

Fire and Earth

a prelude to chaos
by James Wallis

Bruno Mellrich, the mightiest warrior in the Empire, steadied his lance, kicked his heels into the flanks of his great black stallion Clarion, and leapt into the charge. His men, surprised and scattered by the goblin ambush, rallied to his war-cry and began to re-group, but Bruno was well ahead of them, the foul green-skinned enemy parting before and sometimes under Clarion's hooves. Two foolish goblins screamed their lives out on the end of his weapon, flailing like speared fish.

A second war-cry caught his attention and he wheeled his mount, to face an army of Skaven breaking cover from the nearby woods. With cries of terror his men dropped their weapons and fled, leaving him alone to face the horde of Chaos-creatures that poured across the field towards them. And at the head of the army... Bruno raised his visor and shaded his eyes. Yes, that was the ugly, filthy, scarred form of Magste Kimt, standing a full head above the rest of the rodentine forces, and brandishing a double-edged axe that Bruno knew well. For a second the cavalier's vision was filled with images of his ruined village, the burnt-out shell of his home, the corpses of his family, and the eternal vengeance he had sworn on that day against Kimt and all Skaven.

Bruno had waited years for this day. He closed his visor with one mailed gauntlet, while the other drew his five-foot blade NightBiter from the scabbard strapped to his back. 'You dirty rat,' he muttered through clenched teeth. 'You killed my brothers.'

He spurred Clarion, and his faithful mount sped towards the Skaven horde like an arrow from an Elven bow, or a harvester towards a field of ripe corn. 'Prepare to die, Kimt!' he yelled in pure bloodlust.

A shadow blotted out the sun. 'Herr Mellrich!' it said.

Bruno blinked and looked up in sudden panic, the little clay models on his desk forgotten. Magister Klimdt was standing over him, the old man's thin frame interrupting the few dusty sunbeams that filtered down from the classroom's high windows. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Then the schoolmaster bent down and carefully picked up one of the models, holding it close to his bleached, rheumy eyes for a long instant.

'Is this meant to be a Skaven, Herr Mellrich?' he asked at last.

Bruno swallowed and nodded. Then, remembering his master's failed eyesight, said, 'Yes, sir.'

Magister Klimdt seemed to consider for a moment. 'Well. Since you have such an interest in base things, perhaps you can tell us what the five elements are? The ones that the rest of us have been studying this afternoon?'

Bruno looked down at his desk, at the diagrams and words carved there by generations of schoolboys before him, all of them taught by Magister Klimdt. How old was Klimdt, anyway? 'Air,' he said. 'Water. Chaos.' Five elements? The other two were in his mind but, skittish as bad dogs, they would not come to him.

'Fire and earth, Herr Mellrich. Fire and earth.' The master's hand closed on the tiny clay Skaven and a trickle of dust fell from between the bony fingers, glistening in a beam of sunlight. 'The fire from which the world was born and to which it will return, and the earth from which we were born and to which we will return. Remember fire and earth, Herr Mellrich, although I believe you are more likely to remember the Skaven. Boys like you always do.' He was about to say more, but the scrape of the door at the back of the room interrupted him.

Bruno turned to see who the newcomer was. A tall figure stood against the bright light of the street behind him, wearing a riding cloak and a fine hat. Magister Klimdt raised his head, gazing in the direction of the doorway with near-blind eyes.

‘Are you the book-seller from Nuln?’ he said.

The stranger took a step into the room. ‘No,’ he said in a voice devoid of accent. ‘I am Karl Schwindler, and I bring a message from Tomas Diener in Marienburg.’

Klimdt seemed to sway for a moment, then grasped for support, and his claw-like hands fastened onto Bruno’s shoulder, the nails digging unpleasantly through the cloth of the boy’s jerkin.

‘School is over for today,’ he said. ‘I have important business to conduct. You are all dismissed. The gods go with you.’ And then he turned towards the side door and called in a strange high voice, ‘Octavius! Octavius! Come here! I have need of your eyes!’

As Bruno scrambled to gather up his books and clay figures, moving fast amidst the hubbub of classmates eager to get out of the dusty schoolroom, he paused for a second to wonder how, if Magister Klimdt was as blind as he professed, he could always tell from half-way across the room when boys were playing with toys or passing notes instead of paying attention. Then the question slipped away. It was a fine Sommerzeit afternoon with several hours before supper, and there were more important things to think about.

• • •

Three figures sat like statues in the Magister’s book-lined office. Magister Klimdt was seated behind the desk, hands clasped in front of him, as his young acolyte Octavius read out loud from the sheaf of papers beside him, his Altdorf accent clear and filled with the purity of youth amidst the old furniture and older books. In the corner sat the newcomer, his hat and cloak on the floor beside him. Evening had fallen and the diamond-paned windows were

dark. In the candlelight, the lines of late middle age were visible on the visitor's face, and for someone who had just ridden from Marienburg his clothes were unusually clean and well pressed.

Finally Octavius placed the last sheet of parchment on the others, and was silent. Klimdt put his head on one side as if in thought, then made a gesture to Octavius, and the fresh-faced priest disappeared through the door. A moment later there was a faint scraping from the far side, as if someone had just turned a key in the lock.

The stranger drew his chair into the centre of the room. 'Well,' he said, 'what do you think?'

Klimdt did not move. 'I think many things. What in particular?'

'Are these the pages you asked Tomas to find for you in the Unseen Library in Marienburg?'

The old schoolmaster was silent for a moment more. Then: 'They are fascinating, are they not? The workmanship, the dedication involved in creating them. Exquisite. Masterful. But you ask if they are the missing chapter of the Lexikon of Eber Keiler of Salzenmund? The subject is correct, the phrasing is undoubtedly in her style. They could almost be the lost pages, but they are not. You and I both know that this is a forgery. The parchment has never been near Marienburg, much less Salzenmund. It was made here in Altdorf, in the last month. I can feel the moisture in it, and smell the fresh ink.'

The messenger looked aghast. 'A forgery?'

'Please, Herr Schwindler – which is not your real name – credit me with the intelligence my age deserves. This is a fake, and one produced with a great deal of effort as well: too much for a mere swindler. You wanted to gain my trust, not my money. But I am not so easily fooled. I know the only truth you have told me so far is that Tomas is dead. Tell me truthfully now: are you a member of the Reiksguard, or merely an agent for them?'

The former Herr Schwindler smiled the self-conscious smile of a man whose secret has been uncovered. 'I am Lieutenant Gottfried Braubach of the Reiksguard. And, since you have forced my hand, I am here to place you under arrest for conspiring against the Empire, consorting with agents of Chaos, summoning demons, trafficking in forbidden knowledge, and perverting the minds of the children you pretend to educate. This building is surrounded by my men. You cannot escape. You and your followers will be taken from here to a place of secrecy, tried with the utmost speed and burned before dawn, along with your books. Your ashes will be buried deep in the plague pits outside the city, and forgotten.'

Klimdt leaned back in his chair, stroking his wrinkled chin, as if he had not heard the list of accusations and threats. 'Fire and earth again; always fire and earth. You are Braubach? You are the one who has pursued me these last eight years?'

'Nine. And you have led me a merry dance across the Empire.'

'I? I have not. Friends and agents have led you a merry dance, while I stayed here teaching. I was never in Talabheim, nor in Kislev, and the warehouse you burned to the ground in Nuln contained only mildewed sacks. I am too old to gallivant around like a young fox with the Empire's hounds at my heels. No, at my age I prefer to stay here, finding old books and making sure that their learning is not lost. My printing press has produced twelve fine volumes...'

'Twelve volumes of deceit, lies and heresy! Treasonous writings without wit or learning, the ramblings of centuries-dead blasphemers, fit only for the bonfire. I have read your books, Magister, and there is nothing but filth and falsehood in them!'

'You do not have to believe them, Lieutenant Braubach. I do not ask you to accept them as the only truth, merely as an alternative to the official truths peddled by the likes of you. There is truth in them; truths that shall outlast your precious Empire if they are told and if men are allowed to open their eyes to see them. Do you know how old I am?'

The lieutenant made to interrupt, but Klimdt was in full flow: 'I am one hundred and ten years old. Does that surprise you? A hundred and ten years, without making a pact with any of your devils or forces of Chaos, or kissing a vampire, or resorting to infusions of Elven blood. And every man could live so long if they had the knowledge I have saved from your purges.'

Braubach spat on the floor. 'I'd rather die bravely at forty than live to a hundred as a blind, gutless heretic,' he said contemptuously.

Klimdt stood up, his hands gripping the edge of his desk. 'Regardless of your threats and your men outside, Herr Braubach, you are still a guest in my house, Lieutenant, and you will keep a civil tongue in your head while you are here. I am bound by the laws of hospitality, and so I will not kill you...'

Braubach jumped to his feet. A dagger flashed from a hidden sheath and held steady, its point against the old master's dewlapped throat. 'Never threaten a member of the Reiksguard, old man. Your trial is a luxury and I am prepared to do without it if need be.'

'I said I would not kill you, dolt.' Klimdt sounded irritated, but nothing more. 'This charade has gone on long enough. Octavius and the others should have escaped by now, taking the last of the scrolls with them. Did you remember to post guards in the sewers? No, I can tell from the scent of your sudden sweat that you did not. Well, then, they are away. Now only my own escape remains. I have no doubt, Lieutenant, that we will meet again in a few years: the room's door may be locked but it is not strong, and the fire that Octavius will have started in the kitchen should take at least five minutes to reach here. Or there is always the window, so long as your men do not have crossbows and itchy fingers.'

'You're going nowhere, old fool, except with me.' The point of the dagger dug further into Klimdt's throat. The old man smiled and turned his head, and candle-light shone in the milky pupils of his eyes. Unnoticed, the fingers of his left hand finished tracing the lines of an intricate pattern carved into the polished surface of his desk.

‘Tell me, Lieutenant,’ he said in the high voice of a boy of nine, ‘when you were at school, did you dream of fighting monsters?’

His right hand shot out, tossing a handful of dry dust into the soldier’s eyes, and for an instant there was a Skaven in the room – bigger than the biggest Skaven Braubach had ever faced, and swinging a rusted double-headed axe at him. He ducked left, bringing his dagger up to gut the Chaos-creature before it could finish its blow. His blade struck nothing. There was no Skaven, only a little drifting powder in the musty air. Nor, as he glanced around, was there a wizened old schoolteacher with the chalk-white pupils of one who has spent his life in study. Only a book lying on top of the pile of forged pages. It had not been there a moment ago.

Braubach bent and picked it up, turning it over in his hands before flipping to the title page.

The New Apocrypha
Being a Collection of Heretical and Suppressed Writings by Diverse
Hands
Volume Thirteen: Fire and Earth
Dedicated Most Humbly to Gottfried Braubach,
Officer of the Emperor’s Reiksguard,
whose Unswerving Zeal for Truth hath Sustained mine Own

The faint roar of flames far off in the building caught his ears. Braubach tucked the book inside his jacket, picked up a chair and, with a faint smile on his lips, began to pound it methodically against the thick diamond panes of the window.

Part 2

It was late. To the east the first hues of dawn tainted the sky, while the red glow and high fingers of flame in the west testified to the strength of the fire that still raged there. Above it all, the chaos moon Mórrslieb watched over the sleeping capital like an all-seeing and none too benevolent eye.

In his room in the Reiksguard barracks, Lieutenant Andreas Reisefertig licked his finger and turned the final page of the book on his desk. It was blank save for a woodcut, a strange abstract pattern. In the chamber beyond, his fellow officer and mentor Gottfried Braubach grumbled for a moment in his sleep before breaking into a deep snore. The day had been a long one for them both, but Andreas had not been trapped in a burning building by a diabolical old mage, so it was Braubach who slept and Reisefertig who had sat through the night reading Volume Thirteen of the New Apocrypha.

The candlelight flickered over the strange pattern and Reisefertig stared at it. He could see no picture in its lines and swirls, but it reminded him of something. Standing, he turned to the bookcase behind his desk and began to methodically take down the thirty-seven volumes of the Ancient Army Lists and Battle Reports of Johann Wissden. Hidden behind them on the shelf lay another row of books, smaller and with newer bindings, flat against the wall. Only the two of them knew of this secret cache: even for members of the Reiksguard's little-known Untersuchung section, charged with protecting the Imperial court from the conspiracies and machinations of Chaos followers, possession of blasphemous material was a burning offence.

Reisefertig took down the seventh volume of the twelve, flipping to the final page. His memory had not fooled him: the woodcut there was similar, but not identical. He glanced out

of the window, eyes unfocused, remembering. It had been in Middenheim. The day was snowy, and the large flakes had hissed as they landed on the bone-fires of seventeen heretics and minions of Chaos, the air full of the rich smell of burnt flesh and hair. Braubach had been elated, sensing an end to their search. They had found the seventh volume in a secret drawer in a rich merchant's desk. It had contained a scrap of parchment used as a bookmark, and that had led the two of them to Parravon, and the ambush by the Bretonnian swordswomen. He rubbed the deep scar on the back of his left hand, as it itched at the memory. That had been an eventful year.

The woodcut caught his eye again. Reisefertig replaced the seventh volume, strode back to the desk, and stared at the pattern on the endpaper. It was almost like a maze, a labyrinth, a single line curving in and around itself, yet leading ever inwards, towards one centre. The lieutenant's brow furrowed as he tried to focus on the diagram. It seemed to swim before his eyes... no, his eyes could see it perfectly well, but his mind could not take it in. The day had been a long one, and his senses were tired. Tomorrow he would look at it again. No, tomorrow would be too late: the rat-like Klimdt and his pack would have made their getaway by then, despite the extra guards on every city gate. After nine years of pursuit Reisefertig knew his enemy. Klimdt was no ordinary man.

Know your enemy – aye, that was the key. Why would Klimdt have included the woodcuts in his books? Their significance would not be purely decorative: every other illustration was keyed to the text, yet Reisefertig knew there was no reference to these patterns in the seventh volume, or in the latest addition to the set. Perhaps they were a message in some secret code, or a symbol sacred to some forgotten dark god. Mayhap if the two were overlaid they would reveal a secret map...

The candle-flame guttered as a wad of congealed wax burnt through and fell to the desk. From the window, the malign light

of Mórrslieb fought against the approaching clarity of the dawn. Reisefertig yawned, and tapped the page of the book with a thoughtful finger. It reminded him in a way of a pattern that had been carved onto the school-desk where he had sat many years before, trapped for long hours as the teacher droned on about pointless subjects like mathematics. He had plotted battle-campaigns across that desk, using the carved paths as ditches and fortifications for his strategies, dreaming of the glories of life as a Reiksguard officer. The fantasies had not included nine years on the trail of a sad old heretic, nor spending long nights trying to puzzle out the secrets of illegal books.

The tome would give up its secret eventually. Meanwhile... His tapping finger touched one end of the tangled pattern and began to idly trace its interwoven path across the page. The room was still around him, and time was silent as the pattern's intricacies yielded to his meandering digit. How long could it take to travel from one end of the path to the other? The puzzle seemed so difficult, and yet as he followed the spiralling trail, he felt it begin to come clear in his mind. Pieces of old knowledge began to fall into their appointed places. Clues, riddles, the books: they came together and he could see now they were all parts of a bigger, greater pattern. And there was more: the revelation brought a new understanding, a new consciousness.

Outside the window the clear, bright light of dawn broke across the city of Altdorf, and as Reisefertig raised his eyes to look at it, he felt a greater light shine forth inside him. At last he understood the fire that kept Klimdt's spirit alive, that drove him to live among dusty, earthy books, digging out their secrets. Fire and earth. Of course. Everything was so clear now.

In the other room, Braubach snorted in his sleep. Reisefertig glanced at the connecting door, then at the books on the desk. Should he take them with him? There was no need. He had read and reread them so many times that he knew their every word; only

now he understood them too. Better to leave them here. Braubach would figure the secret out for himself eventually, and would follow into the path of enlightenment.

With slow calm, the man who had been Lieutenant Andreas Reisefertig picked his riding cloak from the back of the door and walked out of the office, down towards the Reiksguard stables. Somewhere out in the world, possibly in the Unseen Library in Marienburg, were the missing pages from the Lexikon of Eber Keiler of Salzenmund, and Klimdt had need of them.

Behind him on the desk, the pattern on the book's endpapers glowed slightly, perhaps in the light from the dawn. The pages ruffled as if in a breeze, as one and then another flipped over, turning faster and faster until the book slammed itself shut with a bang. Outside the closed window, the face of Mórrslieb could have been grinning as it faded in the bright morning sky.

This story first appeared in *Apocrypha Now*, a supplement for Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay published in 1995 by Hogshead Publishing under licence from Games Workshop. All copyrights, trademarks and distinctive imagery are the property of Games Workshop ©1995 and are used here without permission. This digital edition was created and released in 2012 by James Wallis.