room, when she heard Brisingr’s voice.

- Your parents seem to be doing well, little mouse.

She stopped at once, and turned on her heels. She asked in a pinched tone:

- Yes and so?
- So, I think they’re really happy.
- They are happy to be together, Father left for months.
- They are even very happy…

The girl got impatient.

- Could you be clearer instead of speaking in riddles, Master Steadyhand?
- Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if, in the next few months, there is a new kid in your family, if you see what I mean, little mouse!

Bianka stepped back and walked through the door, without looking away from Brisingr.

- I do not know you, I have never seen you, and I beg you also to stop speaking so colloquially!
- I’m much older than you, I’m taking birth right.
- Is it a custom of High Elf people to disrespect your host?
- It’s a long time since I have ended to be socially a High Elf, my child.
- I’ve just asked you a simple question, Brisingr Steadyhand: if I go to Ulthuan someday, will I have the right to insult the people who welcome me?
- If you go to Ulthuan someday, at best, the guards won’t let you leave your boat. At worst, the Mages will dissect you. High Elves don’t like Skaven. In fact, they don’t like anyone.

Bianka remained speechless. When she saw Brisingr’s little smile lengthen, adrenaline whipped her senses. She reflexively slammed the door, then quickly left the hallway. She clenched her fists.

*I feel like I won’t appreciate this beanpole!*
Condemnations

Children of the Horned Rat,

As you know, Clan Pestilens decided to attempt an attack on France. Like a large majority of my compatriots, I am forced to remain confined to my home. But that doesn’t stop me from cultivating a certain fever: creativity. If my homeland is idling, Vereinbarung continues to live at full speed.

I take this opportunity to thank all the people who are on the front line, despite the danger of Skaven infection: all the hospital staff, firefighters, traders and police, who have to work in much more difficult conditions without the less material recognition. Bravo everyone, be strong, we will be admiring.

Glory to the Horned Rat!

When Heike Steiner woke up, she saw that she was alone. She narrowed her eyes and let out a sad sigh. She got up, took her clothes under her arm, went to the bathroom, took off her nightgown, and made her morning toilet. During her ablutions, she was thinking about the situation.

For two days, her companion had been locked up in the library for hours with Brisingr Steadyhand. Certainly, she had a lot of respect for the Elf. His face was tied to the definitive change of her life. Her earliest memories were the burrows of a Feral Skaven colony whose name had remained unknown to her. Like all the unfortunate girls born in the Under-Empire, everything had been nothing but darkness, screams, violence and terror. Locked in a dark cell, she had only two other older females for companionship. Regularly, a fat ratman used to come to bring them an infamous food. One day, Heike’s greatest comrade in misfortune was examined, fiddled in a very embarrassing way by three Skaven, who carried her outside with cries of joy and impatient sneers. Poor Heike understood that it was not a release awaiting the breeder.

The little girl grew a little, felt her body change, and over time, an anguish that grew, grew... Finally, when she saw Skaven entering the dark room, she understood that a terrible fate was going to happen to her.

But the Clanrats hadn’t locked her in the breeder cell. They had tied her upside down on a pole, then had headed to the surface. Again, the memories were blurred. The clash of arms, the
groans of agony, the blows... Later, she had learned what had happened: a band of mercenaries had come to clean up the area, this colony was rather small. The two Skaven who carried her had tried to run away on their side, and had hidden in a stable a little further. But the small group had been followed. Quickly, three things had rolled into the stable and eliminated her carriers. Three beings she hadn’t known how to identify. She had not been taught to differentiate the races of the enemies of the Sons of the Horned Rat. She had not been taught to speak, moreover, she had not even been given a name.

The first one was the smallest, and yet it was far more massive than the ordinary Clanrats. Its hair was long, and unlike the other two, it had a hairy chin.

The second one was very thin, wore colourful clothes, and it was not possible to see its face because of a mask it wore constantly.

The third one was the most notable. Even taller and thinner than the masked one, its mane was particularly impressive, sparkling and wavy like flames.

These three characters then had detached her. She had tried to flee, but too exhausted, had not gone far. She had the surprise of her life when she saw that the three strange things did her no harm. They kept her in the barn for a few days, brought her something to eat, and tried to speak to her several times. She hadn’t understood a word, but the intentions of their voices were comforting.

Later, they had to make her travel indefinable time in a crate. They had taken care to drug her soup. When she woke up, she had seen a new face, radiating benevolence. It called her “Heike”. Over time, she learned to articulate a few words, then her language developed, so much so that she soon called this face “Father”.

The three faces of her liberators were forever engraved in her memory. And over time, she knew how to put a name on each of them.

The Human was Hallbjörn Ludviksson, captain of a company of mercenaries from Norsca. He had worked several times for Ludwig Steiner, before leaving for his homeland with enough gold to establish and equip an entire army.

The Masked Elf was called Yavandir Palebough. Officially, he was an accomplished artist. Unofficially, he joined the Order of Lorekeepers, and got into the habit of working regularly for the representatives of Verena.
And finally, the other Elf was Brisingr Steadyhand. He who used to be distant and cynical was the one who tried to make contact first, and most assiduously. The first time, he hadn’t hesitated to encourage her to eat her soup by getting on all fours and drinking from the bowl.

These memories had formed the foundations of Romulus and Steiner’s studies of the Feral Skaven people. Years had passed since then. Heike had grown into a fulfilled young woman, and then meeting Psody had made her life perfectly happy.

Brisingr Steadyhand was her godfather. Whenever she saw him or heard about him, she was happy. The bad memories of the beginning of her existence were quickly supplanted by hope, renewal, her transformation from a common breeding machine to a pampered young girl. And if Ludwig Steiner was her father, the Magister remained her benefactor, and she never had the least negative feeling towards him.

However, his day, she couldn’t help but feel a kind of jealousy.

It had been two days Brisingr Steadyhand was the centre of attraction for Psody. Two days that they worked from morning to night in the office of the White Skaven. Of course, an entire area had to be saved from the Feral Skaven corruption, but it seemed to grab the attention of her companion so much that she felt herself a little neglected.

Maybe she should tell him about her feelings?

_We’ll see, it’s only temporary. For now, I’ll let him focus on this work._

She finished arranging the fur on her face, then dried herself and put on her dress. Before leaving the bathroom, her gaze fell one last time on the mirror. She stood there for a few moments... and her heart warmed a few.

No one knew the exact age of the young woman. Her official birthday was the day Ludwig Steiner first saw her in his secret laboratory in Altdorf, but no way of knowing the day or the year she was born. Romulus and Brisingr had made some estimates based on what they knew about the mores of the inhabitants of the Under-Empire. Fortunately, she had not yet been treated with warpstone. Usually, the Feral Skaven began to apply their infamous decoctions to girls when they reached the age of two. In any case, the still healthy girls who had been Harvested never looked more than two years old.
Considering this fact, and the time spent in Altdorf since then, Heike had already lived almost twelve years. She was a little older than the White Skaven who she shared her life and had five children with. For a Human, it had been thirty-six years. Some of wives among her friends were grandmothers at that age. She wasn’t.

*Another question to deal with, now that the Harvests are over. Hum-hum… For Sigmund, I don’t know, but his sister and Kit should do something in this way!* she said to herself with a small smile on her lips.

She considered her reflect one last time, examined herself carefully. Twelve Skaven years including the first two very tough, five children, and yet...

*Yes, I’m doing pretty well... I’m still desirable, I think. Besides, I know someone who didn’t fail to remind me this last night!* 

Her smile grew longer as he thought of how the night before had ended. But as Psody’s face came back to her, another much less cheerful memory stroke without warning.

*That, on the other hand, cannot wait any longer. I have to know!* 

Determined, the ratwoman wrapped her scarf around her neck, exited the manor and left the family estate.

- *Come in!*

Romulus felt his face relax when he saw Heike enter his small study.

- *Greetings, my child.*
- *Good morning, Prior.*
- *How are you today?*
- *I’m fine. I was wondering if my children would finally meet someone to share their life with?*
- *It’s normal. What good mother is not worried about the future of her children? Whether it is*
success, fulfilment, or offspring?

- For Gab and Isolde, it’s too early, of course, but the three older ones... None of them introduced me to someone likely to integrate our family.

- They’re still young, Heike. You don’t have to worry.

- My main concern is for the twins. I love them both so much, but... they are so characteristic!

- It is true that Sigmund’s Black Hunger can be a problem for torque stability.

- It’s not only Sigmund. Bianka too is a strong head. Very proud, even rather imbue of herself... I’m afraid her to put off everyone, all the time.

- Maybe you should tell her your concern?

- I’m not sure how.

The Human looked surprised.

- She’s your daughter, you’re the best person to speak to her frankly.

- Without a doubt. I should think about it with Psody. I would like to have his opinion, but I shall have to wait.

- Yes, he’s very busy right now. You know him, he won’t stop until he finishes his preparation.

- Fortunately, that doesn’t affect the feelings I have for him. Right now, I see him less often, but I’m happy with him, and I love him the same way we had when we were in Altdorf.

- This is the essential thing, my child. And I’m sure he appreciates the support you and your children give him as much.

- It reminds me of his study of books on Lizardmen. He was already with Master Steadyhand.

- Yes, but this time, he won’t leave you to a dangerous expedition. Fortunately, according to Clarin’s last post, rot has not progressed at Nichetti Estate. The animals have not carried diseases too far away, so far confining the area has proven to be effective.

- Of course, but I noticed that even if it progresses, all this work is not such a good thing for him, in the end.

- What do you mean, my child?

- Well, when he came back, he was tired, but he looked happy. Me too, our children too, we were all happy to see the end of the Harvests. But this new concern seems to weigh him more.

- It’s about his past, it can stir up bad memories...

- And yet I still feel him more upset than he should?

- My child, there was an attempted murder against him! Only a madman wouldn’t feel upset.
Heike felt a touch of anger tickle her heart. She couldn’t seem to steer the conversation as well as she wanted. Also, she decided to try another approach, more direct. She sported a determined expression, and asked:

- Prior, do I feel like you are hiding something from me?

And it had the desired effect. Even if Romulus seemed to remain impassive, he took a second too long to answer:

- What makes you say that?

- I know about Esmeralda’s calming nectar. My mate puts it in his tea. That means he isn’t sleeping well these days. I’ve noticed that at night, either he doesn’t sleep at all, or he sleeps too much and he has trouble getting up. You are the one who provide him these decoctions. I am his wife. If he has a real problem, I have the right to know.

- Well, my child, he’s the person you have to speak about to, I am not.

Heike then stared the Shallean priest straight in the eyes.

- Prior Romulus, is my husband suffering from something really serious?

The Human sighed, and resigned himself to explaining:

- The only thing that has really hurt him lately is the distance. The last Harvest lasted several months, he and his companions had to cross the Empire and take enormous risks, all while staying away from you and your young children. It’s the kind of thing you recover painfully. Grant him a little more time, in a few weeks, he’ll get better. For now, he needs smaller doses. Don’t worry about it. Rather concern about Sigmund. I think he needs your affection more. Unlike Psody, he’s still young, and is not yet mature enough to endure all that he has already sustained without sequelae.

He stretched and massaged his neck.

- I have to leave you now. Your father planned to execute the Feral Skaven Master Steadyhand captured. The news of his arrest has toured neighboring towns, the people are demanding justice.
- Are you sure the people demand justice when there is a public execution?

The Skaven woman had spoken in a heavy voice of reproach. Romulus pouted.

- I’m sure the opposite. I witnessed many such punishments when I was in Talabheim. Rather, this kind of gathering is a way for the people to let go of their fear and anger at a target that the authorities point to. I don’t approve, just like you don’t seem to approve. But the Prince decided to make an example. To reverse this decision would be an admission of weakness. Just like forgiving this individual who committed two things: attempted murder of your man, and evasion of our justice.

- Are you sure his escape is so blameworthy?

- He didn’t trust Sigmund.

- We are his enemies and he does not understand our way of reasoning. I was in his shoes, Prior. When I was their prisoner in Gottliebschloss, if Chitik had taken me to another place in the countryside, with no one else, I would have not hesitated to escape him at the first opportunity!

- Even with the promise to be released without any harm once you arrive at your destination? You wouldn’t have trusted him?

- I... oh, I can’t say.

Indeed, Heike had often thought about it. Deep down, she knew that she had trusted the big Black Skaven throughout her captivity, even without knowing that he was his companion’s blood brother. Romulus continued:

- Larn had a chance. As he reasoned like a Feral Skaven, he listened to his survival instinct. His fate is sealed. All I can do is comfort him a little.

- Couldn’t you do it while he was still in his cell? He would have faced the scaffold calmly!

- No, alas, he was not in good condition. We had to drug him to prevent him from killing himself by smashing his head on the walls. He won’t be untied until his execution time. Only then, I hope to be able to relieve his soul.

- Good for you, Prior. It is out of the question, as for me, to attend this exhibition! I’m going back to my children!

Without giving the Human time to respond, the ratmother left the office.
The Hammer Quarter was where the Steinerburg military barracks was located. It was also the place where the prison was built, on the other side of the large square, and the small building dedicated to Sigmar, too. There was no pillory, the Prince refused this kind of practice, believing that public deterrence was not effective enough. But some crimes had to end with death penalty. So, on occasion, workers would build a large wooden platform. In some cases, they set up a gallows, in others, they fixed a chopping block.

Prince Ludwig Steiner had come to personally attend the execution of the sentence. He was installed in a small space bounded by a barrier, under a large canvas stretched by long poles, and surrounded by guards. Two Humans were installed at his side: Prior Romulus and Commander Johannes Schmetterling. The latter had a stone face, completely impassive. Over the years, such a spectacle had become so familiar to him that it didn’t cause him the slightest emotion.

Provost Tomas was also present. He was a tall, thin thirty years old man, with long blond hair tied in a ponytail, and a slight beard under a large, triangular nose. He used to scan the world with two little black eyes – one of them was actually a glass eye – and a long, clear scar running across his face from top to bottom.

Tomas had met Psody during the expedition that had taken him to Lustria six years earlier. Expert in matters of peoples, in particular Lizardmen, he was able to speak fluently a dozen languages, including Queekish and the language of the Slanns. Passionate about Ludwig Steiner’s project, he had followed the procession to the Renegade Crowns, and had become the “chief agent” of liaison with the Order of the Lorekeepers, of which the Prince and Prior Romulus were a part. Once all the first volunteers were installed, the Prince had kept his word, and had him make a glass eye; the Master Mutator from Psody’s former burrow had maimed him in the battle before they left.

Clerk Tomas had been appointed as judge by the Prince, and dispensed justice according to the model of the Imperial Code. He had a reputation for being relatively lenient towards sincere repentant ones, but he was ruthless against criminals that didn’t feel any regret with their choices, and everyone knew that he was perfectly capable of make the difference between a liar and a frank person. He was the one who suggested the public execution of Larn to the Prince. No one had blamed him for a dry heart. It was necessary to mark the blow.

A huge man in ornate armour approached the tent and leaned over the barrier. It was Jochen Gottlieb.

- Your Highness, everything is ready. With your permission, we can start.

- Is your comrade in place?

- See for yourself.
And he pointed to the roof of one of the buildings adjacent to the barracks. Sat on the roof, under one of the beams, Nedland Grangecoq was waiting, his rifle in hands. The latter made a gesture to the Prince, who did the same back.

- I’m not sure I really like the presence of this Halfling, your Highness.
- I’m counting on him to calm things down, if necessary.
- By shooting in the crowd?
- Of course not, Schmetterling! He’s able to send the bullet exactly where he wants. The first one who dares to overflow will see the impact right in front of him, it shall cool anyone.
- My men are trained to contain stampedes, your Majesty.
- Two precautions are better than one, Schmetterling.

The Prince waved.

- Go ahead, Brotzmann.

Luther Brotzmann, herald at the court, had been instructed to read the sentence aloud, so that it would make a deep impression. He was a tall, slender middle-aged Human with a long, well-trimmed moustache and a piercing gaze under thick eyebrows. He left his seat, bowed politely, and climbed onto the platform. He raised his hands, asking for silence. When calm returned to the square, Brotzmann took out a parchment from his leather case, and read in a powerful voice:

“Hear ye! Hear ye! Brave folks of Steinerburg, there have been rumours that we had been infiltrated by the Feral Skaven. His Majesty Prince Ludwig the First here present recognizes that these concerns are well-founded. To date, the threat has been contained, but his High Magnificence would like to remind to you, good people, that his best collaborators have not waited to react and take the necessary measures.”

“A unique Feral Skaven broke into our land, killed a brave soldier who conscientiously did his work, wanted to threat the life of the Princely Family, then wanted to flee the justice of Vereinbarung, with damage. The Prince wants to prove to you that he will have no pity for any invader, be it Humans, Orcs, or Skaven of the Under-Empire.”

“This is why, damsels, gentlemen, inhabitants of the Rat Kingdom, this murderer has been sentenced to death by beheading.”

The crowd howled with joy and applauded before letting the herald finish his reading.
“Today we shall not just execute a killer. We’ll show that the Under-Empire will never make us fail, us, men and women who constitute Vereinbarung. We are a united people, and no one can ever break the bonds that unite Humans and Skaven. Let this be an example for everyone!”

Brotzmann put the parchment away and climbed down from the platform. A small procession of soldiers then arrived from the side, opposite the space where the Prince and the officials were installed. The public redoubled their ferocity. In the midst of the soldiers, there was a Human and two Skaven: Marjan Gottlieb walked to the left of Larn, ready to protect the condemned ratman with his shield from any projectile. Psody walked cautiously to the right of the Feral Skaven.

Marjan remained focused, trying not to pay attention to all the hatred spewed out by the angry people. In her heart, she congratulated herself for having succeeded in convincing the Tenenbaum family not to attend this sinister ritual.

Larn was fearing to death. Tears in his eyes, he stammered:

- What will happen to me? What are you going to do-do to me?

Psody leaned forward, and murmured in Queekish:

- You tried to assassinate me, the Prince’s son. We gave you a chance to leave, you rejected-refused it. You wanted to save yourself, you didn’t succeed. My people must understand-realise that they have nothing to fear from the Skaven of the Under-Empire as long as the Steiner line is on the throne. And your people need to understand it is a very, very, very bad idea to go after us.

- And... so what?

- What do you think? You’re about to die, right here-now!

Larn burst into tears. But nobody let themselves be pitied, or even embarrassed. On the contrary, the crowd was unleashed. The insults spurted among the rotten fruits. The ratwomen were the most passionate, and called the Feral Skaven “rapist”, “torturer” and other “child killer”. Finally, the procession arrived at the foot of the platform. Marjan pushed the Feral Skaven to the log. She forced him to kneel down, tied his feet with strong handcuffs, and waited.

Romulus leaned toward the Prince.

- Have you noticed, Ludwig? Skaven citizens seem to be twice as vindictive than Human ones.
- Yes, I saw, and I don’t like it.
- It’s like they wanted to prove to Humans that they weren’t like Larn.
- For me, it’s obvious!
- For you and me, it is... but for themselves?

The Prince didn’t answer. The prior got up.

- Come on, it’s my turn.

He climbed onto the platform and camped alongside Psody. Larn looked up, and in his gaze perplexity mingled with fear.

- I am Romulus, a priest responsible for softening and facilitating your end, explained the Human in the language of the Feral Skaven. I can’t speak for the Horned Rat, but my goddess, Shallya, will agree to relieve your fear. Are you ready to meet your god?

The Gutter Runner yelped in despair.

- Let me go-live! I will disappear! Over-over, the Rat Kingdom! I’ll go to Skavenblight or Sub-Delberz! Let me go-live!
- Sorry, but it is not possible-possible. You should have obeyed Sigmund. Now you have to take on the consequences-consequences.

The wheel was spinning, the sparks crackling around the edge of the axed. The scraping, the little clicks were sounds familiar to the ear that received them at that moment. Familiar, and rather pleasant. The Black Skaven holding the handle raised his hand, stopped pressing the pedal, and carefully examined the steel head. He blew on it to evacuate the impurities, and gave a satisfied little smile. He put his tool on the table, picked up the bottle from the wood, and took a few sips of wine.

Nikolaus Richter was one of the jailers of the Steinerburg prison. He also exercised the unwanted function of executioner. His black coat, impressive musculature, and unkind face were all advantages for this profession.
The Rat Kingdom was relatively stable, and Prince Ludwig the First preferred prison or forced labour to mutilation or death. However, the Old World remained cruel and expeditious, and life was already dangerous enough not to let an assassin or rapist take the risk of recidivism, even after years of dungeon. Not to mention the cultists. They weren’t found yet at Vereinbarung, but the law was very clear: anyone caught worshiping the forbidden gods was immediately put in jail before execution.

Nikolaus had already shortened the lives of many criminals by rope or axe. The Prince was a man who was repelled by torture, and when a man or a woman, Human or Skaven, was found guilty of an abominable crime punishable by death penalty, which hardly happened more than once a month, the punishment should never be dragged out. Death was to come as quickly, and as cleanly as possible. No wheel torture, no pyre, no drowning. No, generally, hanging or beheading was quite sufficient.

Nikolaus was not particularly satisfied with this work, he took no sadistic pleasure in it. However, he was not ashamed of it, either. He saw himself as a neutral “executor”, the person who had to do the dirty work and carry out the most extreme sentences because someone was needed to do it. Not a joyful job, but necessary for the maintenance of a balanced society. In his heyday, he even experienced a kind of satisfaction. He considered himself devoted and courageous in accepting to do what a large majority of respectable citizens would not have dared.

And then it brought him money. Even if this work was occasional, financial compensation was important, which facilitated his life as a couple.

He had met Serah Hisbald, a woman who was not very attentive to his profession, from the time he regularly covered her with gifts. The neighbourhood gossip, the cross eyes didn’t count for Serah. This seamstress was probably the best dressed soldier’s wife. Making her a happy woman was worth getting his hands a little dirty. And still, was “dirty” the right word? It was more like social cleansing.

Lately, he had done his accounts, and had realized with pleasure that with this additional remuneration, he had the means to place their first child at the lessons of Brother Karl Seehecht, the priest of Verena who used to teach the children of the Steinerburg elite. He had spoken about it to his wife, who had immediately approved the proposal. Once she would be old enough, their daughter would become much more educated than her parents. Nothing but benefit for everybody.

But for now, his victim of the day was waiting. Nikolaus was curious; he had never participated in a Harvest, and Larn was the first Feral Skaven he would ship to the other side. Out of curiosity, he came to visit him in its cell. He hadn’t understood the gibberish of this strange and disgusting young ratman, but its behaviour was no different from that of a Vereinbarung sentenced one.
Anyway, he must have the same blood as the rest of us. A beautiful, dark red.

He got up, grabbed his axe firmly, turned it in his hands, and headed for the exit. He was about to walk through the door, when an unpleasant little tickling in his abdomen made him grumble. With a sigh, he went to the toilets. It is out of the question for a conscientious professional to work with a full bladder.

As he was doing what he had to do, the executioner heard the latrine door handle move behind him. He grumbled in an annoyed voice:

- Wait, I’m in.

Romulus sighed in disappointment. Larn couldn’t articulate a single coherent word. He still wanted to reason with the Feral Skaven, but he couldn’t even hear himself speak. The crowd was more and more excited. So much so that the Prince worried.

- Schmetterling, what is your man doing?

- He always takes his time, your Highness. I will tell him to lose this bad habit.

- People are generally excited by public executions, but not such as now! growled Tomas.

- It must be said that this is the first time... Ah, there he is!

Brotzmann gestured, and a young cadet rolled his drum. Everyone stopped making noise. Romulus, Psody and Marjan went down to join the Prince as the large hooded figure of the executioner appeared, his heavy axe resting on his shoulder. The great Black Skaven advanced quietly, and climbed the stairs without hurrying, before finding himself beside the criminal.

Still on his knees, his head on the block, Larn seemed ready to strangle himself with terror.

The executioner then put down his axe, leaned towards the Feral Skaven, grabbed his wrist, and forced him to put his two hands tied on the wooden base. Then he whispered in Queekish:
- I think you lost something.

Larn’s terror diminished slightly, under the influence of puzzlement. But he didn’t have any time to think. With a sharp movement of the tip of his tail, the Black Skaven planted firmly in the hand of the Feral Skaven the nail that had allowed his escape.

Larn screamed in pain. The executioner tore off his hood. The Feral Skaven squawked twice as loud when he saw Sigmund’s furious face.

- I told you I would crush you in two, Larn! And I also told you I’m a man of his word!

And with a gesture, he grabbed Larn’s head with both hands, and plunged it on the nail.

There were screams in the crowd, but they were hardly noticeable because of the strident screeches emitted by the Gutter Runner. With one hand, Sigmund pulled his head back. The poor condemned man no longer had a left eye, torn off by the nail. The young Steiner didn’t lose an ounce of anger.

- Nobody fucks Sigmund Steiner, you little asshole!

Without letting go of his grip, he flung a violent series of punches to the Feral Skaven. People’s stupor turned into panic. Some spectators felt bad, others scrambled to leave the place as quickly as possible. Nikolaus Richter, furious, a wet cloth on his neck, tried to get through the crowd by calling the impostor with all the worst names.

Psody jumped up and ran to the bottom of the platform, followed by Romulus and Schmetterling. The White Skaven exclaimed:

- Sigmund, that’s enough!

But the Black Skaven wasn’t listening. He continued to hammer the criminal with knuckle blows, tearing the fur, breaking the bones, crushing the muscles.

- SIGMUND! STOP-STOP IMMEDIATELY, IT’S AN ORDER!
- Your father urges you to stop! added the commander.

Sigmund suspended his gesture. Larn’s face was just a bruise. He gurgled painfully, spat out a small bundle of flesh. It was his tongue. The Black Skaven raised his fist again. The Prince got up and made a big gesture.

- Nedland!

A single shot answered that call, and the skull of the assassin Eshin burst.

Sigmund remained standing, dazed, his fist still stretched towards the sky. Jochen took the opportunity to surround him with three guards. They came down from the stage, the tall Black Skaven obediently followed them, shocked by surprise and disappointment. Marjan intervened when Richter approached the group, and took him to discuss further the way for arrange the prejudice.

As the citizens of Steinerburg dispersed, Schmetterling turned to Psody, looking irritated.

- Master Mage, with your magic, couldn’t you have done something to prevent this?

The White Skaven held the gaze of the tall red-haired man.

- Commander, our laws are very strict: no magic in a public place without it being carefully and scrupulously controlled, and no serious emergency.

- This was an emergency, don’t you think? The Prince would have agreed to that, I suppose. Wouldn’t you, your Majesty?

The commander spoke in a soft voice. Psody felt his whiskers flutter. Instinctively, he had the impression that Schmetterling deliberately wanted to put him and his father in an embarrassing situation. Fortunately, the latter had nothing of the shy little kinglet led in the background by a mind behind. Steiner replied in the same tone:

- I trust my son’s word. If Prospero felt that using magic would have been more risky, then that was true. The only person who suffered was the condemned inmate. What just happened was lamentable, but without consequences... except for its author.
- Count on me to remind him! said Psody.

- Of course, but you know the Magic of Life, couldn’t you have cast a harmless spell? Schmetterling insisted.

- There is no... well, I mean...

Psody realised he was starting down a slippery slope. He decided to stop the argument.

- I don’t have to justify-apologize to you, Commander!

- Prospero, fetch my daughter and join us at the barracks.

He didn’t have to repeat it. Without further ado, the White Skaven rushed to his home.

* 

The Skaven couple were in Commander Schmetterling’s office. By order of the Prince, the army chief had left Heike and Psody alone with their younger son, “in order to prepare him”. The tall Human had obeyed orders, with a little reluctance on his heart, but without answering a word.

The White Skaven was walking in circles on the carpet. The wood of the floor creaked under his nervous steps.

- I don’t believe it! My son who goes berserk and publicly massacres a condemned! What do I look like now?

Sat on a stool, Sigmund said nothing. But when he looked up, his face had an expression that displeased his father very strongly.

- And you have the nerve to challenge me! I don’t really like the way you’re looking at me!

The large Black Skaven remained silent.

- Come on! You do not understand where all that will lead you? First, you want to take revenge on
Feral Skaven. Then, when I want to execute one of them properly to avoid problems, you blame me for lacking in compassion, you naively-foolishly trust him, he takes advantage to escape, and when we catch him back, instead of doing things in a civilized way, it turns into butchery because of you! And according to you, I am the Feral Skaven?

Sigmund finally agreed to whisper:

- It’s Black Hunger.

- Oh, sure! It’s so simple-easy! It’s all because of Black Hunger! You can do whatever you want, there will always be Black Hunger to excuse everything! This time, with me, it won’t work!

- It’s a fever in my blood.

The White Skaven thought he heard in his son’s voice the heaviness of reproach.

- Of course, it was this famous Black Hunger that made you disobey me! I had forbidden you to approach it!

- “Until his execution”, I remind you.

- I really can’t believe it! You’re making fun of me, too!

His Skaven instinct tempted him to stir up his anger to forget the physical difference between him and his son and slap him, but something stopped him at the last moment: the voice of his wife.

- That’s not all, Siggy! Black Hunger is the essence of the instinct that characterizes the Feral Skaven! You must suppress it, if you want to remain a worthy citizen! You’re better than a Stormvermin!

- I can’t do anything.

- Yes, you can! You can remain Human!

- You can’t understand, Mother. None of you can understand.

The ratwoman had to think for a few seconds to find the words she thought were right, while her partner remained behind. She brought her stool closer to sit in front of Sigmund, and held his gaze as she told him:
- No, you’re right. I am not affected by Black Hunger. I don’t know how you can feel when it goes up, and it makes you go wild over what you don’t like. I didn’t want you to suffer, Siggy. Your father didn’t put a curse on me when I carried you in my womb, and I’m sure if you could get rid of it forever, you would. But this Black Hunger is there. You’re also right when you say you have it in your blood. Even if you don’t worship him, the Horned Rat has installed it into your heart. What you need to do is learn to master it. It brings you closer to the Feral Skaven. But your heart is not that of a Mighty of the Horned Rat, I know it. You can resist it, I’m sure. And we can help you. The Shalleans could bring you means to control yourself.

- Are you thinking about... drugs? murmured Sigmund.

- No! I don’t want you to throw yourself into this prison, Sigmund. You already have enough problems with drinking. We will find many other healthier ways. The most important thing is that you feel good about yourself without this kind of artifice.

The office door opened without warning on a Human who wore the uniform of the Vereinbarung army. It was Sergeant Marius Weller, a man in his twenties, who joined the military four years earlier. Medium in size, with clear eyes, he had a light down over his chin, his auburn hair contrasted with his pale skin. Weller was known to be an example of integrity and efficiency. All the men and women under his charge appreciated his professionalism.

Currently, he seemed rather sorry, but resolved. Behind him stood three guards.

- Master Mage, my Lady, sir, I salute you. I regret to tell you, Master Sigmund, you are under arrest.

Sigmund jumped up. He was indignant:

- What is this crap?

- A direct order from your Prince, replied a strong, imperious voice, which did not allow the slightest reply.

The Black Skaven shivered as he recognized the tall, imposing figure of Prince Ludwig Steiner who had just appeared behind the guards, alongside Schmetterling. The most disturbing was his face. The Human displayed a relentless expression. Sigmund had never seen him in such a state.

- I’m a patient person, and I can be lenient, but there are limits, and you’ve exceeded them. I want you to understand that no one is above the law. Especially not the Prince Family, who must behave in an exemplary manner. You have multiplied the nonsense, these last days: you offered a miserable exhibition of drunkenness to a guest of the Court, you challenged our laws by wanting to
extract from it a Feral Skaven, you were careless to the point of letting it get run away, and when it’s caught back, you commit an abominable carnage in front of an entire assembly! Well, that’s enough. Since the words don’t seem to work with you, we’re going to try another method to get it in your head for good. A week in the dungeon should give you time to think. So spoke the Prince. Guards, do your duty.

The Black Skaven slowly held out his wrists to Sergeant Weller, who handcuffed him. The guards and the Master Mage’s son left the office without another word.

- Let the commander take over his room, Steiner murmured.

And the two Skaven left the room, followed by their adoptive father.

When they had left the barracks, Heike threw himself on her father, and asked, in tears:

- Father, was it necessary?

- My child, I’ve founded this kingdom in order to be freer than in the Empire. But there are behaviours that remain unacceptable, including for the Prince’s family. Especially for the Prince’s family. Sigmund behaved like a rabid animal. Not only did he ridicule my family, but he also cast a shadow on the Skaven people. When the rumour spreads a Black Skaven has gone mad to the point of publicly killing a criminal, what do you think is going to happen? All Humans will fear Skaven to become like this. This is unacceptable.

And all hope of seeing any indulgence in the Prince shattered when the ratwoman recognized his gaze. It was the one he displayed when he faced a rival against whom he had no pity, the one who made it clear that nothing in the world would change his mind.

* *

At the next supper, the atmosphere was especially deadly. The Prince, busy with Magister Steadyhand, didn’t appear at the table. Neither Bianka, Gabriel, nor Isolde dared to ask about the absence of Sigmund. Their mother had told them, without further details, that he “had to be absent for a week”. But the three children had sensed that this absence was something serious.

After the meal, Heike went to bed, followed by her eldest daughter. Psody accompanied Isolde to her room, Gabriel on his heels. The little ratgirl entered, while her father took Gabriel with him.
- I’m scared, Father!
- Don’t worry, there is no reason to be scared of!
- Sigmund is in trouble, isn’t he?
- He’ll be back in a week, we told you.
- Yes, I know…
- Is it for him you’re afraid?
- No, he can face anything. The problem... is this Elf!
- There is no reason to be afraid of him neither, Gab.
- His presence... is not... normal. He gives me… goose bumps.

The White Skaven sighed.

- Gabriel, everyone gives you goose bumps, anyway. You’ll really have to work on it.
- Y… yes.
- Come on, go quickly to bed, I’ll take care of your little sister. Good night!
- Good night, Father.

The Master Mage hugged his son and returned to Isolde’s room. When he entered, she was finishing putting on her nightgown. She climbed into her bed and curled up under the sheets.

- It has been a hard day, darling. I hope you can sleep well.
- Is Siggy fine, at least?
- Yes, he is. He’ll be back in a week, I promise.
- Can you continue the story, Father?
- Of course!

The little girl couldn’t read yet. The White Skaven had already planned to make arrangements with the clerk of Verena. In the meantime, he used to read a story to Isolde at least once a week, when it wasn’t Heike or Prince Ludwig himself who was doing it. It was a small moment of sharing essential to his balance which he particularly appreciated before joining his partner.
As usual, he sat on the armchair near the bed, and read aloud a chapter of the storybook that rested on the dresser. He hadn’t finished that the little girl was already sleeping deeply. Quietly, he put the book in its place. He was about to leave the bedroom, but he changed his mind. He sat back in the chair, and remained staring at the sleeping child.

He stayed there an indefinable time. After the last few days, he really needed to decompress, too. Seeing her beloved, innocent daughter was a great remedy for gloom. He adored her as much as his four other children, because she reminded him that Skaven could be really cute.

Suddenly, he started. Verena’s Great Temple clock had just struck. Surprised, he looked around him with an odd impression. He got out of the chair, wolfed his way to the door, and left the room.

He went down to the living room where there was a large ornate clock. The hands indicated nine hours and a few minutes.

Bah... The day was really long-long... and it’s not over!

Yes, he still had to work on the formula that would purify the Nichetti Estate. Fortunately, thanks to the support of Brisingr Steadyhand, he would soon find the right dosages, and the few ingredients that remained to be determined.

He left the mansion to return to his laboratory, his mind still a little cloudy. He entered, sat down at his desk, and resumed his notes.

He could only work for a few minutes. Soon, his mind was shaken again by the horrible sight Larn’s killing had been. The Master Mage shook his head. Even a Feral Skaven didn’t deserve to end so violently.

One thing, however, reassured the White Skaven a little: his son had not revelled in Larn’s suffering. He hadn’t laughed wildly, neither. On the contrary, this massacre had left him deeply bitter. Before Sergeant Weller arrived, the White Skaven had even detected a tear on his son’s face.

But the damage was done.
He casually closed the drawer of his work desk, put his elbows on the table, and massaged his skin on his head.

*Father is right, what a shame for the whole fam...*

- There is no shame-shame, Psody. He is a worthy son of the Horned Rat. Like you were before you betrayed-betrayed me.

Psody felt the contents of his intestines solidify. This voice, so familiar, which had just echoed in his ear in his native language, could not, should not exist elsewhere than in his memory. And yet, when he looked up, Psody felt all of his hair stand on end.

In front of him, behind the desk, stood Vellux. The tall White Skaven, arms folded in his dirty Grey Seer robe, looked at him condescendingly, a wicked smile on his lips under his long pointed snout.

Without hesitation, the Master Mage drew his pistol from his belt, pointed it at his former master, and pulled the trigger. The detonation exploded in the room. The bullet sank into the wood of the front door of the cottage. The Seer Prophet had completely disappeared.

Dazed, sweating and blowing, Psody hardly swallowed. He looked down. His hand was shaking so much that it threatened to drop the gun.

*What if I hurt someone next time? A servant... or a friend? Or Isolde? Or Gab? Or Heike?*

He didn’t have the patience to wait any longer. He picked out of his pocket a small test tube containing a bright blue liquid. He uncorked it and drank its contents in a single sip. Esmeralda’s calming nectar quickly worked. Once the tremors were over, he put on his coat, hurriedly walked to the barracks canteen, and entrusted the pistol to Nedland, with the firm intention of never asking back for it.
Motivations

Children of the Horned Rat,

Clan Pestilens continue its bad move, and unfortunately, many people have been victims of their malice. My family and friends have been spared for the time being, but I guess this is not the case for many people. I’m especially sad to hear that Juan Giménez, the designer for Jodorowsky’s The Metabarons, an authentic epic masterpiece of Ninth Art, so each page is a real painting, passed away.

However, I would like to share with you a news that reached me the same day: my request for a change of position was validated, so in June 2020, I leave the factory in which I have been working for more than two years. Those of you who know me a little know how much I didn’t like this situation. Things should logically be better for me in the coming months. It’s not my final goal yet to become a librarian in a city library, but it’s a step.

Anyway, I want to sincerely thank the readers who have openly supported me with encouraging messages, some of which have become very interesting long conversations. But I also think of all the others, the simple fact of knowing that this fanfiction is read around the world is very stimulating.

Do not hesitate to write to me, I will be happy to answer all your questions, comments or observations. And feel free to encourage the artists who bring the characters to life on the ChildrenOfPsody page of DeviantArt website.

Stay healthy, and Glory to the Horned Rat!

The rain had soaked the ground, and turned the village square into a mud bath. A liquid, sticky mud, on which each step was heavy, painful, and where the clay seemed alive to the point of sucking up the weakest hoofs and boots, without ever appearing satiated. A real hunger for shoes. This point didn’t worry the Skaven so much. They were all walking barefoot, the skin on their feet was naturally strong enough and insensitive to walk on surfaces that would have injured a Human heel. But regularly, a Skaven slipped and fell, especially those that were heavily loaded.

Until the day before, the Klapperschlänge construction site had made good progress.
Unfortunately, black clouds had gathered at sunset, and pouring rain laced the workers without respite. Accidents multiplied, injuries were more serious. The unlucky ones were quickly led to a twenty yards long tent, which had been erected at the start of the work. It served as a dispensary, and three priestesses of Shallya worked tirelessly there. Wüstengrenze was a good hour’s walk away, so care had to be taken of the injured on the spot.

- All right, guys! That’s enough for today!

The loud voice that had just spoken belonged to Baldur Gottwald. He was a rather impressive sized man, with a large brown beard in undergrowth, and muscular arms, sculpted by years of construction. When Ludwig Steiner and his gang had passed through Nuln before definitively leaving the Empire, the future Prince of Vereinbarung had spread the word that he was going to need lots of arms to build a new kingdom “with a totally new concept”. Like all the Humans who henceforth populated this principality, Gottwald had been enticed by the profit in front of the promise of interesting wages, and especially curiosity.

He and his family had accompanied the procession to the field of ruins that would become the mansion of the ruling family. Like all of those involved, he had seen with his own eyes a couple of ratmen altogether civilized during their journey – Prospero and Heike had stopped hiding once the border of Averland had been crossed. At the beginning, the future Prince had announced to his followers that they were just his adopted children, without adding anything. Once there, the big work had started. Everyone had participated in the building of Steinerburg. Even the children had provided help as much as possible. Mercenary captain Hallbjörn Ludviksson had been tasked with recruiting and training militiamen. And the site had been entrusted to Gotrek Gurnisson, the famous Dwarf Slayer, himself an engineer before having made the Vow to the Slayer Cult.

It was therefore natural that Baldur Gottwald had been appointed as the assistant to the foreman. After a year of hard work, he learned a lot from the brave Dwarf. He was therefore able to take over when the Slayer set off on an adventure with his faithful companion, the poet Felix Jaeger. The official announcement of Steiner’s real goal – to build a whole society where Humans and ratmen would cohabit – did not immediately please him, but several things made him think. He had always heard of these beings as monstrous creatures ready to devour the imprudent, but had the opportunity to exchange a few words with the two Skaven, become parents since their arrival. His wife had finished convincing him: the pay was good, it was a new life awaiting them and their children, the climate was better than in Nuln, thanks to the work in which he had participated, the vital resources wouldn’t lack… So he had continued to use his carpentry skills. And every time he got up and walked the streets of Steinerburg, he was proud of the result. Fortunately, he kept his feet on the ground, and knew that this job could never have been accomplished without the help of all his workers.

The Prince had appointed him to take care of the reconstruction site of the village of Klapperschlänge. Each morning, he and his men came from Wüstengrenze, and worked to rebuild the place from morning to night. Everything had been destroyed by the Orcs. The foreman had decided to reconstitute each dwelling. First, it was necessary to completely clear away the remains.
and ashes. Then restart the construction of the building from scratch, while making improvements. Klapperschlänge would literally rise from the ashes, the carpenter was convinced of it.

Another small detail finally improved his mood: the rain had stopped falling for a quarter of an hour. Better still, the clouds were tearing, and a few rays of the setting sun punctured the greyish cottony blanket.

Baldur Gottwald wiped his forehead. He saw approaching a characteristic silhouette, on horseback: that of the elder son of the Master Mage, a young ratman of pleasant company named Kristofferson. He approached slowly, and waved to him.

- Hello, sir! It’s nice from you to come to Klapperschlänge!
- I came to see how the work progresses. Compliments, my friend, you’ve made an impressive advancement!
- We do what we can, sir. What about you?
- It’s all right, as much as it can be. Wüstengrenze soldiers are not very well trained, but they don’t lack motivation. The training is going on. When I finish my... well, when I get back to Steinerburg, they should be able to provide an effective defence. Captain Müller should be much more efficient than his predecessor.

Young Kristofferson was unable to participate in the construction due to his broken hand. So he spent his days at the military barracks with Captain Rudy Müller. He gave the old captain advice, tips, and sometimes allowed himself to teach him some small communication techniques that he had received from his grandfather. The difference in method had not taken long to be felt.

- You said it, sir! Kreutzer was really not a good lad!
- He’s not dead, Master Gottwald. Don’t talk about him by using the past, please.

The carpenter spat on the ground.

- According to me, that asshole is dead. I had friends who lived here, my lord. They may still be alive today.
- They might still be alive if I had thought of sheltering them!
- Come on, my lord! We know very well the real problem was Kreutzer. You’re not.
- If you say so...
Kristofferson still hadn’t come to terms with the tragedy that had struck Klapperschlänge. All people around him supported him, no one blamed him for anything. And the authoritarian shadow of Kreutzer, who was still found totally drunk the last morning in a bush, no longer hung over the village.

Young Steiner glanced at a particular point.

- If you allow me, I would like to check something.

Gottwald raised his thumb over his shoulder.

- We’re going to have a drink at the inn before going back to Wüstengrenze.

- When we go?

- In an hour, we have to prepare the wounded for the trip, yet.

- Right, I’ll join you.

The Human nodded, then strode towards the building that had once been the village inn. The roof had been burned, but the rest of the structure had held up, and the reserves stored in the cellar had not suffered too much from the fire. The workers had stretched large canvases over the walls. As he walked through the door, he spotted an easily recognizable figure out of the corner of his eye under the large tent in the dispensary.

- Move on in an hour, my Sister!

- Thank you, Master Gottwald!

Sister Carolina Kuhlmann was exhausted. The work had lasted all day, and her service had too. She had volunteered to come to the site and provide care to the workers. The accidents were numerous, and with this bad weather, more serious and more difficult to deal with. Finally, she looked up, looked at the man she had just wrapped his calf, and sighed in relief.

- Well, I did what I could. It’s up to Shallya to decide for the rest, my good fellow.
- Thank you… my Sister.

- You’ll be installed in the cart for the back travel.

- I understand.

The worker let himself fall on the cot. The young nun looked at her hands stained of blood, and looked around. This patient was the last one. She had finally finished. She gave a last reassuring look to the wounded man, grabbed the strap of a leather satchel placed not far from her, and came out from under the stretched canvas.

She spent a minute looking for a specific person. She smirked in satisfaction when she saw him. She advanced, but slipped on a clod of mud and sprawled all the way. She got up slowly, and clenched her teeth.

*May Taal forgive me, this slush is a real pain!*

Like other members of her congregation, she wore simple sandals, and the feeling of mud smearing her toes was all the more unpleasant. She had taken the precaution of wrapping strips of tissue around her bare feet, but there was not much to expect from the fragile fabric in front of such an avalanche of loose soil. It took her a long time to cross the central square, and she finally stopped in front of a small, isolated house.

Unlike all the other dwellings, this cottage hadn’t been burned down by Orcs. The green-skinned barbarians used to ignore what was already destroyed. The girl posted near Kristofferson. The latter, standing, motionless, watched the remains of the house, tears in his eyes.

- Master Steiner? Is something wrong?

Without moving, the young ratman murmured:

- I was thinking about the last owner. It was an old lady who lived alone. When we were attacked by these wyverns, one of them fell on the roof.

- Was this woman inside then?

- She was, but she managed to get out of it in time. She has not been devoured. However…
Kristofferson couldn’t finish his sentence. He bowed his head, and felt a tear fall on his toe.

-I promised her to fix her home...

- And that’s what we’re going to do, Sir Kristofferson.

- That’s all she owned. All her life hung between these stones and this wood. But now… what’s the use?

- This house will experience a new life, it will protect a new family. The story of Klapperschlänge didn’t stop. It experienced a sudden and tragic turnaround, it’s true. But we’re doing our utmost to make this story evolve. Master Gottwald is a professional, and I’m sure the whole village will come back to life, more beautiful than before! Don’t you believe it?

The young ratman finally looked at the sister, and had a light, sad smile.

- If all the people present here share your optimism, I’m even sure of it.

- If you continue to encourage them with your presence, they will remain optimistic.

The priestess make silent, and pouted while she was thinking. Kristofferson scratched his head.

- Can I do something for you?

- Well, yes. I have a favour to ask you.

- I’m listening.

Sister Carolina looked right and left, then she spoke more softly.

- Have you seen which condition this day left me in?

Indeed, even without the fresh mud, Sister Carolina’s white dress was smeared with blood and other fluids, and a pestilential odour emanated from. Kristofferson dared not say anything, but his sense of Skaven had been violated by the scent of carrion and faecal matter before the conversation even had begun.

- I would like to take advantage of the respite that Master Gottwald has granted us to go to the river and wash myself. Could you accompany me, please?
Sister Carolina hastened to add:

- This is asked with the most honourable intentions, sir! Usually, at the temple, we have a small cabinet to make us presentable after a messy operation, but here, of course...

- Of course, the young ratman repeated.

- I know that the Orcs are far away at the moment, but the river is a few minutes’ walk away, and it would be unwise for a young girl to be alone in the countryside, especially near an abandoned place, and therefore easy to loot.

- Even if there is nothing to recover, I guess. Either, I come with you.

- Very good. And…

Kristofferson saw the girl’s round face flush.

- You’ll find me very demanding, but... Hum... You tell me, I treated you, I saw you naked, and then, we are not of the same people, my anatomy should not arouse the slightest emotion within you, but...

- I understand.

- Please forgive me, even if I seem to talk like a frightened virgin, I consider you as Human, and I ask you the same thing as I would have asked of a Human who would have the confidence that I’m having towards you.

- I thank you for this confidence, and for your consideration. Don’t worry, my Sister. My parents taught me to look at a naked woman only if she explicitly authorizes it, by words, stares or gestures, and whether she is Human or Skaven. Or, failing that, if her life is threatened and I can do something to help her. Like you did, when you took care of me. I’ll respect your modesty, you have my word.

The girl finally allowed herself a smile.

- Your parents educated you so well, sir. I’d like to meet them so much.

- If you come to Steinerburg, someday, I’ll be happy to introduce you to them. I think you would please to my mother. On the other hand, you’ll have to be patient with my young sister, she won’t lack of questions about your priestess life! For the time being, I’ll stay nearby, but until you have given my permission, I lay my eyes on you to save you from immediate danger only.
- Yes, and in that case, you said it, my life will come before my modesty. But really, I appreciate, Sir Steiner.

- Oh, you can call me Kristofferson. If you allow it, I would be happy to count you among my friends, Sister Carolina.

- Is it true? So, I authorize you... Kristofferson. You can forget the “Sister”.

- As you wish, Carolina. And... What about your clothes?

- I have a spare dress, replied the girl, tapping her leather bag.

- So let’s go!

The two young people walked away from the village, side by side, and followed the path to the nearby river. Kristofferson spotted a tree stump he sat on, turning in the opposite direction to the water. Confident, Sister Carolina approached the clear aqua, put her bag down, removed a piece of soap from it, and undressed completely before entering the water.

Still on his stump, Kristofferson heard the splash of water on the girl’s skin as she gradually sank into it. Once accustomed to the coolness of the river, she began her ablutions.

While soaping herself, Sister Carolina contemplated the young Skaven. She found herself thinking from a new perspective.

Hmm... I must admit, for a ratman, he is rather remarkable! Even without the character... nothing but the appearance make him different from the others! I wonder if...

She smiled slightly, and asked the question out loud:

- Tell me, Kristofferson...

- I’m listening, replied young Steiner without moving.

- Is there anyone waiting for your return in Steinerburg?

- My parents and my brothers and sisters. I hope to be able to present myself to them with my honour washed.

- Don’t you have a bride?

This time, Kristofferson let a few seconds of silence hover before answering.
- No, Carolina. I have not taken a wife yet.

- But you could? Do you prefer to stay single?

- That’s not the point, Carolina. As you know it, I am the first Skaven born in Vereinbarung. All the others were harvested, or were born from parents brought back with these harvests. Aside from my own family and a few friends like Pol and Walter, I haven’t had much opportunity to hang out with a lot of Skaven of my age, and thus bonding that could lead to marriage.

- There are many girls in marriage age for now! Some even have children! You can meet one who will be a young adult, it is not necessary to marry someone who has exactly the same age you have.

- You are right, but there’s something else: the Harvests have just finished. However, I participated in all those that I could as soon as my father judged that I was aged enough to. That means, for the past few years, I have taken risks. If I had married, had children, and had been killed in a burrow of the Under-Empire, I would have left a widow and orphans.

- Yes, but now that you have returned, you could think about the question when you are home again?

- Maybe… If Orcs don’t kill us all before.

Sister Carolina hesitated between laughter and annoyance. She tried to mix the two.

- Shallya have mercy, Kristofferson, you should relax! It’s good to be forward thinking, but you have to know how to enjoy life, too! You are young, you are appreciated, and you are rather pleasant to look at, even for a Human like me... You have no fear to have, love will knock on the door of your heart! If you ask me nicely, I can even be the priestess who will marry you!

Kristofferson finally laughed a little.

- If I accept your proposal, Carolina... will you invite me to your wedding?

- Ah, but it’s not planned, my dear. Not yet.

- Shallya’s priestesses can get married as well?

- They can, but... let's say I haven’t met the right person yet. But the day it happens, if you’re a good boy, you can even be my witness!

- Cross my heart and hope to die, Carolina!

The Human and the Skaven laughed together. Young Steiner ended up to admit:
- Having said that, I must admit that between two Harvests, I sometimes had the opportunity to participate in a ... “social evening” organized by my grandfather, where he the main personalities of Vereinbarung and their children were gathered. Including Freed Skaven, and therefore, young girls of marriage age.

- And... Did one of them catch your eye?

- No, Carolina. Like you, I haven’t met the right person yet. The ones I have been presented with so far have not seemed to me enough...

- Pretty?

- Pretty, they were, but too bland for my taste. For me, beauty is not everything, in someone. I think there are girls who are much more attractive by heart than by physique.

- I hope you don’t speak for me? The nun quipped.

Once again, Kristofferson let a little silence hover.

- All I can say to you without hesitation and without risking, I hope, to be wrong or disrespectful, is that you are someone of very pleasant company.

- It’s an exquisitely crafted sentence. And a very kind compliment.

Sister Carolina went completely into the water to rinse herself off. She felt clean again. She got out of the water, rubbed herself at length with her towel. She took her spare bure from her bag and got dressed. She sat down next to the young ratman to lace up her sandals, and gave him a warm smile.

- You’re a very pleasant companion, too, and I’m not afraid of being wrong when I tell you so. Right, we should go back, the others will need our arms.

- After you, Carolina.

The young woman picked up her bag, and the two friends returned to the village under reconstruction without adding a word.

The sun was just setting. The caravan was halfway to its goal. Kristofferson was at the tail of the procession, near the cart on which the most seriously injured workers were transported. He walked
quietly alongside his horse, and held the bridle with his valid hand to guide it, while Sister Carolina was seated on the saddle.

The priestess ran her hand through her long hair, and took a deep breath. The air was still humid, mosquitoes swirled around the workers, and the wounded chased flies regularly, but she remained in a good mood. There were no more clouds, and the warmth of the sun was very pleasant to her.

- I hope the building site to be finished on time, the girl said.
- There are enough able-bodied people in Wüstengrenze to take over.

Kristofferson turned his head toward the nun.

- Your words were right; we are going to bring this village to life.

Satisfied to see him happier, she replied with a smile. Then the young rat man asked her:

- Tell me, Carolina: What did a Human like you come to do in a kingdom like this?

Sister Carolina found the question rather personal, but she hadn’t forgotten that the young Skaven had spoken truthfully from the heart at the river. She decided to return the favour.

- There are several reasons. First, I would say it was a proposal from the Mother Superior of the Temple where I was. She… sensed that my opinions, my ideas, my motivations on the status of women would be useful in a society like the one of the Principality of Vereinbarung. You know better than I do how Feral Skaven treat their women. This is a whole education we have to offer here. Even if you were educated as a Human, even if all of the Skaven adopted here, and then their children, received all a Human education, it is important to remind them that men and women are equal. In Karl Franz’ Empire, alas, it is far to be acquired, I know something about it.

- So you think you can change everyone’s mind-set?

- If we manage to create a society where boys and girls have exactly the same status, there is a good chance that this society to become powerful. And therefore, an example for others to follow.

- It’s pretty ambitious.

- But not impossible. I’ve learned about the subject: there are already societies where women have their place in political life and military affairs. Among the Norscans, for example. And see the Kislev! This is a country ruled by the Ice Queen, and the magic is mastered only by women!
- Interesting, but aren’t you afraid of going overboard? What if we find ourselves in a society where men are reduced to the state of reproductive slaves, as girls among the Feral Skaven?

Sister Carolina leaned forward, leaning on the pommel of the saddle.

- Be reassured, Kristofferson. At the rate things are going, three new Chaos Storms will have time to occur before such a situation becomes a reality.

The young ratman pouted ironically.

- Have you always had such… avant-garde ideas?
- As far back as I can remember. When I was little, I insisted on playing boys’ games!
- Ha! Your parents shouldn’t be bored! What did they think about it?

The priestess did not answer immediately. She even sighed.

- I don’t know. They couldn’t see me grow up.

Instinctively, the Skaven understood that he had just put his finger on a delicate subject. He dared not add a word. Before his silence, Carolina continued:

- Kristofferson, I... I’m one of the orphans of Nuln.
- One of the orphans of... by Verena’s scales!

Kristofferson felt his ears down in discomfort. Even without having lived it, he knew too well the terrible tragedy which had struck the city of Nuln, seventeen years earlier. Grey Seer Thanquol had tried to bring down the capital of Wissenland. Lots of people had died in just a few days.

- I... I don’t know what to say.
- Well, don’t say anything, Kristofferson! replied the girl joyfully. You have nothing to say, nor feel! You have nothing to do with it! Your father wasn’t even born at the time. And then, I like to say that this... page of my story was like a second birth, for me.
- What do you mean?

- I was four years old when it happened. My parents lived in a house in the Neuestadt. They had a business in the Handelbezirk district. I will never forget that night, Kristofferson. My mother hid me in the cellar and pulled the hatch down on me. I heard cries of terror, and hissing, squeaking... then nothing more. I stayed in this cellar, without light, I don’t know how long. And then, the hatch opened, and a member of the Null Guard lifted me out of there to put me back in the light. I was first dazzled, then I looked at the outside world. Everything had changed, I didn’t recognize anything. I felt like I was born for the second time, at that time. In any case, the symbolism was very strong. I was taken to Shallya temple. I quickly discovered a vocation for the Bleeding Heart robe. I could help people, learn to care for them, and have the same value as a man while still being a woman. So this tragedy was finally the real start of my life.

- In a manner of speaking, yes. But... weren’t the priestesses put off by your ... strong personality?

- It wasn’t easy at first, but the sisters... “turned a blind eye” to my character, when they saw that I was quite good at retaining medical lessons.

- And then?

- I stayed in Nuln for thirteen years more. I learned to save lives, I mainly fought the diseases inflicted by Feral Skaven. Even after Nuln’s invasion ended, they regularly sowed the seeds of their plague on several occasions, fortunately on a smaller scale. And then, over time, I settled down. I managed to reconcile my fighting spirit with my femininity, without giving up on my ideals. And then, about four years ago, I was offered to come here. I told myself that it was a golden opportunity, a way to take my revenge on Destiny definitively: the Skaven had taken my parents from me, I was going to do my best to dismantle their society. And for that, what could be better than teaching them to be Human while they still can?

- You show a real willpower! Many people in this world who have experienced what you have suffered would take revenge by killing as many Feral Skavens as possible.

- I forgave the Feral Skaven, Kristofferson. Shallya invites us to forgive, if only to be in peace with ourselves. Revenge is useless, it only stirs the bitterness of the one who exercises it. It is never satisfied, it will always be hungry, and it will always have to find something to fill it up at least for a while. I met inquisitors who were justly obsessed with revenge. None of them ended their lives peacefully. I learned to forgive, and I did.

- Have you ever met a Feral Skaven, Carolina?

- No, but I heard a lot of testimony from those who had faced them and whom I had to treat. I think their biggest problem is not their temper or deceit. No, the real problem is grief. The entire Under-Empire lives in the grip of sadness, fatalism and fear. This results in this permanent rage which pushes them to be so violent. In fact, I can’t seem to be angry at them, I can only complain about them.

Kristofferson sighed a little bitterness.

- You might be less forgiving if you had seen their nurseries...

- You might think differently if you had spent the past fifteen years living according to Shallya’s
word, Carolina replied in the same tone.

- Maybe yes.

- Speaking of which... you said you had a rather curious sister?

The young ratman felt that the conversation was going to take a less sullen turn. He hastened to answer:

- Yes, her name is Isolde. She feasted her second anniversary a few months ago. She’s fascinated by the Order of Shallya.

- Is she?

- Regularly, she tells us she would like to become a dove. She asks questions to prior Romulus, the chaplain of my grandfather, she often goes to visit the priestesses of the Steinerburg temple, she attends all the religious ceremonies she can... Even on a daily basis, she always wants to see the people smile around her.

- Well, she seems to have good dispositions.

- For the moment, of course, she is too young, and she has not yet had the opportunity to see the most... “organic” side of the life of a priestess of Shallya.

- Of course, a young child should not be confronted with illness and death too early. What do you plan to do?

- When she’s a little older, we’ll send her to work for a few days with your colleagues of Steinerburg. She’ll see by herself if this life really suits her or not, and if it is, then she can become an initiate?

- I wish her find what she’s looking for, Kristofferson.

- I wish so, Carolina. I wish so.

The caravan arrived in sight of Wüstengrenze. As its name indicated, this good-sized town was the last border between the Rat Kingdom and a desert area. Not a sandy desert, the region was made up of plains of dry grass, with a few scattered shrubs. No, if the area was known to be “desert”, it was simply because it was not habitable. Or rather, it was already inhabited by many Goblin tribes. Two of them, in particular, were constantly fighting over the land: the Yellow Eyes Tribe, and the Night Goblins Bloody Spear Tribe. Fortunately, until then, the Goblins had not dared to get too close to the high stone walls of Wüstengrenze. Gotrek Gurnisson himself drew the plans and carried out the work. Like all his peers, the Dwarf knew well the methods and psychology of Goblins, and had known how to imagine suitable ramparts.
The city itself was medium in size, and rather austere. The permanent threat of the Goblins hovered over the rooftops, and the authoritarian attitude of former Captain Kreutzer had hardly helped matters – it was well known that the burgomaster, a rather oblivious man by the name of Harald Emmerich, suffered more than he allowed Kreutzer’s muscular policy, as long as he had authority over the city’s militia.

The atmosphere was all the more tense than usual because of two disturbing new elements: first the dismissal of the captain had shocked. Admittedly, he was credited with a ruthless man, but at least his policy had been effective so far. Not everyone liked seeing a man like Rudy Müller replace him. The old captain understood this, and had redoubled his efforts to gain the confidence of his fellow citizens.

The other element was the presence of the Orcs. The dreaded green-skinned barbarians have never been reported so far. Orcs live in the Badlands, far to the south, beyond the port city of Barak Varr. To see them in the Border Princes was a bad omen. What did the authorities in Barak Varr think about it? They couldn’t have been unaware. So, why no reaction? No news? Was there a fault in the communication chain? Or worse, was the Rat Kingdom left to itself, deliberately ignored by neighbouring countries?

So many questions that didn’t help the morale of the residents of the border town to stay high. Night was falling quickly, people still outside hurried to return, the shutters closed on the passage of the caravan. Finally, the workers reached the city’s Shallya temple. The wounded were taken to the large furnished dormitory.

When Kristofferson entered the inn adjoining the barracks where he had settled, he found Walter and Pol. The tall, light-coloured Skaven offered him a pint of beer, and asked him about the work. Fat Pol then handed him a sealed envelope, which had arrived during his absence by courier. Kristofferson opened it, and spent a long minute reading its contents. Walter thought he’d rather spent that minute swallow its content, the mail didn’t seem particularly long.

Without saying a word, Kristofferson crumpled up the letter, threw it into the fire in the fireplace, and stepped out of the tavern.

Letter from Sister Carolina Kuhlmann, priestess of the Shallya Temple of Wüstengrenze, to Sister Judy Hoffnung, priestess of the Shallya Temple of Steinerburg, written on the tenth Sigmarzeit of the year two thousand five hundred and thirty of the Imperial Calendar.
My dear benefactor,

The work continues at Klapperschlänge, and the bad weather that has just hit the countryside won’t stop us, I am sure. But I’d like to share a little concern with you: citizens are getting nervous. Certainly, Captain Müller embodies goodwill, but a kind of unhealthy tension is mounting. We have had no signs of activity by the Orcs, but they may not have come here for a single isolated assault. They’ll return someday, and we hope that His Highness the Prince will then have made arrangements to enable us to defend ourselves effectively.

I remain optimistic, from my point of view. Klapperschlänge is coming back to life, slowly but surely. Of course, there were broken arms and legs again. I am sure that the people who will live in these places once the work is finished will praise the quality of their work for years, and the treasures of patience and professionalism which they dug up from the bottom of their hearts to achieve it. Once the threat of the Orcs has passed, it will be so good to live in that others will be tempted to settle there.

As for me, the Klapperschlänge tragedy has brought me at least one positive thing, and I would like to thank Shallya for it: the beneficent warmth of a friendship. I had the opportunity to spend some time with Kristofferson Steiner, the elder son of Master Mage Prospero. I am happy to now count among my friends someone so deeply Human.

He is Human, by heart, and also by worries. Indeed, shortly before supper, I had to comfort him: Master Kristofferson Steiner wanted to “meditate on the progress of the situation”. In reality, he withdrew to an isolated corner to smash a log with large axe blows. His friend, Master Pol Demmler, came to me to ask me to reason with him. When I arrived, Kristofferson seemed to be furious. I asked him what the problem was, he told me about “family concerns”. “It is my brother. He made a big mistake, and now the whole family pays! When I come back to Steinerburg, he’ll be sorry!” I didn’t ask for details, even if I didn’t want to be intrusive, it wouldn’t change anything. From what I understand, the matter has gone public, and you yourself have probably known about it for longer than I did.

Still thinking about what Shallya teaches us about revenge and its consequences, I wanted to dissuade him from it. “Maybe you should relax a bit, you don’t have to carry this burden, you know...” “I’m the oldest, it’s my duty”, he replied. “It is your parents’ duty, Kristofferson. Your duty is to prove to us that you are strong enough to carry out the reconstruction. Your brother has made a mistake, he will have to assume it. You won’t. Take on your role here, because we need all your resources.”

Shallya be praised, I found the right words. He eventually calmed down, and returned with us to the barracks. I wished him a good night before returning to the temple. I’ll be going to bed soon, myself, the day has been exhausting, and the work is far from over.
I wish you well in these difficult times. May the kindness of Shallya protect the inhabitants of our Kingdom in these troubled times!
A disturbing discovery

- Find! I will find!

Psody was determined to complete the formula before the end of the day. He had been working hard with Master Brisingr Steadyhand for several days. Sister Judy Hoffnung had joined the two scientists. Admittedly, she was above all a priestess of Shallya, but her knowledge in the art of preparations – she was the appointed apothecary of the Steinerburg temple – was very useful for the two magicians to interpret the nature of the ingredients necessary for the elaboration of the purification mixture intended for Nichetti Estate.

Sigmund’s wrongdoing had quite annoyed the White Skaven. Also, he had redoubled his energy to think of something else. Fortunately, the anger had not diminished his intellectual capacities. The list of elements was gradually clarified, as well as the quantities required.

Only one ingredient still escaped the thinking of the three researchers.

A group of words whose meaning was not yet clear.

Brisingr Steadyhand consulted the Encyclopaedia of the Children of the Horned Rat, looking for the slightest clue. While browsing through, he came across a reproduction of an engraving. It represented the first known White Skaven to have lived differently.

- Ah, Cuelepok, this clever fellow! I wonder if he could have helped us?
- He lived in a place where very exotic plants on hand were under his hand, indeed! Sister Judy reminded. A chance for him, we will have to do without!
- Unless we take the time for a walk in Lustria... What do you think, Prospero?
- You already know the answer to this question, replied the White Skaven without lifting his nose from his book.

The Elf chuckled and looked at the picture again. He felt his nose wrinkle.

- Say! Have you seen his hands?
The red-haired woman and the White Skaven, moved by curiosity, joined the Magister and looked at the illustration in turn.

- He has only four fingers on each, Sister Judy observed.
- Like me! Psody noted.
- Maybe an ancestor of yours, in the end?
- No, Master Steadyhand. He admitted in front of me he couldn’t have any child. And he tried hard.
- If he was the only White Skaven of all the city of Capatec Hanahuac, I presume that in terms of seductive aura, this uniqueness gave him a great advantage!
- We’ll see when the first White Skaven in Vereinbarung reach adulthood, Judy supposed.
- At the moment, there is only one, said Psody. And I think his life is likely to be more complicated-complicated than being a simple lady-killer. But this is not the subject, we have a land to purify.

The three scholars went back to work. After two long hours, they had managed to painfully estimate a sense of the nature of this ingredient. According to their interpretation, it was the “vector of life”. This ingredient had to be used to make the mixture touch the surface to be purified.

But what could it be?

- Water, suggested Sister Judy. Water is life by excellence, and nothing can live without water.
- Chaos demons are mostly raw energy. They don’t need water.
- Master Steadyhand, I do not consider the demons of Chaos as living beings.
- However, your Order prohibits killing them, except Nurgle’s. You therefore consider them to be living beings, since you have no right to take a life.
- It’s an interpretation.
- We don’t have time for interpretations, my dear. We have to find the ingredient.
- That’s what we’ve been trying to do for days! No need to confuse us with your bloody twisted interpretations!
- Blood? That’s it! Psody exclaimed.

The Master Mage stood between the man and the woman.
- That’s probably it! Blood! It’s a common ingredient, after all! Many magicians use it, it puts a part of themselves in the formula!

The priestess however didn’t seem convinced.

- The use of blood is still linked to dark magic, Prospero. Now, we have to create a purification ritual. Putting blood on it could add a corrupting touch. Even if it is the purest blood you can find!

- You are right, realised the Magister. Remember that the wizards of Slaanesh willingly use newborn blood.

The White Skaven sighed deeply.

- Excuse me, I need to get some fresh air.

He exited the library, left the manor, and found himself in the park.

The weather was fine. Having to work in a confined space was all the more painful for the White Skaven. The first years of his life when he only felt comfortable in a burrow were far away now. In addition, Heike had transmitted him some of her passion for horticulture, and if he didn’t particularly like taking care of plants and flowers, he was able to appreciate their beauty.

Precisely, he saw his companion-girl planting stakes to help certain shoots to climb in the right direction, on a wooden panel. He approached her.

- It’s a new variety of nasturtium. I’m doing a little test: if I see they grow well like that, I will ask Father to hire a gardener, to craft us some floral arrangement, such as an arch in front of the greenhouse.

The park of the domain included a greenhouse where were stored the most exotic plants, brought back from various countries of the world.

The ratwoman saw the expression of her spouse which mixed excitement and annoyance.
- So, anything new?

- Yes! We have almost found-finished the formula! But…

- I was afraid to hear this “but”. So?

- An ingredient is missing.

- What a shame!

- All we know is that it is a liquid which must be a “vector of life”. It must come from the person who initiates the ritual. It must represent-embody nourishment and fertility. We thought about water, but it’s not personal enough. The blood would be too dirty-corrupting.

The White Skaven then saw a malicious expression appear on Heike’s face.

- You men! Fortunately, women are there to explain everything to you!

- “Explain”? Sister Judy didn’t find more than the two of us!

- From her, it surprises me. For me, the answer is obvious, Psody!

- So… what are you thinking about?

The ratwoman let a little silence hover to maintain the effect of surprise.

- Breast milk!

- Huh?

- It’s obvious! This “vector of life” is breast milk! Is something on earth more nourishing? It’s a body fluid that carries life itself!

- Yes… Yes, you’re right! What a fool I am! But… should… me?

Seeing her companion’s disconcerted face, Heike giggled nervously.

- Of course, you may have difficulty to produce it!

- Ah, it’s not funny-funny! A whole infected field is at stake!

- Yes, it’s true, you’re right, excuse me.
The young ratwoman felt her smile fall to the floor when she realised something.

- I... I hope you’re not going to ask me to provide this ingredient?
- No, it wouldn’t work anyway. It has to come from the person who performs the ritual!
- So what to do? Ask a female Mage from the Empire, a young mother if possible?

The White Skaven grunted.

- Not only would it be very embarrassing-daring, but in addition, even if there was a candidate, it would take too long to find her, contact her and bring her in. We have already lost days for this research!
- There must be a solution if...
- The ritualist to be a boy-man.

The two Skaven thought again, and simultaneously understood the nature of the ingredient required. They looked at each other, and if Heike was rather troubled, Psody was downright speechless. After a long minute of awkward silence, the woman-rate murmured:

- Psody, why do you want to accomplish this ritual?
- To stop this rot and to have good relations with our neighbours, who could become friends-allies.
- So you’re going to do this in the name of duty.
- Yes, my love.

Finally, the delicate face of the young Skaven girl relaxed.

- In that case, go ahead, you don’t have to feel any shame. I understand.

The Jade Mage sighed in relief.

- I’m really lucky-lucky to have such a smart-understanding woman.
The young woman bit her lip.

- Do you think... you will be able to produce... enough?

Her companion replied with a poor smile:

- At least one advantage, the quantity-quantity required is very small. Now I understand why! Can you imagine if it had been a litre?

---

The supper was concluding when the Master Mage announced:

- Father, my children, I have very good news. Thanks to the efforts of Master Steadyhand and Sister Judy, mixed with Heike’s little spark of genius, we have finally succeeded in composing-making the elixir which will allow us to purify the warpstone rotting that stains the Nichetti Estate.

The whole table rejoiced.

- Congratulations! If the ritual works, Steadyhand will be given the reward he deserves, and I’ll send a donation to the Shallya temple.

- What a great idea, Opa! claimed Isolde, clapping.

- Tomorrow, I’m off to meet Master Clarin. The main course of the ingredients will be waiting for us on the site.

- Do you think Clarin will find them easily?

- Yes, Father, I will only need to supply-give a few very specific ingredients that I can transport myself. The list is already gone-mailed, he should have gathered them by the time we get there.

- “We?” repeated Isolde. Are you going with someone?

- I will, darling.

- This nutty bright mage, I suppose? suggested Bianka.

- You’re supposing wrongly, Bianka. Master Steadyhand is going to leave for Altdorf to report, I won’t need-need him. Your brother will be with me. No, Gabriel, not you! No need to hide under the table!
So are you going to take Sigmund with you?

Yes, father. He... comes back home tomorrow morning, he’ll pick up some stuff, and we leave as soon-soon. We will only be absent while we are going back and forth. Right, I’m going to bed, a long travel awaits for me.

A short quarter of an hour later, Bianka was taking Isolde to her room. As she changed her clothes, the little girl worried.

- Is the place where Father and Sigmund go dangerous?

- Not at all, Soso. The Feral Skaven have fled, the rot has not progressed, and anyway, they will clean it all up using Jade magic.

- I want Siggy to come see me before he goes so much!

- Don’t worry, he will! He must also take clean clothes for the trip, he will necessarily come home! You know he loves you very much, too, he won’t leave without seeing you.

- If I have to, I’ll wait all day outside the door!

- Whatever it is that you enjoy... go, bedtime!

The little girl jumped on the mattress and slipped under the blanket. This time it was Bianka who continued the tale for her sister. When the chapter was finished, she put the book down, and placed a little kiss on the child’s forehead.

- I wish you sweet...

A brutal and very unpleasant feeling of fear twisted in the girl’s intestines, like an ice viper. She made a violent effort not to let anything appear. However, she couldn’t not see it. And her mind stubbornly refused to accept what she had just seen. There, on the head of the frame, just above the location of the pillow, near a knot, there were three small notches in the wood. Discreet, but too regular to be there by chance. They had been cut with the tip of a knife, or any other sharp object.

She straightened up, left the room in the most natural way possible, gently closed the door, before collapsing on the floor. Tears of panic beaded in her eyes.

I have to do something... I MUST do something smart!
What could she do? Tell her father about it? What would he do? Confining the whole family, tripling the guard? The two little ones would surely be sick in fear, but was it better to take the risk of seeing them get their throat cut by another Gutter Runner?

*No, I’ll talk to Opa Ludwig when they’re gone, no need to confuse his mind as he has a ritual to perform!*  

Then she thought she heard a little noise behind the door. She almost started. The more disturbing than ever anguish almost cut her breath. Her dry throat painfully let out a hoarse breath. She wanted to be clear about it.

Ready for the worst, she slowly lowered the handle, and half-opened the door. Everything was silent. The ratgirl’s ear swivelled to the rustling of tissue.

- What is it, Bianka? asked the small voice of Isolde in the semi-darkness of the room.

Bianka had almost howled. She mumbled with difficulty:

- I... I was just checking that your window was closed properly.
- So, why?
- It... it’s not summer yet, nights remain cold.
- The window is rightly closed.
- Yes, sweetie, I saw it. Come on, sleep well.
- Good night, Bianka!

The Skaven girl closed the door behind her, and took her head in both hands. How was she going to be able to sleep after that?

*A single window will not stop an Eshin assassin. By Verena’s scales, I wish I would be tomorrow already!*
A clicking sounded, then the door of the cage opened with a creak.

- All right, it was a pleasure to receive you, Milord, but the best things must come to an end.

Sigmund painfully opened his eyes. It was Commander Johannes Schmetterling himself who came to pick him up.

- It is time for you to enjoy again the benefits of civilization.

The tall Black Skaven rose from the bunk and followed the tall man. They walked down the prison corridors to the door that led to the courtyard. The commander opened it, but young Steiner remained motionless and silent.

Schmetterling guessed what he expected, and replied aggressively:

- I let your gromril toy to the Prince. It is up to him to give it back or not. I wash my hands of it.

He made a little gesture at the door.

- Go home. And try not to do it again, young man. Your father and grandfather already have enough problems like this without needing an extra layer.

Sigmund did not want to risk being sent back to the cell after a well-received response. He just held the commander’s gaze before leaving the building. As he crossed the courtyard, he thought:

I’m sure you’d love to take a couple of layers off with a big lick, eh, motherfucker!

When he found himself facing the portal, he felt a little pinch in his stomach when he saw the little silhouette of the White Skaven waiting for him on the other side of the gate.

Sigmund let out a sad sigh, and decided to cross the ten yards that separated him from the Master
Mage. A few seconds later, they were face to face.

The father and the son remained motionless for a few moments, silent. Sigmund hesitated on the way forward, then he finally perceived a slight relaxation on the face of the White Skaven. The latter nodded.

- Let’s go.

And the two ratmen left the perimeter of the prison.

As they arrived near the edge of the Hammer Quarter, Sigmund ventured to ask:

- Are they still angry?

- They are, more or less, but it will pass. Your grandfather had other business to deal with, it made him think of something else. As for me, I have finally found-completed the formula that will allow us to purify the Nichetti Estate.

- Ah! Great!

- Bianka is a little annoyed, but you know her. As for Isolde and Gabriel… we told them that you had left on a mission.

- Oh… thank you.

- Well... We haven’t seen Gabriel of the week. I guess he was working on a great-awesome new invention. Or in any case, that’s what I prefer to say to myself, it’s better than “he is agonizing over because he supposes that something has happened to you”, don’t you think?

- Uh...

The White Skaven stopped, and put his hand on his son’s arm.

- Siggy, I would like you to fully-fully understand the consequences of your mistakes.

- I.. I thought about it. I had time for that.

- Of course you had! And so, your conclusion?

- It wasn’t worth.

- Having massacred this little thug, so it did not please you?
- And I’m not proud of myself, either. I tarnished the family honour.

Psody pouted ironically.

- I don’t care about family honour, Siggy. When I was a Feral Skaven, I did so much worse.

- You are no longer a Feral Skaven, Father. And I never was.

- I mean, boy, I’m not the one who’s going to blame you on this.

- Yet that’s what you did before Weller threw me in jail!

- I was pissed off, and I didn’t say what I really-really had on my heart. Siggy, what upset me was what you did to your mother. You shamed her by behaving like a roughneck, yelling at her, and you made her cry.

The great Black Skaven felt a wave of bitterness macerate in his guts.

- Honestly, she doesn’t deserve this, Sigmund. We are a family. Right, this family is not perfect-ideal. It does not exist. But from what I know about families, we are fortunate to be one far above most, in all aspects! You and your four brothers and sisters, you are intelligent, you are capable, and above all, you have received an education that Humans describe as “excellent”! The instruction, the learning of the methods of communication, relationship with the gods, the place you have in society, and the importance of all that constitutes-constitutes it, the bonds which are necessary to develop thanks to the respect-love… and your mother is an exceptional person. Before she got there, she went through a lot of very unpleasant events, you know. And yet, your grandfather has told me many times how she incarnates sweetness itself. She is a woman like there are perhaps only ten by generation and by country. Remember this, Siggy: whatever you think, she will always love you unconditionally. But, I beg you, give her reasons to be happy-proud of you. Smiles have to sparkle on her face, not tears. Do you understand?

- I do, Father.

- Know that you didn’t completely disappoint-piss me off. At least you understood that “It wasn’t worth”.

Finally, the White Skaven relaxed completely, and smiled slightly. They started off at a good pace.

- Now, you’re going to find back Okapia, she was longing for you.

- Me too.

- In fact, you’ll be able to enjoy her company for a while.
Is that so? What do you mean?

You’re going to collect some stuff and say goodbye to the others.

What? Why?

I’m taking you to Nichetti Estate. I want you to accompany me, and then it will make you change air, you need-need it.

The two men crossed the Libra Quarter.

- Clarin will be with us, Siggy.

- So much the better.

- I’m counting on you to make a better impression on him!

At these words, Sigmund felt a violent stroke of blood in his heart. But he said nothing. On the other hand, his young brain caught fire.

Was risking my ass to save strangers not enough for a “good impression”?

The anger turned to disappointment. He who thought he had found a good complicit mood with the White Skaven, here was a good, very scathing annoyance to make everything collapse! But he did not want to upset his father. Again, he understood that it would have done him no good. Besides, the house was in sight, he should not appear in front of the others making a face.

* *

The reunion was made without shouting or shedding tears. Isolde made no secret of her joy at seeing the tall Black Skaven again, as usual. His mother hugged him, as did his younger brother, and his grandfather spared him a sermon or a moral lesson, and contented with asking him what he got out of it? Sigmund replied roughly the same thing as his father. Satisfied, Ludwig Steiner gave back to the young ratman Heart of Unicorn.

Only one person had not appeared before him. While he was gathering some clothes in a bag, he wondered where his twin could be. His face creased in annoyance. He knew her well: she was probably still mad at him, and wanted to avoid him in order to “deprive him of her presence”. It was something she gladly used to do when they were children. She had quickly understood that she had some kind of power over her brother.
But was it still reasonable to do so now?

Once his few possessions gathered, the great Black Skaven greeted his kind and went to the stables. On the way, he distinguished the characteristic silhouette of his mare, Okapia, kindly guided by Magdalena, the Human servant of the Prince, who maintained her bridle. And on the saddle, delighted, was sit Teresa. She recognized the young ratman, and waved her arms to call him.

- Siggy, hi! Siggy, hi!

The busty housekeeper made the mount advance in the direction of the Black Skaven.

- Hello!
- Hello, Magda.
- So, how are you? Not too boring, this… diplomatic trip?

Unlike the simple-minded ratgirl, Magdalena knew the true nature of Sigmund’s absence very well; she spoke in a somewhat ironic tone. Without losing his composure, he just replied:

- Very informative.
- We took care of Okapia while you were away, Teresa and I. You shall excuse us, we have allowed ourselves to make her walk.
- Sweet Okapia, kind Okapia, Teresa sang, delicately flattering the beast’s neck.

Sigmund smiled slightly.

- On the contrary, it’s very kind of you. Unfortunately, I’ll have to ask you to come down, Teresa. I need Okapia, I’m going away with my father for a while.

At these words, Teresa suddenly displayed a very sulky look.
- Psody said “no more Harvests”! Psody lied?

- No, Teresa, Psody didn’t lie at all! We are not leaving for a Harvest, we are going to help a foreign country to... do a little cleaning.

The teen ratgirl plunged into an intense mute reflection before suggesting:

- Great spring-cleaning?
- Yes, that’s it.
- Great spring-cleaning! Great spring-cleaning!

Delighted, she jumped down the saddle, and began to dance on the grass, repeating loudly the same words.

- At least, she breaks less often the furniture, whispered Magdalena.
- This is progress.
- I assure you, Siggy, she treated Okapia very well, I personally made sure.
- I believe you, Magda. I can see it, the good girl looks wealthy! Thank you.

Magdalena passed the reins to her, but before joining Teresa, she said again:

- Bianka is in Teresa’s house, she takes advantage of our walk to do some cleaning.
- Ah! Good, I’ll be able to greet her!

And he walked calmly towards the little house where Teresa and her guards lived.

Indeed, he saw his sister through the doorway. He tied the reins of Okapia around a tree, and entered.

When she saw him, Bianka didn’t wait a second to throw herself at his neck.
- Siggy! Finally, you’re here!
- But... aren’t you angry?
- A little, but I’m too happy to see you to moralize you! Besides, I’m sure you got your account.
- You can say so.

They stayed in each other’s arms for a few long moments. Something ends up disturbing Sigmund.

- Hey, Bianka... Is there a problem?
- About what?

Sigmund looked closely at his sister.

- I smell an unpleasant odour... it’s the smell of fear. Bianka, are you afraid of something?

The girl crossed her arms.

- I’ll be having a really hard time hiding something from you, Siggy!
- What happened?
- Nothing at the moment, but...
- What?

Bianka bit her lip. Was it necessary to reveal everything, at the risk of seeing Sigmund disturb their father by alluding to it during their absence? She preferred to play the game of caution.

- Well, I think we should be careful... Do you remember what Opa said about this story of “traitor”?
- I do, so what? Has this traitor been found?
- Not yet, but it is possible that this traitor will manifest again. Yesterday, I... spotted something fishy.
What, what? the tall Black Skaven asked, suddenly worried.

Probably nothing, Siggy. I can be wrong, I’m not going to start making false assumptions. It’s just that... keep your eyes and ears wide open.

Do you think there is going to be another attempted murder?

I don’t know, but if in doubt, keep an eye on Father. But don’t tell him anything!

Why is that?

Because he must not have his mind disturbed by these things when he is about to perform an important ritual of purification for Prince Calderon. I haven’t told anyone on my side, but I will tell Opa when you are gone, he will know what to do. And for you, I ask you to be careful that nothing happens to Father.

You can count on me.

I know it. But above all...

She kissed the big Black Skaven.

Pay attention to yourself!

Only if you pay attention to yourself.

I will pay attention to myself, but I hope that you, you will pay attention to yourself, like I also pay attention to myself!

Do not worry about me, I will pay attention to myself, but take care rather of yourself, because for yourself, the most important person remains yourself!

It’s true, I have to be there to watch over you!

It’s more up to me to say that to you, don’t you think?

You think I am not able to take care of myself? You don’t know me well! Shame on you!

The twins loved to engage in this kind of dog-talk, until they knew which one of them to have the last word. Sigmund capitulated and left the unique room of the house. Determined to obey his sister, he retrieved his mare and continued on his way to the entrance gate.
A great spring-cleaning

- The gods have mercy!

Psody didn’t want to say anything, he didn’t want to risk invoking the only deity he believed in, in whose name the sad spectacle before him had been orchestrated. Indeed, for the first time, the White Skaven saw with his own eyes the decay inflicted on Nichetti Estate by the unknown Grey Seer, the one who commanded Blokfiste. The Master Mage, his younger son and the Estalian ambassador were all three side by side, facing a terrible picture. It was on the verge of the indescribable. The whole landscape seemed to emerge from a nightmare made by the most soaked of drunkards the day after a night spent drinking Dwarf beer.

The central square of the estate was invaded by moisture, a veritable carpet of wild grass, whose colour of which resembled that of the floor of a sordid inn after an orgy. Plants had grown, but they were certainly not natural, in any way; an ivy with hard, sharp charcoal-coloured leaves climbed over the buildings. Berries sparkled with a burst of emerald. The ground itself seemed to be covered with a sort of shiny, sticky layer of jelly.

There was no bird song. Under the effect of this vegetation, no animal had remained in the perimeter. And yet, there was a whole concert of noises all more disturbing to each other: cracking wood, rattling, small gas eruptions, hissing and other rustling.

Worst of all, a sort of greenish mist hung over the whole village. A moving mist, almost alive.

- If I could hear Taal and Rhya talking to us, I’m sure they would make sailors blush!
- I agree with you, it’s terrible! Even a battalion of Plague Monks defecating wouldn’t emit such an odour-horror!

Clarin looked more worried.

- Things got worse, I’m afraid. Not on the surface, but in intensity. I wonder…

The Estalian paused, and sniffed. An aroma he couldn’t recognize had just passed through his nostrils. It was neither ashes nor spoiled food.

- Don’t you smell anything, Master Mage?
- Don’t get any closer, muttered the White Skaven, raising his hand. I smell. I even smell very well. And I know exactly-perfectly what it is.

The White Skaven swivelled towards Clarin. Her pink eyes blinked nervously.

- The flowers are loaded with warpstone particles, it is their pollen!

Clarin felt his face cover with sweat.

- You mean we’re breathing poison?
- Back-back, quickly!

The three men hurried away from the square. A few minutes later, they joined the company.

Six soldiers were standing near a cart pulled by two oxen. Okapia, Sigmund’s mare, was quietly waiting a few yards away, the reins tied to a lone tree. All the equipment was gathered on the vehicle: boxes of incense, apothecary’s toolbox, a dozen large terracotta jars, a large, rough canvas
The two Skaven had met the Estalian at the border of Sueño. They had travelled to Nichetti Estate, stopping regularly at the inns. Each evening, Psody had taken care to ensure that the terracotta jars were kept warm.

On the way, luckily, they hadn’t met any other Feral Skaven. Clarin had explained to them why: worried that the Under-Empire would land in his principality, his Excellency Roderigo Calderon had doubled the number of patrols around the area. Besides, the two ratmen could see in the distance regiments of horsemen come and go around the perimeter. Sigmund couldn’t help admiring the grace of the horses and the ease of their masters. The emissary recalled how famous the Estalian cavalry was.

The White Skaven approached the cart.

- I shall explain-explain what I’m going to do.
- If you allow me, I will translate as you go.

Sigmund raised a surprised eyebrow.

- Your men can’t speak reikspiel?
- Not those. If you have something to tell me, they will only understand if I do the translation.
- That’s a surprise, why didn’t you tell us?
- I didn’t consider it necessary, Master Sigmund.
- You mean we made the trip here with soldiers without knowing that...
- Siggy, that’s enough! cut the White Skaven. Master Clarin is an ally, not a trickster who wants to double-cross us!

The great Black Skaven looked down.

- Right, I’ll resume.
- Please, Master Prospero.

And the Jade Mage went on to explain what he would do, pausing at the end of each sentence to allow the ambassador to repeat his instructions in Estonian.

- First, the most urgent: we now know the air is full of warpstone, and prolonged exposure could damage-corrupt your lungs. Fortunately, we had foreseen this vicissitude.

And he opened the rough canvas bag, which contained several heavy and shiny metallic objects.

- That is why I wanted to know the exact number of people to accompany us in my letter-missive.

The Master Mage distributed protective masks. Every Human covered his face with. Sigmund wore a model designed for Skaven heads.

- I bet it’s another invention of your son!
- You can! You have to get used to their weight, and it’s a bit difficult to breathe with, but at least you’ll be protected from warpstone particles!
- I really should meet this little genius!
- Unfortunately, you can only when he wants. It is impossible-unthinkable to force him to meet someone.
- What a pity!
- The last time we tried to, he had a nervous breakdown and attempted to bite our guest! Since then, we have not taken any risk-risk.
Hearing his father’s words, Sigmund added nothing, but felt irritated. He was about to protest, asking the White Skaven to stop telling the Estalian such personal stories, but he didn’t do anything about it. He didn’t want to risk seeing the Mage Master refer to the epilogue in Larn’s life.

Clarin observed:

- What about you, Master Prospero, don’t you take one?
- I’ll have to use another accessory you see in a minute-minute. And anyway, I lived four years in a burrow where the laboratory was more heavily loaded with warpstone dust than here. Even though it’s been a long time my body is empty of any pound of warpstone, I think I can resist it more than you. Anyway, you’ll see the ritual to quickly protect me much more effectively. Siggy? Can you put the equipment near where this Grey Prophet spilled his mixture?
- Right now, Father.
- Gentlemen, please give me a minute, I need to put me in condition.
- Do it.

The Black Skaven pulled on the reins. The oxen dragging the cart became nervous, and the young ratman had to pull harder and raise his voice to force them to obey. Meanwhile, Psody sat on the floor, trying not to pay attention to the sticky moisture under his buttocks. He closed his eyes, put his hands on the floor, and concentrated.

The Druid who had taught him magic had insisted: Ghyran was not a wind domesticated by clever calculations like those of the Golden Wind or the Celestial Wind. No, it was something much more instinctive, more visceral. Whoever wanted to practice Jade Magic should not control the magic wind, but vibrate in harmony with it. In that it was not that different from Warp Magic, except that Warp Magic corrupted, enslaved and destroyed life. Ghyran favoured it. “You have to feel Nature, Prospero”, had said the professor. “Amber Mages rely on their instincts, and do everything to dominate Ghur, the Wind of the Beast. You’ve shown yourself to be a Druid, I guess your experience with the Slann artefact has a lot to do with it. So, you shouldn’t be too confused by my words, you should be able to find this feeling of apprehending magic thanks to your guts. But don’t be as infuriated with rage as an Amber Mage or a Grey Seer. Ghyran is your friend, not your slave. Listen to Nature, feel it, and communication will only be better.”

This is precisely what the White Skaven was about to do. Feel Nature. And Nature was violently protesting. This stain was not only an insult to its harmony, but also a pain, as sharp as an acid burn. The pain of the earth was almost palpable. It brought back a distant, very distant memory...

He had barely entered adulthood for the Skaven community of Brissuc, his native land. To satisfy his master and obtain his title of Grey Seer, he had to pass a test: kill a Dryad. He had gone to a glade not far from the village named Niklasweiler, with Chitik and Diassyon, his two favourite brothers. The Clan Skryre’s brown Skaven had used a warpfire thrower, and all the clearing had ended up consumed by the greenish fire. At the time, he had been very proud of himself, and the sniggers of the three brothers had long resounded in the middle of the forest. But over the years and the changing environment... this “feat” had become a source of remorse and shame.

Something tickled his muzzle. No doubt, it was a little tear. In truth, this tragic story was a stain on his own heart, he had to clean it. One day or another, he would.

*May the Horned Rat witness me, little woods fairy: as soon as I have the occasion-possibility, I come back to heal your glade, so that another can settle there!* 

He then felt better. He had just created a link with Ghyran’s stream. Now he could act.

He opened his eyes, stood quietly, and spoke to the company again.
- Well, gentlemen, I’m going to perform a complex-delicate ritual. It will make noise, maybe smoke and light. I have never done this ritual before. Normally, only good things should come out of it.
- Is there a risk this ritual to fail? asked Clarin.

Psody sighted.

- Nothing is ever perfect, apart from the acts of the gods themselves, Master Clarin. But if that can reassure you, the only risk is that nothing will happen. No chance of causing a rain of fire or bringing in a demon, if that’s what you’re thinking about.
- I have already seen mages fail in their formulas, and cause disasters.
- The rituals are a little different from conventional magic. Because very specific ingredients and conditions are used, the chances of unwanted side effects are minimal. It’s like you’re worried about an explosion if I’m wrong in the doses or baking to make a cake.
- Certainly, but in this example, there is the oven? The oven can break under the effect of heat, if it has a design defect? A cleansing ritual could go wrong and burn everything around, right?
- I do not guarantee an immediate success and without the slightest risk, but I suggest you trust - trust me.

Clarin smiled a little.

- You wouldn’t be there without that trust, Master Mage. But what is doing your son?

Sigmund was filling the wooden tub with water from the jars.

- He’s finishing prepare one of the essential elements for the ritual.

The Black Skaven put the last jar back on the cart, took out a small leather package which he placed next to the tub, and returned quietly to the group.

- Everything’s ready, Father.
- Perfect.

The Mage Master stood in front of the guards and Clarin, so as to have the field in front of him. Sigmund was by his side.

- I will now proceed to a purge enchantment. These places have been infected by the rotting-corruption of the Feral Skaven, it will have to be dissolved. Sigmund?

The Black Skaven took a wrought box out of his backpack and handed it to his father. The White Skaven picked out a curious object. Clarin opened wide, impressed eyes when he saw a massive, round-shaped gold mask, with intricate carvings over its entire surface.

- Gosh!
- I can tell you, apart from my family, this is my most precious treasure. It comes from Lustria.
- Did you go to Lustria?
- Once. But I won’t tell you more today. Let’s wait until the bonds of trust are more solid-firm. The blessing of my father, for example?
- I understand.

Clarin knew the reputation of the great continent beyond the sea, and had heard terrible stories about his fearsome natives. The Master Mage continued:

- First, I burn incense in the perimeter where the cauldron has been overturned-emptied, to repel warpstone mists. After, I’m going to drink a potion that will imbibe me with life magic. Then, I’ll
capture the energy of the sun to concentrate it in this golden mask. And finally, I’ll have to imbue the earth with the combined forces of the potion, the sun and the mask with a wave of concentrated energy that will react with incense. So the soil should be purged of this infection.
- Are you going to serve as a magic channel?
- Exactly. It will be a new-new experience for me, Master Clarin!
- And... isn’t this operation risky for you? Couldn’t such a flow of energy flowing through your body consume you?

The White Skaven smiled slightly.

- If I was an old-old man almost thirty years old, maybe my heart wouldn’t bear it. But normally everything will be fine for me.

Clarin regarded Psody with respect.

- Be sure Prince Calderon will appreciate your gesture at its true value.
- I’m sure of it. I’ll do my best to succeed. Now, I ask you to stay turned in this direction. You don’t have to risk being blinded by the light of energy. The protection of the masks could be insufficient.
- Everything will be fine, are you sure?
- I am.
- So, good luck, Master Prospero.

Psody took a few steps toward the tub, but turned around one last time.

- Siggy? Come over here!

Sigmund joined him in small strides. The White Skaven placed a loving hand on his arm, and spoke to him in his native language.

- Don’t worry about me, my little boy-boy. Everything will be fine, and we’re doing this for a good cause.

Sigmund didn’t like hearing Queekish so much, but he knew how to practice it when necessary. For the sake of discretion, therefore, he replied in the same language:

- I know-know.
- I’m just asking you to keep an eye on me, just in case. You can watch. I never did this ritual. Normally, nothing dangerous for anyone, but if you ever see that I don’t move when it’s over, you know what you have to do.

Sigmund replied with a nod. His father also says:

- If ever one of these Humans, any of them, dares to turn his head, slap him!

New nod. Psody smirked, and resumed his way to the bucket, while his son returned to his seat in front of the citizens of Sueño, who had been a little disturbed when they heard the language of the Feral Skaven.

- What did he tell you? asked Clarin hesitantly.
- He asked me to watch over you, in case of something went wrong. Just keep facing me, and everything will be fine.

Clarin repeated Sigmund’s words in his language. The soldiers just nodded slightly.
Sigmund saw in the distance the little white silhouette of his father who was setting small censers in a circle around the cauldron still overturned on the ground. He thus placed ten. Then he took out his tinder lighter and lit them one after the other.

The great Black Skaven focused his gaze on the Estalian emissary.

- Master Clarin, I have something to tell you that concerns only you and me.
- You’re arousing my curiosity, young man. Be my guest!

Sigmund was genuinely embarrassed. It didn’t happen often when he talked to strangers, but he thought what he was trying to say.

- Hum, I... well, my father made it clear to me that I hadn’t an exemplary conduct before you.
- What are you talking about, my friend?
- My anger, my sadness, my excesses... especially with alcohol.
- What? Oh, come on, it has been forgotten for a long time! Listen, you risked your life to save my fellow citizens when you had neither received the order nor the formal obligation!
- A Prince’s grandson cannot afford everything.
- No, probably not, but a passionate young man who sees such horrors and who nevertheless manages not to fall into madness... no wonder that he happens to... get a little carried away.
- Didn’t my family tell you anything else?
- Hmm... not especially.
- Good. Anyway, I want to apologize if I could have seemed unworthy of my rank.
- The valiant warrior who saved a village of my Prince on a whim has no apology to do to me for a simple misconduct.

Sigmund thanked the gods inwardly. Apparently, his family had said nothing to the envoy about the Eshin assassin. His eye caught a gesture from the White Skaven.

- Ah, watch out, my father is waving me. The most decisive moment of the ritual is coming. Remember, look at me, and don’t look back, no matter what.

Clarin repeated the instruction in Estalian.

*Good. When you have to go-go, you have to go-go!*

He had never done this kind of ritual, even less in front of witnesses. He had spent the entire time preparing for this event. He thought back to his youth in the Brissuc tunnels. Even then, what he was about to do would have been very embarrassing for him, perhaps more so. His mind then slid over the faces of his family members.

*I’m doing this for them, and it’s worth it!*

Determined to sacrifice his self-esteem in the name of peace between the kingdoms, the White Skaven inspired deeply. Then he removed his clothes one by one, folded them carefully and placed them near the tub of hot water, while humming a small prayer. He knew that the Horned Rat would no doubt be angry to see a White Skaven destroy the work of the Pestilens, so he asked him to be forgiving.

When he found himself naked, he looked at himself from head to toe, then glanced away. Neither her son, nor Clarin, nor any other Human had moved. So he took the small bottle of potion that had...
remained in his satchel. There was in the flask a good third of a litre of the mixture he had spent hours concocting with Magister Steadyhand and Sister Judy before adding the last ingredients provided by Clarin. He swallowed it all in a few sips. The potion tasted sweet, there was a good dose of honey. Then he gently grabbed Cuelepok’s mask, and wore it. Then he lay carefully on his back, his muzzle turned towards the sun, and did not move anymore.

- Is everything all right, Master Sigmund?
- Don’t worry, Master Clarin.

And now, the most delicate moment...

Jade Magic was something you had to feel. Not see, not calculate, but fully feel. It was not necessary to beat around the bush: the magic potion circulated in his stomach, and thanks to the magic of Ghyran, penetrated in his organism much more quickly than ordinary food. Already, bubbles were tickling his intestines, and his face tightened under the effect of nervous tics.

Above all, for what he had to do, he had a certain feeling to feel, in particular.

_To fertilize... what a joke-joke!_

No, he shouldn’t disperse, but stay focused. Under his mask, he closed his eyes. Pictures jostled in his head, as heat circulated through his abdomen. Then he felt a tingling in his lower abdomen. Yes, he was on the right path. So he thinks more. He remembered the very first time he had felt this emotion, in a dark cave in Niklasweiler, again. Then he saw breeders, large, stretched out all their length on straw mattresses, all naked and ready to receive him. But after his wanderings during the Harvests, his point of view had changed. They were no longer objects of desire, but unhappy creatures which inspired him only with pity.

He had felt a violent desire for the creatures of the sorcerer of Chaos Aescos Karkadourian, they had bewitched him thanks to their evil charms. When he ran to them, he wanted more than anything to die between their claws, because this ecstasy would have been really worth it. Except for one woman, the one who saved him from this trap.

_My love..._

Heike was there, always more beautiful, always softer, always more feminine… Even when some Skaven girls had reached adulthood, even if some of them were rather cute, none managed to exceed the grace and the generosity of his partner.

And with his return after the last Harvest, they had lost time. And Heike seemed eager to make up for this lost time. Oh yes, for the past few weeks, she had been radiant with energy, and almost insatiable when the door to their bedroom was closed.

The thoughts quickened, and the feeling grew stronger. Psody realized the mask was warm, the skin on his face was starting to burn, like the time he had been outside too long one day the previous summer. He creaked, feeling the veins in his crotch painfully swollen with blood. Again, he concentrated, and allowed himself to spill a hundred thoughts all more erotic to each other in his mind.

His heart was pounding. Suddenly his nervous system ignited. He felt the desire to flow through his basin, like a torrent of bubbling sap ready to overflow. He turned suddenly, and found himself
lying on his stomach. So he put his hands firmly on the ground, pushed hard, took a deep breath, and reared up, his head towards the heavens. His buttocks tightened, his thighs tensed, and finally the enjoyment permeated the corrupted earth through frank pushes of kidneys, while he moaned with all his strength, transported by pleasure. Fortunately, Humans didn’t have the opportunity to hear him shout, because the mask radiated a golden glow, in an electric crackle. Psody remained in this state for long seconds, then everything stopped.

There was no more light, no more sound. The White Skaven, still leaning on his palms, remained dazed for a moment longer, then his head fell to the ground. He barely felt the compression of the mask on his face.

Despite the pounding of blood in his temples which still deafened his ears, he heard his son’s voice.

- Father!

Panic-stricken, the Black Skaven ran as fast as he could towards the Master Mage. Several times he slipped, and even sprawled across the yellowish grass. He didn’t care, and continued on his way to the White Skaven. But when there were only a few more steps to take, Sigmund saw Psody, still lying on his stomach, raising his hand, and nothing else.

- It’s all right, Siggy. I’m fine.

His arm fell limply on the grass. He seemed out of breath, unable to move, but he was still alive. Besides, he spoke in a tone that mixed exhaustion with... a blissful ecstasy.

- You need help?
- No it’ll be fine. Go back to reassure them, and give me ten minutes.
- As you wish.

Sigmund obeyed, and obediently returned to the Estalians. They still hadn’t moved.

- So, Master Sigmund?
- My father is fine. Still, he needs calm, in order to be able to favour the transmission of flows in the earth. Again, there could be bright sounds and lightning. Above all, don’t turn around until he tells us it’s over.
- Good. Will there be for a long time?
- Ten minutes. In the meantime, look ahead, and at your feet.

Clarin translated, and the Estalians looked around without looking back. There were some surprise exclamations.

- Did you see that, Master Sigmund?
- I did.
- Unbelievable!
- Isn’t it?

Indeed, the mist had completely dissipated. But above all, the ground itself was beginning to transform. The most yellowed blades of grass changed colour and took on a more natural shade. The brown foam dissolved, several clouds of white smoke rose here and there.

- This is a miracle!
- No, Master Clarin, this is Ghyran.
Psody was finally able to get up after the third try. His head was still spinning. He removed his mask with a trembling hand. The gold was hot between his fingers, almost burning. He looked down and gave a nervous chuckle. After such an experience, his fur was soaked. He then decided to go to the final stage of the ritual. He picked up the small package left by Sigmund, took out a soap, entered the tub of hot water, and rubbed vigorously his body.

*By the Horned Rat, what an experience! So, every cloud has a silver lining!* 

- Come in!

The door to the Prince’s office opened on Bianka Steiner.

- Ah, finally, I can see you, darling. I swear, the complaints multiply, with this story of Larn. The citizens are going crazy, the stories of argument and vandalism never stop, so much so I hadn’t a minute to myself! I hope the wait didn’t seem too long to you?

On the afternoon of the departure of her father and brother, Bianka rushed to her grandfather’s office to express her concern. She had shown him the triangle of the Horned Rat carved on the headboard. The Prince immediately made arrangements. He had replaced the bed, doubled the guard of the property by choosing only among the best soldiers, and instructed the temple of Verena to investigate this matter. Samuel Heifetz was commissioned for the investigation. As a former servant of the princely family, he knew the layout of the place very well. Unfortunately, he had found nothing convincing.

- Let’s go to the garden, I need to get some fresh air.
- I’m behind you, Opa.

A few minutes later, the two Steiners were at the back of the property. The servants were coming and going. There was a certain nervousness in the atmosphere.

- All of this is very upsetting. I still don’t know what may have happened. At least your little sister appreciates her new bed. A “bed for grown up”.
- All of them good for nothing! exclaimed the girl. The priests of Verena, the guards... Come on, is it so hard to protect the most inaccessible place in the whole city?

She had shouted the last words. Several staff members, Humans and Skaven, jumped.

- Calm down, Bianka, please! They don’t deserve this. Watch your words! These people do everything to do the job for the best, so show them more respect.
- Yes, Opa, I... I’m sorry.

The ratgirl clenched her fists. Anger was a way for her to express her fear, and her grandfather knew it. But he had no intention of being more lenient with her than with her twin brother.

- Your fear is legitimate, Bianka, we are faced with a complicated situation. Figure out all the members of the crew are as afraid as you are. Any of them could face the same doom as Tenenbaum’s. But if we want to solve this problem, we have to keep calm.
The Prince then heard loud voices near the building reserved for the servants. A Skaven was berating a Human. She walked away, throwing a string of insults at him.

- Well, speaking of that...

Without hesitation, Steiner headed for the Skaven.

- Well, Ulli, what’s going on?
- This woman is really impossible! Not only does she not take it seriously, but she also lowers herself to gossip! Enough is enough, I asked her to leave!
- It doesn’t seem upset her much...
- Inevitably, she says far from here, “her skin will remain intact”!
- Fear is contagious.
- And it prevents us from progressing! Certainly, your Highness, I am struggling to find a replacement for Krista.
- Krista?
- Yes, your laundress! I refuse to hire the first commoner for your Majesty! I need the best! I trusted my brother-in-law who recommended this one, but indeed... He will hear me, for sure!
- What happened to this Krista? Has she taken leave of us?
- What? Your Majesty is not aware?

Prince Steiner felt a little itch tickle his skin.

- Aware of what?
- Well, she had an accident a few days ago, visiting her mother. She was found on the stairs, her neck broken.
- Oh... And what about her mother?
- Dead in her bed, the unhappy thing was a sick old woman, and Krista used to come visit her every day to take care of her. The shock must have killed her.

Bianka, who had heard the beginning of the conversation, approached and asked:

- And... had this family other problems?
- In fact, Fräulein Bianka, when the father died, he left heavy debts to Krista’s mother. The poor girl worked twice as hard to send money, but she could barely make ends meet. The less sad thing is the suffering has stopped for good.
- I see. You may dismiss, Ulli. Find me another laundress, and offer a salary one and a half times higher than Krista’s, that should stimulate the candidacies.
- At your command, your Highness.

Ulli bowed respectfully, and hurried back to the building where the laundry and his office were located.

Steiner and Bianka looked at each other, each saw the same thing in the other’s eyes.

- Opa, I think we’ve found our traitor.
- I share this impression with you, my angel. Who was better placed to steal something with the smell of your father on? But I don’t think she was the main culprit.
- What do you mean?
- Feral Skaven regularly use Humans, Bianka. They primarily target people who are in positions of power. In my opinion, they would never have thought of contacting this poor woman; trust a female, can you imagine that? A female which, what is more, has no status in the dominant class. No, they probably lured someone unhappy with his or her fate, who in turn was able to get help from Krista, a poor servant girl who was in dire straits because of numerous debts, before getting
rid of her. A magistrate, one of the main servants of the castle, an army officer, perhaps? Anyway, I’m pretty sure the real traitor is still among us.
- You have an idea?
- Hmm ... Maybe, but I can’t say anything yet. I refuse to accuse anyone without solid evidence. If I was wrong, not only would it discredit me, but it would also allow the real traitor to get out of it. We’ll have to be extremely careful. Maybe I should talk to Steadyhand about it?

The ratgirl’s heart beat faster as she hear this name.

- Opa, I doubt it’s a good idea.
- You don’t trust him?
- No. I don’t know why, but something tells me he’s not playing fair with us.
- And what is this “something”?
- His confidence which borders on insolence, his superior airs, his innocent little smiles... I can imagine him making eyes at a laundress to bribe her better, before betraying her!
- Oh, he has a bit whimsical personality, for sure, but that doesn’t make him a suspect.
- Who threatened Isolde? Maybe me?
- This has nothing to do with! Come on, Bianka, you’re talking about your mother’s godfather! I assure you that he is above all suspicion!
- And maybe he’ counting on your trust, Opa. Many tragedies are the product of a betrayal by someone “above all suspicion”!

The Prince felt a touch of bitterness tickling his heart.

- You’re speaking so because you don’t know him as much as I know him, darling.
- Precisely, I am safe from a positive image which can be distorted. I don’t want to know this individual better, anyway!
- He risked his life several times to allow your mother to live.
- I do not deny it. But he may have changed? What if someone had promised him something in exchange for Father’s head? The Council of Thirteen, for example? They could provide him with a mountain of warpstone, for his experiments!
- To appeal to an Elf, they would have to be desperate. They are too afraid of the Elves to deal with them. Even the Dark Elves arouse their fears.
- Well, let’s admit, Feral Skaven are not our only enemies! What if another Principality tries to create issues?

Steiner raised his hand.

- Well, if that can reassure you, for the moment, I won’t tell him anything. But I still urge you to be careful. Bianka, you tend to see evil everywhere, including the most modest of peasants like Gustavus Finston. Distrust can be a good defense, but if you let it veil your eyes too much, it can blind you.
- I hope you’re right, Opa.
- Me too, sincerely. Let us remain vigilant, but do not act like the people in our charge; let’s keep a cool head.
- I’m going back to Verena temple, it will make me think of something else.
- We’ll see you later, at supper.

The ratgirl took a few steps to move away, but she quickly returned to her grandfather, and threw herself into his arms. She allowed herself to shed a few tears on his shoulder.

- Be strong, my little angel. I promise no one will hurt my family as long as I live. And I intend to live a long time still! The day Morr picks me up, it won’t be because of a Feral Skaven!
- I love you, Opa.

Finally, Bianka decided to go back to work.

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