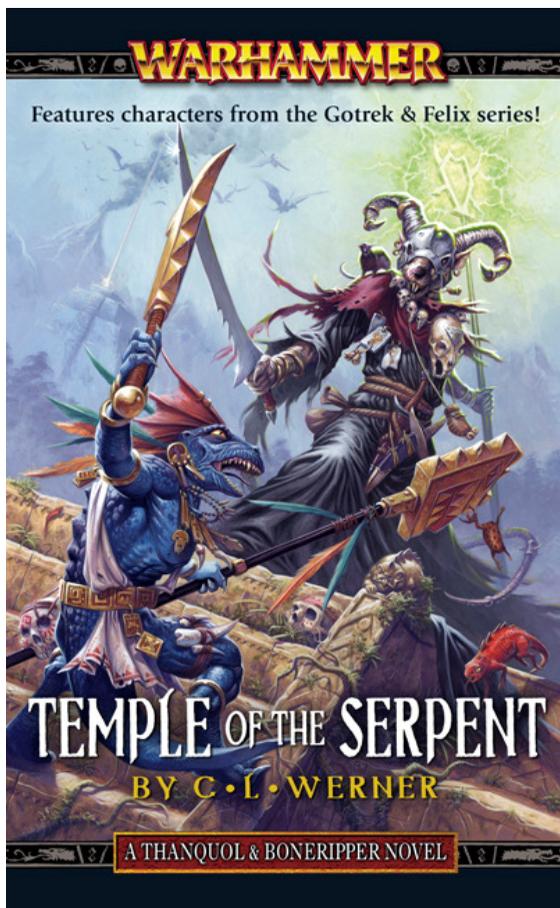




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TEMPLE OF THE SERPENT

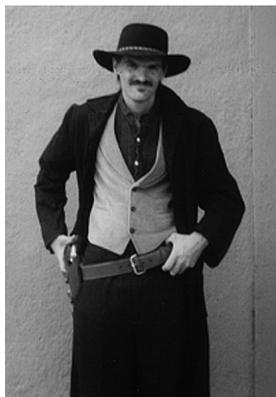
A Thanquol and Boneripper novel

By C. L. Werner

After a series of failures, Grey Seer Thanquol is offered a chance to redeem himself by going to the island of Lustria to kill the Prophet of Sotek. Dogged by assassins and stranded in a foreign land of giant lizards, temple cities and endless jungle, Thanquol must use all of his cunning and magic if he is to come out alive.

About the Author

C. L. Werner was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story in *Inferno!* magazine. His Black Library credits include the Chaos Wastes books *Palace of the Plague Lord* and *Blood for the Blood God*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang* and the *Brunner the Bounty Hunter* trilogy. 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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IT WASN'T A lot, the small stash of warp-tokens Thanquol was able to take with him when he fled Altdorf, barely the surface of what he had hoped to extort from the bickering clan lords of Under-Altdorf. Certainly it would take more to pay off Nightlord Sneek and make him reconsider the interest he had suddenly shown in the grey seer. The slicing voice of Sneek kept echoing in Thanquol's mind, that whispered threat about helping him rest. Clan Eshin had helped a lot of skaven rest, the kind of rest that usually involved poisoned blades and quick stabs in the dark. Thanquol had even paid for the services of their assassins in the past. He knew only too well their hideous and lethal efficiency. Once the trained killers of Clan Eshin were on a ratman's tail it was only a matter of time...

Thanquol lashed his tail in frustration, his fingers curling tighter about the haft of his staff. He wasn't some flea-ridden clawleader from some three-bat warren! He was Grey Seer Thanquol, the supreme sorcerer-general of the Under-Empire, the most brilliant, valiant and loyal servant to ever serve the Council of Thirteen! If Sneek thought he would be easy prey, then the Nightlord would learn how wrong he was! Thanquol was the chosen of the Horned Rat himself, blessed by the god of all skaven!

Of course, the Horned Rat's blessings had been rather mixed of late. It was all the fault of his incompetent and treacherous underlings of course. That

snivelling fool Skrim Gnawtail and that backstabbing cur Kratch! If not for them, the Wormstone would have been his and his alone, to use in whatever way he saw fit. That ancient idiot Thratquee and all of the decadent inhabitants of Under-Aldorf would have been scoured from the tunnels of skavendom if Thanquol's craven minions hadn't let him down!

The grey seer ground his teeth together and stared up at the night sky. Unlike the rest of the Under-Empire, much of Skavenblight was upon the surface, infesting the crumbled ruins of the ancient human city that had once dominated what would later become the Blighted Marshes. Some even whispered that the Shattered Tower, within which the Council of Thirteen held their chambers, had been built not by skaven paws but reared by human hands. Such heresy was, of course, punished by a good tongue-cutting whenever it was spoken, but as he glanced up at the crooked spire which dominated the cityscape, Thanquol had to admit it had the ugly stamp of human engineering to it, perhaps even a trace of dwarf-thing too. Naturally, even if the thought came to him, he wasn't fool enough to ever speak of it.

Thanquol turned his gaze back to the wide street around him. The avenue was packed with a scrabbling, struggling mass of ratkin, a sea of fur and fangs that bobbed and weaved, squirmed and squeezed in their efforts to navigate through the city. The air was thick with the smell of decaying timber, rancid fur, musk and excrement, the distinct tang of black corn in the skaven droppings giving the city a scent unique to itself. The snarls, whines and chittering of ratmen rang from the crumbling stone walls that flanked the street.

Much of the city was sinking into its foundations, slowly collapsing into the maze of burrows and ratruns

teeming generations of skaven had dug beneath it. Everywhere, timber supports and buttresses hugged the sagging walls, trying to stave off the creeping ruin. Many structures had become so mired in mud and earth that their lower floors were lost beneath the ground. Some still sported the weathered husks of once elegant columns and promenades, a few even had the faint remnants of tiled frescos peeping out from beneath the layers of grime that coated them. Before one tilted manor, the misshapen bulk of a corroded iron statue stood upon a cracked marble pillar, a mass of rust that might once have been a sword raised high in a lump that once could have been an arm.

Home, Thanquol thought as the smells, sounds and sights of Skavenblight crawled across his senses. Wherever he went, there was nothing to compare with the press of Skavenblight's masses, feeling the presence of hundreds of thousands of ratmen all around him. Even Under-Altdorf felt deserted and empty next to Skavenblight. This was the way the world was meant to be, filled to bursting with the swarming masses of the Under-Empire. A world alive with the numberless hordes of the skaven, all looking up from the gutter, looking for the leadership only Grey Seer Thanquol could give them.

Thanquol stroked his whiskers as he thought about the happy vision of himself as unquestioned master of skavendom. One day he would dare place his paw upon the Pillar of Commandments, that obelisk of pure warpstone set down before the Shattered Tower by the Horned Rat himself. He had no doubt that he would survive the ordeal, survive to challenge Grey Seer Kritislik and take his place upon the Council. Then, then he would begin to eliminate the other Lords of Decay.

That bloated pustule Nurglitch and that scrap-metal mage-rat Morskittar and that slinking throatcutter Sneek...

Thanquol nearly spurted the musk of fear as he thought of Nightlord Sneek. The black-clad murderers of Clan Eshin were a nightmare to every ratman, from the lowest clanrat to the most exalted warlord. They could be anywhere, lurking with their poisoned knives and their deadly blowguns. Thanquol's eyes narrowed with suspicion, squinting as he studied the mass of skaven filling the street around him. Suddenly, the press of so many ratmen swarming on every side wasn't so reassuring as it had been a few moments before. Almost involuntarily, he backed away from a clutch of scabby clanrats wearing the colours of a clan he didn't recognise. He watched them pass, one hand locked about the tiny chunk of warpstone he had secreted in a pocket of his robe. Were they watching him more closely than they should? Perhaps he should simply blast them with a spell and worry about whether they worked for Clan Eshin later.

Shaking his head, Thanquol decided against striking prematurely. A display of magic might annihilate his enemies, but it would also panic the skaven filling the street. Being stampeded by the crowd would make him just as dead as any assassin's blade. He continued to watch the three clanrats until they were lost in the mass of furry bodies. Most likely, they had simply recognised him and been overawed by his formidable presence. Yes, that was certainly it.

A sharp growl to the hulking brute towering behind him, and Thanquol made his way through the swarm of ratkin. It had taken most of his carefully hoarded warp-tokens to buy the behemoth, but after that sinister

encounter with Nightlord Sneek, he reasoned that he had to do something to protect himself. The rat ogre had been the biggest, nastiest one he could find in the beast pens, a brown-furred giant with fists like boulders and a face filled with dagger-like fangs. He'd named the monster Boneripper after the brave, clever bodyguard that had fought so valiantly to protect him from Lord Skrolk's treachery and the profane magic of the grey mage-man.

The crowd parted before Thanquol's advance, Boneripper looming over them like the very shadow of doom. There were frightened squeaks, whines of fawning protest and frequent spurts of musk. A rat ogre, he reflected, was a marvellous instrument for reminding the lower castes who their betters were.

A flash of darkness among the throng arrested Thanquol's attention. Had that been a flash of black cloak? The sort of cloak an assassin might wear? Thanquol chided himself for such foolishness. It was ludicrous! Why would an assassin bother to wear black when he could so effortlessly blend in with the crowd without it! It wasn't as if they were required to wear a uniform, to carry a placard that announced their profession to any skaven they might meet!

Through the crowd, Thanquol saw a black-cloaked skaven creeping purposefully towards him, one paw curled beneath the folds of the creeper's cloak. Thanquol blinked in disbelief. It was still ridiculous, but that creep really was hiding a knife under his cloak! As he looked again, he saw a second cloaked ratman slinking towards him, and still a third coming from the opposite direction.

Thanquol quickly edged himself away from the approaching killers, his fingers curling around the chunk of warpstone in his pocket. He was a bit more willing to

risk the stampede now that there was no question that Sneek's assassins were coming for him.

Abruptly, Boneripper's huge maw dropped open in a fierce roar. The rat ogre's huge paws slammed against his chest, pounding a drumlike tattoo that rumbled over the heads of the skaven filling the street. The monster's beady red eyes were ablaze with malice. He took a ponderous step towards the closest assassin, crushing a hapless bystander beneath his immense foot.

Thanquol gloated as he saw the look of terror crawling onto the murderer's face. They hadn't been expecting this. He had been very careful picking his bodyguard, choosing one that had been trained to hate the cloaked adepts of Clan Eshin. The rat ogre's body was still criss-crossed with the scars the packmasters had left when they had beaten hate into the beast's tiny brain. The effectiveness of that training, however, was quite obvious as Boneripper stomped a gory path through the crowd, focused upon rending the assassin limb from limb.

'Yes-yes!' Thanquol hissed through his fangs. 'Kill them, Boneripper! Kill the faithless little maggots!'

Hearing his master's voice snapped the last composure Boneripper possessed. Uttering a deep, groaning roar, the rat ogre ploughed through the massed skaven, hurling squealing ratmen aside with each sweep of his claws, crushing those too slow or too terrified to scramble out of his way beneath his clawed feet. The black-cloaked assassin stood paralysed as he saw the immense behemoth charging towards him. The killer threw back his cloak, revealing the knife he held. Shrieking in terror, he threw his weapon at Boneripper. The poisoned edge sank into the rat ogre's shoulder with a meaty thwack.

Boneripper paused in his rush. He turned his head and stared at the knife sticking out of his body. The brute reached down, ripping the blade from his flesh, staring at it with confused eyes. His huge nose twitched as he sniffed the ugly green muck dripping from the knife's poisoned edge. It took a moment for the smell to register with his dull brain, but when the rat ogre remembered the lessons he had been so painfully taught by the packmasters, he came alive with fury. The knife crumpled into an unrecognisable lump of steel as Boneripper angrily closed his fist around it.

The assassin squealed in fright and turned to flee, horrified that Boneripper had survived the poison. He couldn't know the toxic provender the packmasters had reared the rat ogre on, the slowly increased doses of venom they had injected into his veins since he had been a whelp. The result had made Boneripper's body develop a pronounced resistance to a wide range of diseases and toxins.

The rat ogre reached down to the street beside him, snatching a cowering skaven from the flagstones. The wretch screamed and writhed in Boneripper's grasp, but his efforts went unnoticed by the brute. Glaring at the assassin as he started to scurry away, Boneripper flung the screaming ratman at him. The living missile wailed as he flew across the street, slashing fleeing spectators with his flailing claws. The skaven smashed into the assassin as though fired from a cannon. Both ratmen were hurled through the air, battering a path through the packed street.

In the aftermath, the panicked mass of the crowd struggled even more fiercely to flee, but their very numbers hampered any real hope of progress. Crippled, cringing ratmen, limbs shattered by the impact of

Boneripper's living missile, crawled along the ground, trying desperately to avoid being crushed by the feet of other ratkin. The skaven Boneripper had thrown was a shattered mess of broken bones and bloody fur smashed against the stone wall on the other side of the street. Beneath the dripping carcass, the crumpled body of the assassin struggled. The impact had snapped the killer's spine, leaving him helpless from the waist down.

Boneripper lumbered through the shrieking mob, stalking through the packed skaven with powerful strides. Soon he towered over the crippled assassin. The rat ogre stared down at the trapped ratman, then brought his clawed foot smashing down into the assassin's skull.

Thanquol grinned in savage challenge as he watched Boneripper kill the assassin. He glanced to either side, pleased when he saw the other two killers slinking back into the crowd, clearly less than eager to have any part in attacking the grey seer after watching their comrade slain so brutally. Thanquol snarled a command to Boneripper, gesturing with his claw to one of the retreating murderers. He felt a flare of angry frustration when the brute ignored him, too intent on pounding the skull of the first assassin into paste to pay attention to his master's voice.

With an effort, Thanquol calmed himself. It was just as well that the others escaped. They would bear word of their experience back to the other skulking murderers of Clan Eshin. They would tell their fellows that to face Grey Seer Thanquol was to face their own deaths! Yes, the assassins would know that killing Grey Seer Thanquol was no easy task!

A troubling thought came to Thanquol then and his fur began to rise in anxiety. It had been easy. Much too easy. Positively bumbling on the part of the assassins to

let themselves be spotted so quickly. Perhaps they were simply murderers in training, neophytes at the arts of assassination. But why would Sneek send amateurs to kill someone of his formidable powers?

On impulse, Thanquol spun about and dropped into a crouch. There was a wail of agony just behind him. The grey seer risked a glance, saw one of the skaven that had been cowering near him during Boneripper's rampage lying on the ground, his body twitching in a violent spasm. A dart as long as Thanquol's finger was buried in the stricken ratman's cheek.

The grey seer's eyes went wide with fright. The killers he had sent Boneripper after weren't the assassins! They were the diversion! Something to keep Thanquol occupied while the real assassin made his move!

Thanquol threw himself across the ground, rolling along the muck-strewn stones. He imagined he could hear something whistle past his face, but there was no imagination behind the pained shriek of the skaven behind him. The ratman was hopping on one foot, pawing at the black needle sticking out of his other foot. A moment later, the skaven fell in a twitching mass, froth bubbling from his mouth.

Above! The dart had come from above! Thanquol glared at the stone wall, gnashing his teeth as he saw his attacker. Clinging to the ancient stones like some mammoth spider, the assassin was swathed in black from the base of his tail to the tip of his muzzle, only his beady red eyes left exposed by the cloth mask wrapped around his face. A sniff told Thanquol this was indeed a true assassin, the glands that produced the distinctive personal scent having been removed in one of Clan Eshin's macabre rituals.

The assassin glared back at Thanquol and raised a long, slender blowgun to his cloth-covered lips. The grey seer ducked his head, pressing himself against the filthy ground, trying to hide his face from the coming attack. This time he distinctly heard the dart as it raced through the air. He felt something brush against him, holding his breath in horror as he waited for the poison to do its lethal work.

It took Thanquol a heartbeat to realise what had happened. The dart had missed him, glancing off his horn. Fear and rage warred for mastery of him when he realised how close he had come to dying. Fear put up a good fight, but in the end it was rage that won out.

Thanquol lifted himself from the ground, his eyes focused on the assassin clinging to the wall above him. The grey seer's hand closed about the chunk of warpstone in his pocket, breaking off a tiny fragment and popping it into his mouth. The assassin seemed paralysed with horror, as unable to move as the decoy had been when faced by Boneripper's unstoppable charge.

A sickly green light crackled within the depths of Thanquol's eyes as the magical energies of the warpstone flowed through his mind and seeped into his soul. He could feel the awesome power of the Horned Rat rippling through him, the magical winds seeping into his body. He ground his fangs together, his brain flooded with images of destruction. He would incinerate this entire street and everything in it, leave the buildings nothing but heaps of slag. He would burn the assassin's shadow into the very stone with the fury of his magic and send his soul shrieking into Kweethul's sunken hell! Then he would cast down the Shattered Tower and drag Sneek's shattered corpse from the rubble...

Shaking his head, Thanquol fought down the overwhelming influence of the warpstone. He focused on what was at hand. All he needed to do was kill the assassin, nothing more.

Suddenly, Thanquol's concentration was shattered by a deafening shriek of terror. The air was pungent with the stink of musk and the very ground shook with the violence of hundreds of ratmen stampeding. The grey seer turned and watched as the panicked crowd surged away from him, horrified by the crackling lightning dancing about the head of his staff, frightened by the malignant aura that had settled about him like a mantle as he invoked the awful magic of the Horned Rat. The mob surged away from him as quickly and as far as it could. But even the wide streets of Skavenblight could not accommodate the mass of struggling, frantic ratmen. They soon became packed and pressed together at either end of the street, unable to flee further. When that happened, the blind terror of the mob drove them back, turned them around to find escape in the other direction.

From either end of the street, a wave of squealing, snarling skaven came stampeding. Between the two panicked hordes stood Grey Seer Thanquol, suddenly feeling very small and vulnerable for all the magic burning through his veins.

The assassin chattered maliciously from his perch upon the wall. Thanquol scowled spitefully as the murderer climbed to the roof of the building and retreated from view. This had been the plan all along, he realised. The assassin wasn't trying to kill Thanquol with the darts, he was trying to provoke him into using his magic to defend himself, thereby throwing the mob into a panic. When Thanquol was crushed beneath the paws

of the crowd there would be no evidence that his death had been the work of Clan Eshin.

Defiantly, Thanquol stood his ground. Mostly because there was nowhere to run. He raised his staff, sent a crackling blast of green lightning searing into the foremost ranks of the stampeding skaven. Several ratmen shrieked and fell, their bodies quickly crushed beneath the feet of the mob. In a blind panic, the skaven were oblivious even to the death-dealing sorcery of Thanquol. The grey seer turned and sent a second blast searing through the ranks of the mass of skaven rushing towards him from the other end of the street. Again, the mob refused to break.

Thanquol spurted the musk of fear. He could blast a hundred of the craven vermin into cinders and still there would be enough of them left to crush his body beneath their feet!

As he contemplated his doom, a huge shape charged at him from across the street. Thanquol spun, sending a blast of lightning crackling past Boneripper's face. The panic of the skaven mob had infected Boneripper's tiny brain! The slack-witted brute was turning on him!

Thanquol did not have time to send another blast of magic at Boneripper before the beast was upon him. Huge claws closed around the grey seer's body, pinning his arms to his sides and lifting him from the ground. Thanquol struggled and cursed, trying to wriggle free of his treacherous bodyguard's grip.

The panicked mob of skaven came crashing together, savagely attacking one another as the two sides met. The street became a sea of flashing fangs and raking claws as the frightened skaven tore at each other. The pungent stink of black skaven blood filled Thanquol's senses.

Boneripper lifted the grey seer still higher, keeping him well above the frenzied mob's reach.

Fear drained out of Thanquol and he bit back the last of the curses he had been heaping on his bodyguard's head. Such a clever servant, he considered, to see his master's distress and come rushing to his aid.

He would need to find some suitable way to reward Boneripper for such selfless service.

Perhaps he would let Boneripper eat Sneek's heart after he tore it from the Nightlord's mutilated chest.

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