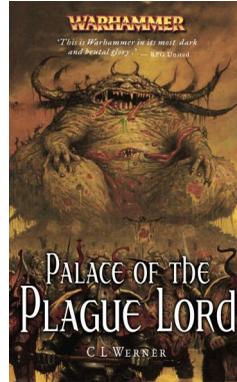


PALACE OF THE PLAGUE LORD

A Warhammer novel by CL Werner

After the murder of his tribe at the hands of a rival tribe of warriors, the fierce Norse warrior, Einarr, finds himself the sole survivor. Seeking revenge for his people and respite from guilt he sets off on a perilous quest deep into the Chaos Wastes, a land of magic and madness that lies far to the north of the world. Hideous monsters, ravenous daemons, even the landscape itself threaten him every step of the journey. What price must a mortal pay to steal the treasure of a god, and will he be able to achieve his ultimate aim, a second chance for his people?



C. L. Werner has written a number of Lovecraftian pastiches and pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications and Inferno! magazine. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer world.

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THE HALF-DOZEN AESLING warriors who had survived the battle with the Baersonlings now began to fight defensively, no longer trying to butcher their way through their foes, merely trying to keep them occupied so that the main body of marauders could smash into the undefended enemy flank. Einarr saw the danger, as did his men. Two, young reavers just growing their beards, turned and fled, throwing their axes into the snow in their haste to flee. Einarr watched them run with contempt. If there were not Aeslings to kill, he'd have cut down the two cowards for shaming the honour of Vinnskor. Instead, Einarr tried to gather as many of his men as he could to prepare for the second group of Aeslings. Einarr knew the odds were long; against the weak men of the south, eight Baersonlings might stand against thirty, but, despise them as he did, he knew an Aesling was a worthier foe. The gods were said to look favourably upon those who fought a hopeless fight. Einarr hoped they were paying attention now.

‘Look to the man beside you,’ Einarr growled. ‘Watch his back and guard it well. Don’t let yourself become too eager. There are plenty of Aes to go around.’ The comment brought a grim chuckle from his men. They knew as well as he that they would all be sitting in the halls of their ancestors before the twilight faded. But they would take many of their foes with them. That much victory they could still hope to wrest from the fists of the gods.

The Aeslings came, roaring like beasts, their scarred faces twisted with bloodlust. Einarr roared back at them and his warriors took up his cry. The marauders smashed into their line and Einarr’s

sword slashed out, cutting the arm from a bearded Aesling with iron studs through his nose. The raider dropped and the warrior beside Einarr chopped into the man's back with his axe. The mangled Aesling tried to crawl away, but was trampled beneath the iron-shod boots of the raiders rushing to take his place.

Einarr gave the man's death no further thought as his sword batted aside the axes of the man's replacements, snarling brutes with horned helms. One of the marauders recovered from Einarr's parry, turning his axe and chopping at the war leader's shoulder. Einarr sidestepped the blow, slashing his own blade beneath the axeman's guard and slicing into the meat of his leg. The axeman stumbled but did not fall, the bloodlust in his eyes burning still brighter as he brought his weapon up for another strike.

Before Einarr could thrust his blade at the axeman, the other marauder was swinging his own weapon at the reaver. The edge of the axe slammed into Einarr's side, digging into the reinforced leather. Einarr could feel several of the bronze plates woven into the armour pinching against his flesh. Knowing it would expose him to the man's comrade, he twisted around with the marauder as he drew back for another blow, sinking his sword into the Aesling's armpit. Bright blood spurted from the wound and the marauder's arm fell limp as Einarr turned the blade upwards and sliced through muscle and bone. Then he was turning again, ready to face the first axeman, the raider who had amazingly hesitated long enough for Einarr to mutilate his comrade. Einarr found the man already fallen to his knees, his hands clenched around the ragged hole in his throat. Svanr nodded respectfully to Einarr, then thrust his bloodied spear into the midsection of another charging Aesling. There was no time to be thankful for the hunter's timely assistance, and Einarr turned to finish off the marauder he had wounded.

The roar of battle faded gradually, as the Aeslings overwhelmed the Baersonlings, their greater numbers prevailing. One by one, the men of his village were cut down. Chief among those who had killed his men was an immense raider with a skull-shaped helm, his arms covered in golden bands almost from wrist to shoulder. Touched by the gods this mighty butcher was, stomping across the battlefield on

hoofed feet, spitting sizzling death from his fanged mouth to melt the faces of his foes after he had carved them to shreds with his twin swords. Einarr had struggled to face the imposing marauder, to pit his sword against the Aesling champion's blade, but always the press of marauders around him thwarted him.

The murderous attentions of the champion were enough to turn the tide on their own, but there was another fighter among the Aeslings every bit as deadly. Thin and lean, his body cloaked in bearskin, a tall helmet framing his wrinkled face, this was one whom even the Aesling marauders seemed to fear, parting before him as hawks before an eagle. The Baersonling warriors who saw him cringed away in terror, making no move to protect themselves as the scrawny marauder slashed at them with his bladed staff. Every man of the north knew one of the mighty seers when he saw them, the chosen prophet-priests of the Dark Gods. Every man of the north knew that to raise a hand against a seer was to invite the wrath of the gods. A seer might strike down a warrior, but a warrior did not dare strike down a seer. Not that any mortal could hope to defend against the terrible powers of a seer. The heavy oak staff the shaman carried was tipped with a metal blade, but it was a bright, silvery metal Einarr had seldom seen – the fabulous steel only elves could forge. With his blade, the seer carved through armour as easily as butter, cleaving men from hip to rib when he slashed at them. In his wake, the seer left piles of screaming human debris.

Einarr was thankful for his determination to face the Aesling champion, for the champion and the seer were at opposite ends of the battlefield. The closer he drew to the champion, the further away from the seer he was. Finally, his perseverance told out and Einarr could see the skull-helmeted champion looming just beyond the flail-wielding marauder he was currently fighting. Even as he battled the marauder, trying to keep the raider from bashing his brains in, Einarr found his eyes straying again and again to the monstrous champion.

The marauder chief was fighting two Baersonlings; the last of his men Einarr could see anywhere. One was old Svanr, the other a young axeman named Tjorvi. As Einarr swatted back the attack of the marauder fighting him, he saw the champion doing the same

with his own enemies. Then, with a speed that belied his armoured bulk, the champion brought his double swords slashing across the body of Tjorvi. The axeman stumbled back, blood streaming down his sides and the champion lunged forward, raking both swords before him in a cross pattern. Tjorvi's head leapt into the air, his face locked in a silent scream as it crashed into the snow.

While Tjorvi was being killed, Svanr charged at the champion's back, his spear aimed at the marauder's spine. Almost as part of the same motion that had decapitated Tjorvi, the champion spun around and brought his blades slashing at Svanr. One sword chopped the hunter's spear in half, the other crunched into the old man's body, nearly severing his leg at the hip.

Einarr shouted in fury, driving his knee into the groin of his own foe. The Aesling crumpled and Einarr did not give him time to recover, bringing the edge of his own weapon cutting across the man's neck. He left the marauder to bleed out and before any of his comrades could close upon him, Einarr was charging towards the champion and the embattled Svanr.

It was too late. Even as Einarr drew near the champion and shouted his challenge to the chieftain, the skull-helmed marauder was dropping Svanr's lifeless body to the ground. The hunter's face was a steaming mess of dripping tissue, burned down almost to the bone by the champion's acidic spittle. Einarr roared again, lunging at the champion. The twin swords were there to block his attack, one swatting aside the warrior's sword, the other slashing toward his neck. Reflexes born from years raiding the northern coasts of the Empire served Einarr well as he recoiled from the champion's deadly blade. It was the first step in a deadly dance as the champion set his impossible speed and strength against Einarr's reflexes and agility. It did not take Einarr long to realise that he was hopelessly on the defensive, pushed back with every attack the champion made. He cringed every time his eyes strayed to the chieftain's skull-helm, wondering when a spray of burning venom would come searing into his own face.

The marauders began to form a wide ring around the combat, watching as their leader dealt with the last of the Aesling warriors.

Einarr only dimly heard their jeers and hoots, his every thought fixated upon reacting to the champion's deadly blades. He felt his muscles beginning to burn under the strain of meeting the chieftain's attacks, felt his heart thundering within his chest. It would not be long, he knew, but the gods despised a man who did not fight to his last breath.

The champion drew back as Einarr narrowly avoided a slash that would have cut his arm from its socket. The Aesling laughed deeply, a sound that silenced the marauders watching the combat. 'You fight well, for a Baerson,' the champion laughed, his voice deep and booming. 'What is your name? I shall carve it upon your skull when I offer it to great Kharnath!'

'I am Einarr, son of Sigdan,' this between deep gasps as he tried to recover his breath. 'And it is your skull that shall grace the Skull Throne!'

The champion chuckled again as he heard Einarr's empty bravado.

'It is Kolsveinn, Jarl of Skraevold who sends you to the gods,' he said. 'When you see Kharnath, you will tell him what hand ended your days!'

Einarr braced himself for what he knew would be Kolsveinn's final attack. He could not hope to defend against the jarl much longer and knew he would get no other respite. Yet even as he prepared to meet his ancestors, Einarr felt something crack against the back of his skull. He fell to his knees, then the blow was repeated and he collapsed to the ground. He could hear the voice of Kolsveinn roaring furiously, could almost feel the jarl's armoured feet stomping the ground around him. In answer to the jarl's outrage, a low, wispy voice, like steam rising from a forge, spoke.

'This one has been marked for Kharnath,' the voice said. 'By your own words you have made it so.' Through the swimming stars that sparkled across his vision, Einarr could see the seer standing over him, fresh blood dripping from the blunt butt of his staff.

'He is mine, Alfkaell! Be you bloodfather or no, this one is mine!'

The seer merely smiled at his jarl's fury. 'By your own words, you have offered this one to Kharnath, the great Skull Lord. Would you think it wise to cheat him, especially with your own sword? Enjoy the victory you have won this day, Kolsveinn, for if you cheat the Blood God, it will be your last!'

The champion glared at Alfkaell for a moment, then sheathed his swords and turned away. Even a jarl knew there were powers he did not dare oppose. Alfkaell gestured with his gnarled hands and marauders came forward to lift Einarr from the ground.

'This one comes back with us to Skraevold,' Alfkaell said. 'He will make a fine offering for the god-beast.'

EINARR WAS DRAGGED unceremoniously through the muddy lanes of Skraevold, blood dripping from his wounds. Through his bruised face, Einarr could see the women of the village going about their daily chores, gathering water from the well, and tossing feed to mobs of black-feathered chickens. Children were everywhere, laughing and jeering at the Baersonling, hurling stones at the captive until their aim strayed and the two burly warriors dragging him through the street turned on the whelps and ran them off with threats and curses.

It was a familiar scene for Einarr. Every day he was taken to the squat, cold building that the Aeslings used to butcher meat when they were not using it to torture captives. Long hours under the tender mercies of his tormentors, then his agonised body would be taken back to his cage. Unlike most of the clans of Norsca, the Aeslings of Skraevold did not keep slaves, seeing the practice as a sign of weakness and decadence, taking pride in working their own fields, mining their own stone and felling their own timber. Where another clan might have a stockade to hold its captives, Skraevold had no such structure. Instead, Einarr found himself entombed within the village kennels, a narrow, thick-walled timber building on the outskirts of the settlement. The building was dark and dank, the thick animal smell of the dozens of warhounds and hunting dogs kept by the Aeslings making the air stagnant.

The warriors carrying Einarr forced the Baersonling to his feet as they entered the kennels. Their arrival was greeted by the snarls of the hounds, a din that pounded against Einarr's skull as brutally as the fists and bludgeons of his torturers. The barrel-chested Aesling pushed Einarr forward. After hours of torture, the strength in Einarr's body was all but spent. As he tried to maintain his balance, he stumbled and crashed against the dog cages. Instantly the savage hounds were pressed against the wooden bars, snapping at the prisoner's flesh. Einarr felt sharp teeth dig into his back, felt a fresh stream of blood trickling down his back. Powerful hands closed about Einarr's head, pulling him away from the cage. The treatment was only slightly less brutal than the fangs of the hounds.

'You'll not cheat the gods that way, Baerson!' one of the barrel-chested warriors growled. Behind him, Einarr could see the dogs snapping and snarling; their bloodlust aroused by the scent of his blood. The Aesling warrior turned towards the slaver mongrels, smashing the heft of his flail against the wooden bars, driving the beasts back. 'This one is not for you!' he hissed. The warrior turned back toward Einarr as his comrade pulled the prisoner back to his feet. He leaned into the face of his captive, his ale-ridden breath stinging Einarr's nose.

'Make no mistake, Baerson,' the warrior sneered. 'You will wish we had let the dogs finish you before we are finished.' Einarr smiled at the threat, spitting a bloody froth into the bearded visage of the Aesling. The warrior staggered back, howling as he wiped the filth from his face. His comrade shifted his hold on Einarr, closing his immense arm around the captive's neck. Einarr felt what little energy he still had drain from him beneath the strangler's embrace.

The kennels echoed with the agitated howls of the dogs, excited by the savage emotions of the men outside the cages. The marauder stormed back towards Einarr, glaring murder at the prisoner. The strangler relaxed his hold as his comrade returned, before his grip crushed Einarr's life as well as his defiance. The bearded warrior tightened his grip on his flail as he stared at Einarr, the prisoner's bloody spittle still dripping from his face. For a long moment, the Aesling was silent. Then he smiled and shook his head.

‘No, Baerson,’ the warrior said, motioning for his comrade to march Einarr to his cage. ‘You’ll not trick me into cheating Bloodfather Alfkaell from offering you to the god.’ Einarr found himself brutally shoved into the timber cage that acted as his cell, the heavy door smashing close behind him as the strangler slammed it shut. The captive struggled to remain standing, but at last gave up the effort, sinking to the icy earthen floor. The bearded warrior grinned at him from beyond the bars. He threw a badly gnawed bone that looked as though it had been stolen from one of the hounds into Einarr’s cell.

‘Better eat up while you can,’ the Aesling laughed. ‘The god likes a little meat on its offerings.’ The harsh laughter of his captor was all but drowned out by the barking dogs as the warrior withdrew. Einarr waited until the two torturers were gone before reaching for the bone they had thrown him. There was still a faint scrap of meat clinging to the joint and he set about it with ravenous ferocity. He did not trouble himself over what had previously been gnawing at his meal, nor at what kind of meat had once surrounded the bone. All that mattered was the energy and strength his miserable meal could give him, strength that would allow Einarr to live for another day. Strength that might preserve him long enough to make the Aeslings pay for all that they had done.

Einarr gathered the filthy straw littered about his cage in a hopeless attempt to fend off the cold. He felt sharp stabs of pain run up his arms as he reached out to sweep the straw towards him. Einarr pulled back, trying to knead the suffering from his arm with his callused hand. The scabby crust of dried blood cracked beneath his ministrations, a crimson treacle running down his forearms. The renewed scent of blood urged the hounds to renew their excited barking.

‘The ymir take your mangy hides!’ Einarr cursed, calling on the hoary ice devils of the mountains. He settled back against the cold timber wall of his cage. For all of the injuries he had suffered, he could be thankful for one thing. Despite the agonies they had visited upon him, his torturers were loath to go too far. They intended him as a sacrifice to the gods, and as such he had to be kept relatively

intact, for the gods would look poorly upon an offering that was too badly damaged. They had stopped short of breaking bones and tearing muscles.

It was something for which Einarr could be thankful. The backhanded restraint shown by his captors meant that for all his privation and torment, he was still physically intact. If the opportunity presented itself, he might yet wrest from Skraevold a death worthy of a Norscan.

Palace of the Plague Lord can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$9.99 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978-1 84416 481 3

- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
- UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000 US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME
- Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com/store or www.games-workshop.com.