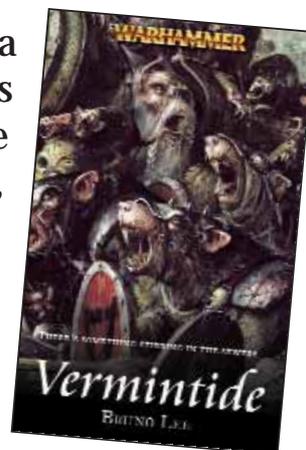


Vermintide

A Warhammer novel by Bruno Lee

WHEN HEIKO GEISSNER is ordered to investigate a mysterious theft from a museum, he expects little more than a challenge to his deductive powers. But when one theft becomes many, Heiko and the wizard Erwin von Fautz are forced to travel across the empire to try and unravel the bizarre pattern behind the crimes.

Soon, Heiko and Erwin are plunged into a world of terrifying secrets. An entire race of evil creatures lives beneath the cities of the empire. Monstrous ratmen known as skaven plot and scheme the fall of humanity.



American author Bruno Lee is an experienced author of genre fiction, with a number of short stories and fantasy novels credited to various pen names. He lives in Arizona.

Vermintide can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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from VERMINTIDE

THE NIGHT SHADOWS hung heavy about the thick walls of the Waldenhof Museum. The streets around the mammoth structure that celebrated Sigmar's great and glorious Empire were dark; only the most populous streets had streetlamps. The night was made darker still by the thick grey clouds that spread across the sky, like the cobweb of some celestial spider trapping the faces of the moons behind a smoky veil.

Within the museum, the cavernous halls were transformed into networks of shadow. The origins of the immense Maeckler Collection could be traced back a thousand years, passing from father to son throughout the family's history. Each generation had expanded the collection, adding to the vast catalogue of artefacts, obscurities and outright oddities deemed historically important. As it had grown, the vast halls had become a veritable labyrinth of crowded shelves and cramped displays. In this dead, almost sightless night, they assumed the quality of a deserted tomb.

Deserted? A shadow glided between the exhibits, freezing as it heard the soft sound of feet stepping on stone somewhere in the distance. The faint smell of sweat and oil interposed itself amid the odour of dust and time. The shadow crept forward, its pace slightly more certain.

Only once did it pause, pressing itself against the polished oak door that separated the hall from the next branch of the museum. The shadow held its breath, quieted its heart, stifling all the little noises that a body can make, as it pressed its ear against the wooden portal.

For a time, the shadow remained pressed against the door, not moving a single muscle even as moonlight threatened to

illuminate the halls. Then, slowly, the shape detached itself from its listening post. It stretched forward, pressing its hand to the latch. The portal withdrew just enough to admit the shape, its back scraping against the bronze jamb.

The gloom was perpetual, but there was ample light for the keen eyes that gleamed from beneath the intruder's ragged hood. They could see the vast hall, its walls concealed behind massive wooden shelves, every available space occupied by some ancient weapon or piece of armour. Every artefact, from broken statues to the ragged remains of an old stone thrower, bore the sharp runes and painstaking craft of a race far older than man.

The intruder crept carefully through the confines of the dwarf collection, its senses ever more alert. It knew this hall would not be unoccupied. It stole forward, pressing itself against the cold stone side of a massive marble column that once supported the west entrance of the lost dwarf hold, Karag Dar.

A thin sliver of light focused the intruder's eyes, shining from beneath a heavy, ironbound door of dark Drakwald timber. The face beneath the cowl stretched into a feral grin, exposing yellowed fangs. It was behind that portal that it would find its prey. Slender hands slithered around the hidden weapons beneath the dark cloak. The time for wariness was almost past.

The intruder turned its head away from the door. There was one thing it had yet to do before confronting its victim. It broke away from its cover, scampering across the hall towards a huge, tarpaulin-covered exhibit. The smell of grease, oil and polished steel smashed against the intruder's senses. It paused before the covered object, a thrill of expectancy holding it frozen to the spot. It knew where to find its prey, but first it had to ensure the prize its master sought was ready.

The figure pulled back its cloak, exposing a large green jewel in a wire mesh container, strapped across its chest. The figure closed its eyes and incanted strange words, and as it

did so, the jewel glowed, releasing a sickly green light. The air within the hall began to grow cold, the intruder's breath frosting as the warmth was sucked from the room. Expectant eyes stared intently at the concealed exhibit, watching as crackling wisps of energy surged around it.

Whatever power that was imprisoned within the jewel amulet was consuming more than the temperature of the room. As its energy flickered and burned out, it left behind only a faint smell of ozone and rotten eggs. The intruder hastily spoke more words of power and the unearthly green luminescence died. It was unwise to tempt the amulet's terrible power too long, lest its hunger grow too rapacious.

The intruder extended a scrawny hand, clothed in mangy piebald fur, towards the concealing tarpaulin. A greedy glint entered the creature's eyes as they fixed upon what it concealed, avarice gnawing at the dark corners of its mind. Quickly it scurried closer to the artefact, its beady eyes studying every inch of the steel and iron frame. At last, the creature withdrew, content that its meticulous inspection had confirmed what its master had told it.

The prize was ready. Now it was time to claim its prey.

The creature left the heavy tarpaulin strewn across the floor, scampering away with excited hops. Its blood was up now, agitated by both aggression and fear. Its prey might prove as innocuous as it had been told. Perhaps it was even its master's intention that it would be he, Quilik, and not the human, who met an end this night. Such suspicion of duplicity caused his heart to slip a beat, the breath to turn sour in his nose. Briefly, his eyes flickered toward the barred windows of the museum and thoughts of escape pounded against the inside of his skull.

Slender, fur-covered hands reached from beneath the cloak, closing about an ancient, clay drinking vessel. Quilik carefully lifted the old drinking pot and turned his head once more toward the door. With a savage gesture, he dashed the relic to the floor, shattering it into a hundred fragments, the

loud crash booming through the deserted hall like the roar of a cannon.

STEFAN MAECKLER LOOKED up from his studies. He had been poring over the manuscript for weeks now, trying to make sense of the archaic words. The pages of the book were not parchment, nor vellum or Arabyan papyrus, but thin sheets of copper upon which the letters were etched and branded. Dwarfs seldom employed anything so short-lived as paper for their writings, trusting to eternal stone and metal to make safe their knowledge. It was just as well. The slimy mire in which the book had been found would have consumed any tome constructed from baser materials.

More frustrating than the excessive weight of the tome, however, was the curious way in which it was written. There were few in Waldenhof to whom the book would have been anything more than a collection of scratches. Indeed, there were not a great number in the entire Empire who could read Khazalid; fewer still who were familiar with the ancient runes featured among the text of the book. Stefan often found himself struggling to decipher the arcane jargon that threatened at every turn to defeat him.

Yet perhaps he had learned enough. Perhaps the book had yielded enough of its secrets for him to be able to achieve his purpose. If so, there would be a great deal of respect and acclaim awaiting him in future. It went without saying that the engineer schools in Nuln and Altdorf would be interested, and, with the wealth such interest would bring, he'd be able to expand the Maeckler Collection far beyond anything his predecessors had dared hope for.

Stefan returned to his study, concentrating on the stubborn dwarf runes. He looked once more at his pile of notes, checking again and again for any errors, any inconsistencies that might have escaped his notice. What was it the philosophers always said? That daemons lurk in the details? Well, if there were any daemons lurking in these details, his association

with them was apt to be very fleeting indeed. Why, if he were wrong, the blasted thing might even explode!

Stefan considered the very real dangers this enterprise entailed. But he found his own mortality did not trouble him, surprisingly, in the manner of scholars who placed a greater value on furthering the limits of knowledge than they did on their own lives. Hadn't he tried to organise an attempt to steal past the hordes of Surtha Lenk and rescue the priceless von Raukov library, before the Kurgan horde razed the city of Wolfenburg? They'd turned down his bold proposal, of course, more concerned with the defence of Waldenhof than the salvation of several hundred mouldy old books. Stefan had wept over all the wisdom that had been lost when the Kurgans had burned Wolfenburg, feeling that loss as sharply as he had the death of his wife during the rampage of Azhag the Slaughterer, seven years before.

Thoughts of family forced caution to the forefront of his mind. It wasn't his own death he feared, but rather the consequences his death would cause. His son Bastian would be left alone in the world, with no one to care for him, no one to guide him. Worse, if Stefan's labours resulted in destruction, Bastian would also endure the shame of being the son of the man who destroyed the greatest possession in the entire Maeckler Collection.

Stefan couldn't let that stigma attach itself to his son. With a deep sigh, he resumed his study of the recalcitrant dwarf tome.

A sound broke through his concentration, causing the scholar to look up from his notes. It came from the hall outside. Stefan rose from his chair and stalked across the small study. If Bastian had locked one of the damn cats in the exhibit hall, there would be hell to pay. The last thing the museum needed was some centuries-old artefact ruined by a mangy feline.

The curate pushed open the door of his study, a candle gripped in his hand. He swept his eyes across the shadowy gloom. As his gaze dropped lower, he noticed the shards of

broken clay scattered about the floor. Biting back a curse on all cats, he knelt beside the ruined artefact.

A foul odour caused Stefan to look askance. He cringed as a cloaked shape manifested itself before him. His mind shuddered at the gruesome visage, a long bestial muzzle clothed in dirty piebald fur. Monstrous, chisel-like fangs glistened in the feeble light, while narrow, red eyes gleamed from under the cloak's hood.

Even as the curator recoiled in horror from the ghastly apparition, filthy, clawed hands emerged. The creature lifted one claw toward its face, blowing across its palm. Stefan's senses reeled as a cloud of gritty black powder engulfed his face. He fell to his knees, then slumped against the floor.

Quilik chittered with happiness, pleased that his prey had been overcome so easily. The ratman inspected the fallen curator, nose twitching at the smell of blood. It seemed the fragile old man had struck his head against the shards strewn across the floor, ripping a gash in his forehead. Quilik placed his foot against Stefan's body, flipping the curator onto his back, watching him closely for any sign of undue movement. Finding none, the ratman crept away, sprinting toward the exhibit he had exposed. There were still a few things to be done to ensure the ancient dwarf device was ready before Quilik made good his escape.

With a groan, Stefan turned onto his side, his vision blurred. For a moment, the curator wondered if he had fallen victim to some terrible nightmare, some childhood fear returned to plague his fatigued mind. But the blood trickling from his forehead was real enough. He could see where the candle he had been carrying had fallen, could see the dusty old tapestry its flame was greedily devouring. But more important even than the fire, Stefan could see his prize exhibit – the pride of the Maeckler collection – and the abominable creature that was scurrying about it, adjusting valves and levers in a frenzy of activity. With horror, Stefan realised what the monster was, and what it was doing.

Thick black smoke was filling the hall now. The fire from the tapestry had spread to some of the wooden shelves, the dry timber cracking and popping as the flames consumed it. Stefan groaned. Tears of rage and despair streamed down the curator's face as he looked toward his prize. The machine was alive now, pulsating with power, just as Stefan had dreamed. But the ratman was going further than he had dared, coaxing the steam engine to its full potential. Stefan could see the great blades beginning to move, thin streams of superheated gas belching from the engine's pressure valves.

The ratman made a few final adjustments, then leapt down from the control seat, his beady red eyes turning once more in Stefan's direction. The curator moaned in horror as the monster stalked towards him. The creature laughed its shrill, inhuman titter.

From outside the hall voices suddenly rose, accompanied by the sound of running feet. The fire had apparently not gone unnoticed. The ratman paused only a few paces from Stefan, turning toward the heavy timber door as a tremendous force pounded upon it from the other side. Quilik snarled at the portal in fury and fear, his savagery backed into a corner. Stefan exploited the monster's distraction, placing his bloodied hand against the floor.

Then the skaven returned his malevolent attention and Stefan's scream echoed through the hall.

THE DOORS BROKE on the fifth time that they were struck by the heavy iron maul. It had been taken from an ogre warlord several hundred years ago, its weight and size such that no man could have wielded it as a weapon. But when five men employed it as a battering ram, the timber doors sagged inward. Soldiers spilled into the vast hallway, coughing as thick black smoke greeted them.

The troopers, members of the Waldenhof Town Watch, knew that if the museum were to burn to the ground, some very important people would be unhappy. The kind of people whose unhappiness ended careers. The men raced about

the exhibits, gathering up tapestries, battle banners and mouldy cloaks to employ in fighting the blaze.

Three of the men found themselves near the centre of the hall, where the sound of churning pistons and whirling rotors joined the crackle of the flames. The smoke churned strangely and, as they rushed forward, they were amazed to see a strange contraption of steel and iron rising into the air above them, its great blades spinning. As the soldiers watched, the machine rose still higher, smashing through the museum's skylight and sending a shower of glass clattering down upon them.

They pointed at the strange sight, even the raging fire forgotten as they marvelled at the impossible machine disappearing into the night sky.

One of the soldiers silently made the sign of Rhya against his chest. He had seen something his comrades had not, a fleeting glimpse of a shape, like a body, crouched at the front of the strange machine. And he had seen something else – a long, naked, scaly tail hanging down from the pilot's body, the loathsome tail of a monstrous rodent.

'Der Rattenherren,' the watchman whispered in a subdued voice as he watched the gyrocopter vanish into the blackness.

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