



Tales Of Stirland

By Nicodemus Kyme, models by Paul Scott

This month, our congenial guide, Nicodemus Kyme takes us through the Imperial province of Stirland. As you will find out, it's not the most hospitable of places during the time of The Three Emperors.

Day One

At dawn, I set out from Altdorf, the temple of Sigmar a diminishing silhouette in my wake. My quarry had time on his side, and in a manhunt such as this, time was of the essence. Even so, I would seek him out, the creature once known as Simius Gant, and dispense Sigmar's justice.

Borne upon a plain river barge, I went the way of the Reik, my destination Stirland, reports having reached me that the wretch I sought was last sighted in its rural backwaters. From what little I know of the place it is an impoverished county, given to heathen ritual and customs. I took care to pack additional rope and torches in light of that.

By way of the town of Kemperbad I travelled, the Great Forest filling the horizon to the north, towards the neighbouring province of Talabecland. I saw figures walking their borders and the fires of distant watchtowers lit up like baleful eyes as the evening dark encroached. It was a bad omen and I made the sign of Sigmar over my chest.

It was fully night by the time I made landfall, concealed under the garb of a travelling merchant trader lest Gant have minions who would alert him to my presence. I approached the wan light of a small village. A crude wooden sign, rotten and mould-ridden, read: 'Kraghaben'. It swung from a single rope like a hanged man.

I found lodgings there at a simple travelling inn, the Haven, although I doubted the strength or veracity of the name.

Day Two

I set out early in the morning, the sky still dark and brooding, after sleeping for four hours. I was fully rested having been taught meditative techniques by my priestly brethren at the temple. I would need my wits about me, and was glad of the knowledge they had imparted.

From what I can gather thus far, these people are a rustic, almost backward folk. Mercifully, they are Sigmar-fearing. His symbol is prevalent throughout the village, an iron hammer hung alongside horseshoes above the bar. I wanted to chastise the barkeep, and advise him sternly that such an icon should be venerated in a more appropriate location, but these rural folk have their superstitions and it was muttered that above the bar and at the door of the inn would ward off evil forces. I overheard other folk speak of men driven to madness, entire crops wasted and dead, of dire portents and anarchy and lawlessness.

Despite their apparent piety, I have noticed a profusion of so-called wise men and women who will have to burn for their heresies. They speak of the 'evil eye' and would ward it off for travellers, such as myself, with incense, tokens and false idols. The temple will not stand for such base idolatry, but there is a greater evil afoot here and I intend to find it and quash it.

For all their simplicity and suspicious nature these Stirland folk stood up well to subversive questioning. I gleaned little of the whereabouts of Gant or his kind. So, I left the inn in the small hours with little save for a rumour – a hooded man seen two nights ago upon a grassy heath.

As I made my way up a rocky crag, the land stretched out before me. If indeed anyone were practising foul deeds in the dark wilds then they would find it hard to secrete themselves. From my vantage point on the heath I saw little, save for a black shadow far on the horizon, a large and ruined tower that I resolved to investigate more closely after my business here was complete. Through a telescope I espied the mighty shadow of the Worlds Edge Mountains to the east, but I doubt sincerely that my quarry made it as far as that. It was then that I noticed something in the dark, a glimmer of light in the charcoal black.

Drawing closer I saw three figures, chanting around a fire. They were hooded, exactly as the barkeep had described, but my quarry was not amongst them. A body lay next to the flames. The stench of dead flesh wafted up to me on the breeze. Its stink was bitter and caught in my throat, along with the rising bile I felt towards these debased creatures.

I dealt with them swiftly. The first I killed with a pistol shot through the neck, his heretical words caught in his throat like poison. The second, alerted by the sound, came at me with dagger raised. I parried the blow and gutted him with my sabre. The third had little stomach for a fight and tried to flee. Picking up a stone from around the fire I brought him down with a well-aimed shot. This one I tried to keep alive so that I could interrogate him, but as I approached the corpse lying in the dirt began to stir. Whatever heinous act they were performing had taken hold and the dead rose once again! The beast grabbed at my ankle with surprising strength and I was brought down. It clawed at me, filth-encrusted talons ripping my shirt. I was disarmed but punched the creature hard in the face. Its head snapped back with a crack and I realised I had broken its neck. Head hanging limply like some macabre marionette with cut strings, it came at me again. But I was ready this time and from my belt I took a vial of blessed water and



smashed it over the creature's head. Kicking the thrashing corpse away, I got to my feet and watched it dissolve. Taking up my fallen sabre I cut off the creature's head, arms and legs, and buried the parts face down in the earth, sanctifying it with another vial of blessed water. By this time, the hooded one was stirring and I went over to question him.

I learned my quarry had fled by way of the River Stir, a natural border between Stirland and their northern neighbours Talabecland and Ostermark. I knew from my readings that the Stir was watched vigilantly by the famous Stir River Patrol and I doubted that Gant could have crossed there easily. No, the cur would have continued through Stirland. Applying the interrogation techniques of the devout, I learned through my prisoner's screams that Gant was indeed upon the beath two nights ago, that he had instructed his followers to raise the dead of the village and invade it. Gant had been making for Wurtbad, a principle town of this province lying upon the Old Dwarf Road all the way from the south.

Since Gant's trio of acolytes had been put down I doubted the threat of the village dead. I also doubted that Gant would have made it to Wurtbad in two days and nights. Necromancers and their kind are oft exhausted from their dark deeds and I was certain he would have taken refuge in some dark hollow or ruin, away from the prying eyes of the Roadwardens and Bounty Hunters that roamed these rural pastures. My thoughts went back to the tower ruins I had spotted in the distance earlier.

In any case, I had broken the underling and looking about me I noticed a gibbet set upon a hill not too far away. I was glad of the extra rope and set about tying the noose.

Day Three

The hanging acolyte was a message to all the occupants of Kraghaben of what fate befell those that deviated from the light of Sigmar. Since Gant was not here and his acolytes were slain, I revealed my true calling to the villagers. In doing so, and with gathered help, I rounded up the so-called wise men and women and had them burned upon a massive pyre in the village square, along with their heretical icons.

Leaving Kraghaben I learned from the barkeep that the ruins I had spotted upon the beath were known locally as the Blighted Towers and that a dire and terrible curse was upon them. It seemed to me a likely refuge for Gant.

Day Four

I could still see the smoke from the pyre as I set forth for the ruins. I passed a militia patrol on my way, a scurvy looking lot, led by one Claus 'Ox' Jaeger, a blood relative of the Elector of these parts, Demitri Jaeger, a minor lord and with scant power to lend to the aims of one of the Imperial claimants, his own allegiance betwixt the lord of Sylvania to the east and the Ottilans of Talabecland to the north.

I reached the Blighted Towers at dusk. They were a three-pronged shadow like skeletal fingers in the distance. As I

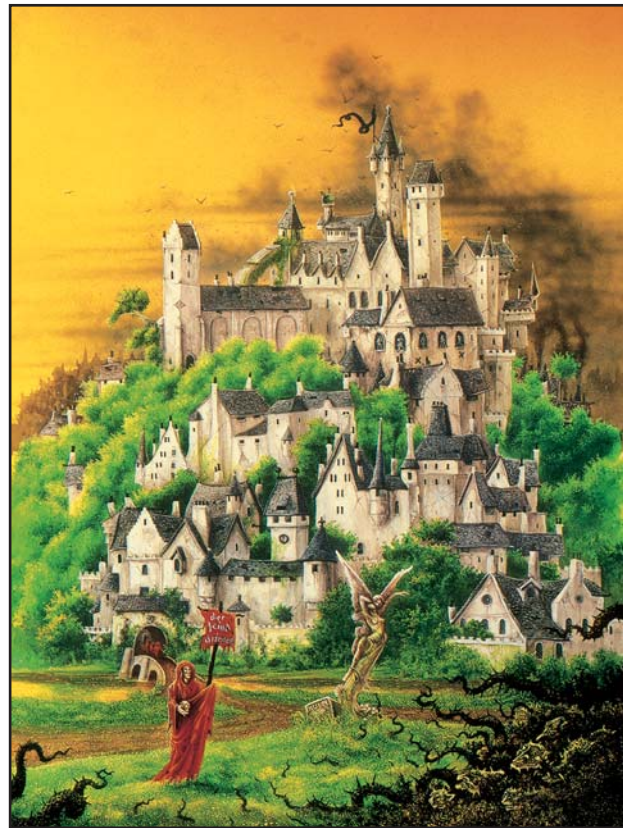
came closer, something moved within. Pressing my icon of Sigmar to my chest and drawing my pistol I advanced. Cowering in the ruins I encountered a thing that was surely cursed, shaped like a man, but with a bull's head and forelegs. I had barely shot the beast through the head when another emerged from the shadows. It roared as if in pain, and looked upon me with murderous rage. With no time to reload, I cast my icon at it like a throwing hammer. It struck hard and burned its foul flesh. I didn't hesitate and gutted the creature with my sabre.

They had been men once. I found ragged clothes, torn and split with the exertions of Chaos-filled muscles. I searched around the towers in turn, looking for clues. There was a circle, marked in blood, a collection of small bones within. They were some kind of crude divining method – a tool of so-called wise folk. But just like all tools of the enemy, it had turned upon its user. The wise man's bones were not too far from them, gnawed upon with fleshy strips still clinging to them. I burned all of it, obliterating and sanctifying the ground where the circle had been.

Day Five

My time at the Blighted Towers had been fruitless. Whatever malady plagued it in the minds of the villagers of Kraghaben, I had not seen it manifest. Although as I left, I felt tired and my skin burned from where my icon had rested.

I decided to make for the river. If indeed my quarry was headed east, towards the mountains, then perhaps he might try to secure a boat, bypass the river patrol and make his way down it.



Sigmar was with me. I found a small ferry port and bought passage down the Stir. The ferryman was toothless and simple. He told me that he usually took poachers down the river after they had crossed the border illegally, slipping past the warden's watch into the Great Forest, bringing their quarry back to into the province. He added that for turning a blind eye, they would give him a portion of what they had stolen. Upon seeing the icon of Sigmar around my neck and the pistol at my belt he said no more. I told him I was looking for a different quarry, a man, a foul servant of evil and that he would turn a permanently blind eye if he spoke of it to anyone. The rest of our journey together passed in silence as I kept a look out at the prow.

I reached Wurtbad in the early evening, with the trail growing ever colder.

One of the principal townships of Stirland, Wurtbad looked more like a large village than an established town. The trappings of a backward culture were for all to see. Wise men and women sold wards against the 'evil eye' once more, but I doubted I had enough torches and rope to redeem them all. There were no temples of any great import, just small shrines, often dedicated to Taal, the river god, rather than Sigmar, another fact that boded ill for these folk. Halflings were a common sight, which was little wonder given Stirland's proximity to the Moot. I began to wonder whether I should return to Wurtbad after my mission with a regiment of Knights Panther and purge these heathens once and for all.

I made lodgings at the Fallow Field inn and heard talk of strange men seen up at the Crow's Feast, a local landmark in these parts, barely three nights ago and again at the Cairn Circle, a rural cemetery at the border

to Sylvania in the east. I could learn no more though. The man who had seen them had died of fright, after giving his account to a Road Warden patrolling there. He had seen nothing and the trail grew cold once more.

Day Six

The next morning I intended to make for Crow's Feast when my attention was arrested by a group of marksmen practicing in the town square. The crowd watching them looked worn and afraid. Practicing in case of invasion rather than for sport it seemed.

It was here that I found my quarry's trail once more. A public hanging was taking place, a few feet from the marksmen. A large crow perched upon the gibbet seemed to eye me suspiciously and cawed at my approach. At once I suspected it as a familiar of Gant's. The bird flew off, doubtless to warn its master, as I questioned the warden who was overseeing proceedings. I discovered the condemned was guilty of witchcraft and necromancy. I demanded immediately to interrogate him and he was cut down. A look of relief on his face at his apparent reprieve, turned to dread as he saw my face. That was good; fear was a tool I intended to exploit to the full.

I had worked up a sweat and used the last of my tongs, but the condemned finally broke. Gant was indeed in Wurthbad. I made haste from the cell where I had interrogated him. As I was leaving, the warden came with fresh rope. I told him there would be no show today. He had already expired from my attentions.

Day Seven

I knew my quarry was not far now. I managed to garner passage aboard another vessel, Gant's trail leading back to the Stir. I was certain now he intended to cross over into Sylvania and become lost in the even murkier shadows there. I travelled with the Stir River Patrol.

These are dour men, well-trained and disciplined, utterly unlike the yokels, poachers and wise folk that made up the rest of the population in this province. We encountered river pirates on our journey down the Stir and the mercenaries aboard our boat dispatched them quickly and precisely with deadly bow fire. A watchtower nearby lit a flaming beacon and the archers garrisoned there finished off the fleeing survivors. Perhaps there was merit to this province after all.

As night drew in, thick and black, I found him. In the distance there was another boat and my senses told me it was Gant. His vessel moved silently and without disturbing the water. He must have enchanted it through some nefarious ritual and this was how he had slipped by the river patrol. A crow perched at the stern and cawed as we advanced. A huddled figure, nothing more than a shadow silhouette, stirred and a great mist engulfed us. The mercenaries would go no further and brought the boat in to the bank. There they disembarked, leaving me alone to continue after the creature. I did so gladly and stood tall upon the deck, holding aloft an icon of Sigmar. It glowed with inner light and the mist around me dispersed. I saw the boat again, although now it was very distant and had crossed over the border into Sylvania where it inexplicably vanished from my sight.

As I write this entry I am nearing the border myself. There will be a reckoning on the other side and I want to ensure my thoughts are documented and my mind clear when I confront Gant for the last time.

An Extract from the Journal of Hermann von Steiner, Witch Hunter

