

THE GAUNT MAN RETURNS

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This Evil Reborn





TORG - The Gaunt Man Returns

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Introduction



creation/ destruction/ creation/
destruction/creation/
destruction ...

The cycle continued unflinchingly, as it had for the past two years, the maelstrom howling its fury in the Gaunt Man's laboratory beneath Illmound Keep.

The Gaunt Man himself struggled to hold his substance together despite the force of the storm. But no sooner did he succeed in regaining his form than a roar from the maelstrom tore him apart again. Just when it looked as if he was doomed to destruction, his body would slowly reform until he was whole again. Then the entire cycle would begin anew.

Occasionally, the High Lord of Orrorsh glared at the small red and blue sliver of eternity shard that one of those damnable Storm Knights had used to initiate the maelstrom. If he could but outlast it, he would be free — free to resume his rightful place on the throne of bones, free to lead his realm to new levels of power.

High Lord and shard both hung suspended in the maelstrom, each attempting to subdue the other. The Gaunt Man furrowed his brow and hissed his fury at the shard. He felt a new determination not to let some overglorified piece of rock get the better of him.

In yet another bid for aid, his mind sought out Heketon in its special refuge. The Darkness Device's thoughts and emotions came to the Gaunt Man, but rather than offering help or advice, the Device merely "sat back" like some cruel father watching his son drowning, curious to see if the child would save himself or be overcome. Such was the only reaction Heketon had ever given the trapped High Lord.

His Device's indifference and malicious curiosity drained the last of the Gaunt Man's patience and fueled his fury anew. With an awesome display of willpower, he reached out for the shard, which hung but a few tantalizing centimeters from his grasp. To the

High Lord's amazement, he found he could actually move his hand in the direction of the offending object, something he had been unable to manage for two years. Could it be that the shard was ... weakening?

Bolstered by this modest success, the Gaunt Man tried again. Slowly, slowly his fingers closed the short distance, though to the Gaunt Man it seemed the void between cosms. Closer ... closer ... closer ...

A loud shriek of painful triumph electrified the air as the Gaunt Man grasped the sliver of the Heart of Coyote. The shard immediately fought back, releasing all of its Apeiros-granted energy into its enemy.

The Gaunt Man felt the shard's power attempting to injure him from within. Ignoring the pain, the High Lord began to literally choke the life out of the sliver. Possibilities bled from the stone at an even faster rate and were hungrily devoured by the Gaunt Man, who grew stronger with each bit of energy consumed. As he grew stronger, he drained more and more possibilities, while the shard grew weaker and weaker still.

Finally, the shard was defeated. In a blinding flash of red and blue light, the maelstrom vanished, dropping the Gaunt Man to the stone floor. He took some satisfaction from the fact that he had landed on his feet, seeing it as a good omen for the future.

The sliver, now fully drained of possibilities, hit the floor with a dull thud. Now, it was only a useless chunk of red and blue veined rock. The Gaunt Man drew back his booted foot and kicked the offending stone. It skittered across the lab floor and came to rest in the ruins of the Gaunt Man's possibility-sorting device.

Regaining his composure, he brushed himself off, picked up his cane and surveyed his surroundings. The chamber was littered with the debris of his machine — much good *that* had done him! Turning away from the ruins, the Gaunt Man's eye alighted on

his enchanted mirror, Wicked, hanging on the wall.

Inhaling and relishing a deep breath of the fear-tainted air of Orrorsh, the Gaunt Man walked around the chamber, taking in every detail. He struggled to sort out the images and memories he had experienced during his struggle in the maelstrom. There was Kurst's betrayal, Kane's failure, and those damned Storm Knights that had locked him in that humiliating state for ... how long?

While in the maelstrom, time had lost all meaning for the Gaunt Man. All he could remember was whatever his barely functioning five senses had been able to tell him. The image of Thratchen gloating over his predicament was the most prominent memory.

The Gaunt Man strode to Wicked, rasping "Show me the present," in a voice like dead leaves skittering across the floor of a crypt. Wicked shifted and blurred and revealed Jakarta, Indonesia to its master. Using the power derived from the shard, the Gaunt Man extended his senses and looked about the city. Focusing in on a newstand, he examined the date on a paper's masthead.

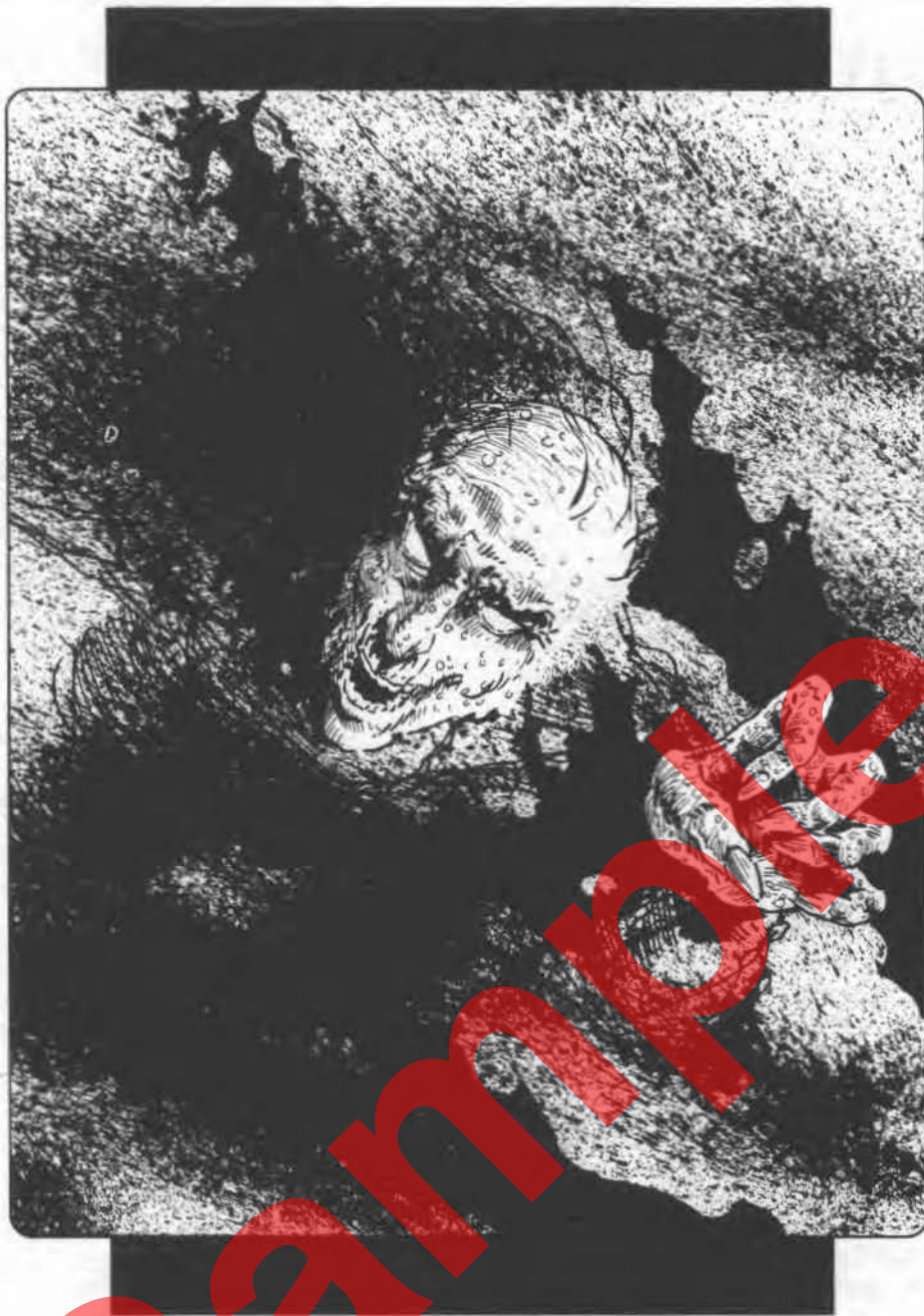
"Two years," he muttered. "A blink of an eye when compared to my lifespan, but a long time when one has plans for this cosm." He turned his back on Wicked and began to pace, letting the implications of his long absence from the war sink in. Then he spun on his heel and shouted at the mirror, "Show me Thratchen, that damned, pathetic, armor-plated gargoyle!"

Obediently, the mirror presented a picture of Thratchen. The techno-demon was consorting with others of his kind in a large city in North America.

"Tharkoldu? How can this be?" the Gaunt Man wondered aloud. Then his skeletal face grew dark with growing realization and fury. "Wicked! Show me the realms on Earth! NOW!"

For the next hour, a collage of im-





ages played across the surface of the occult artifact. Events and personalities flashed across the silver pane. The Gaunt Man hissed as he saw Uthorion routed by Storm Knights and the forces of the Light and forced to take refuge in the form of a dragon.

"My trusted lieutenant!" the Gaunt Man said, infusing the words with poisonous contempt. "My incompetent lieutenant is more appropriate!"

The scene shifted again to show a stunningly beautiful woman clad in ebon armor leading a charge against

Ardinay's armies. The Gaunt Man watched closely, but said nothing.

Again, the mirror shimmered and the Gaunt Man found himself eavesdropping on a meeting of the Cyberpapal College of Cardinals. He could hear their fearful whispers, their worries that Malraux was losing support both here and in Magna Verita. They were silenced when the Cyberpope walked in, his flesh now mixed with steel implants. The Gaunt Man smiled thinly, wondering if perhaps Malraux had been influenced by

Thratchen's "look."

"Has that pompous cleric begun to emulate the techno-demons?" he said aloud.

Assuming the question begged an answer, Wicked obediently showed Malraux descending the maelstrom bridge to Earth. The Gaunt Man saw his ally being attacked by Dr. Hachi Mara-Two and becoming something entirely new — a Cyberpope.

"And even with this incredible technology, he struggles to expand his boundaries!" the Gaunt Man said, shaking his head.

The High Lord's frustration grew as he beheld hundreds of edeinosaurs actively battling Baruk Kaah, while natural disasters of all sorts rocked the Eastern Land. "Scaled idiot," he muttered in disgust. "He cannot even control his own pleasure-seeking reptile scum!"

Perhaps fearing to show the Gaunt Man any more failures, Wicked presented an image of 3327 plotting further expansions in America. Interspersed with this were images of Nippon agents battling Orrorshan horrors.

"Wealth-seeking, materialistic, uncultured barbarian," the Gaunt Man said, dismissively. "I should have known better than to recruit a glorified merchant." He added a silent promise that the Nippon High Lord would pay for daring to challenge the horror realm.

"Thratchen, Kanawa, Kaah. I am crafting quite a list of people who must needs be ... disciplined."

Seemingly oblivious to the Gaunt Man's comment, Wicked continued the spectacle, showing Dr. Mobius' tremendous progress. Finally, the Gaunt Man allowed himself to be impressed. He even let out a ghoulish cackle as he reflected on the fact that the most successful High Lord was also arguably the most insane. The irony was delicious.

Pressing Wicked for more information, he was treated to a display of the Nile High Lord's major victories and defeats. At one point, he cried, "Wu-Han has reformed? That is a sea change that shan't last long!"

Still, Wicked was not finished. He showed the Gaunt Man another realm, one populated by handsome people



and odd beasts, all bearing technology more advanced than even Malraux's. The Gaunt Man's smile was a cold one — he knew of these Akashans, but had not expected to see them on Earth.

"So Manwaring failed me," he said, making a mental note to punish the vampire. "Very well, then. We shall see how long these beings can stand before the most powerful emotion in the cosmverse: fear. And if their machines live as well, then they too can know terror. To me, all fear tastes the same."

Wicked moved on to show techno-demons wandering through a large city. The Gaunt Man was perhaps most surprised by this sight — the Tharkokdu had failed in their attempt to invade Earth. Or had they?

"Show me Kranod!" he commanded. The High Lord of Orrorsh detested mysteries, unless he was the one who crafted them.

Wicked gave its master a brief glimpse of the rotting corpse of a techno-demon. Then it showed a human woman, one adorned with the same sort of equipment as Mara-Two, and she stood beside Malgest.

The Gaunt Man bellowed in evil mirth. "So that is what has happened! The fool failed in his invasion and lost his Darkness Device to that woman! Splendid! She will be far easier to control — new to the power she now wields. An alliance may be in order."

He eyed the image of Jezrael more closely. "Yes, and perhaps it is time I took a mate once more. One who is not so ... fragile."

In quick succession, Wicked showed the current whereabouts of the Hellion Court members and the Nightmares, followed by some of the more prominent Storm Knights who had arisen in the past two years. When it was done, the Gaunt Man sat down on his throne, rested his head on his steepled fingers and began to ponder.

After a few moments, he whispered, "Render Heketon unto me."

In the mirror's heart, there appeared a gaping maw lined with razor-sharp teeth. The Gaunt Man arose, reached into the mouth and emerged with the glowing black heart which was his Darkness Device.

"So you saw fit to withhold your aid from me?"

The heart pulsed as if in answer.

"Yes, I realize that you could have allowed Thratchen to find you, but I know you too well, 'old friend.' Despite his strength and his talent for treachery, he is still not the stuff of which a High Lord is made. In the future, you would do well to remember who is your rightful master!"

The heart pulsed again in his hands.

"Changing the subject, are we? A traitor? In my court?" The Gaunt Man appeared genuinely surprised. "Wicked! Show me my false-hearted servant!"

The mirror obeyed, revealing an image of General Avery Wellington poring over some occult texts. "Indeed. My 'honorable' courtier has decided to take advantage of my ... absence in order to seize power for himself? Wellington — gone from soldier to scholar? I would never have suspected! And here I thought that the combination of the rigid, unimaginative Victorian mind and the repressive restrictions of military life would keep him loyal to me. This situation must be corrected."

The Gaunt Man left the room, deep in thought. With his disappearance, much of what had dwelled in the Keep had wandered away. Many of the rooms were ruined, courtesy of Thratchen's fruitless search for Heketon.

"This will not do," the Gaunt Man said to Heketon, gesturing all about him. "Repair. Replenish. Redesign."

Immediately, furniture began to reassemble itself, walls "healed" of their cracks and scars and floors became level once more. For miles around Illmound, the dead rose from their graves and burial pits as numerous Waiting Village spirits entered their bodies, altered them, and began to shuffle toward the Keep.

Reflecting on his setback at the hands of Kurst and Mara, the Gaunt Man wondered if perhaps Illmound was too easy to breach. At his mental command, rooms shifted position and walls appeared where none had been before until he was well and truly satisfied.

The one chamber which did not change was that of Basjas, the arachnid member of the Hellion Court. Entering, the Gaunt Man no-

ticed dozens of human-shaped bundles of spider silk hanging from the ceiling. The High Lord was pleased to see that Basjas, at least, was doing her part to spread fear.

"All hail the power of the Torg!" said a statuesque, beautiful woman as she approached the High Lord. "He who has defeated the power of Apeiros and now walks again to reclaim his throne!"

"Eloquent as always, Basjas," the Gaunt Man said with pleasure. "During my ... inconvenience, I was aware of your secret visits. I saw how you wished to help and your frustration at your powerlessness. Your loyalty will be rewarded, my dear."

"The only reward I seek is the chance to spill Thratchen's blood," she hissed.

"Once my plans have been completed, I will allow you to begin yours against that traitorous techno-demon," he replied. "As well as have you pay visits to some of the more restless Nightmares, if only to remind them where true power in Orrorsh lies."

"Sonce and Maletretius have been plotting to seize a larger share of power in Orrorsh!" the woman said.

"Yes, yes, so Wicked has told me," the Gaunt Man answered smoothly. "Hence your visits. If they do not receive you well, you may help them on their way to the Waiting Village."

Basjas' eyes gleamed with wicked anticipation. "I am ready to serve you, master ... in any way you desire," she whispered, her fingers toying with the laces on her flimsy gown.

"So I see," the High Lord replied. "Prepare your plans of vengeance, Basjas. I shall inform you when to set the wheels in motion." And he was gone.

As he walked back to his laboratory, the Lord of Illmound Keep shook his head. Why did his female allies, beings such as Sabathina and Basjas, feel compelled to make romantic overtures toward him?

"When have I ever shown any interest in such things?" he muttered aloud as his footsteps echoed down the halls of the Keep. "Even my wife never felt my touch ... save for when I killed her," he added hastily.

After moving Wicked to his tea room, he used it to make contact with Parok, his ravagon lieutenant. His in-



structions were simple: come to Illmound with a dozen of the Dark Hunters, and tell no one.

While he awaited their arrival, another potential problem occurred to the Gaunt Man. Storm Knights had checked him once with an eternity shard—something must be done to prevent such a thing from happening again. He walked to his library and began paging through ponderous volumes of occult lore, seeking an answer.

"I wish a defense against eternity shards," he intoned, reading from a large book bound with human flesh. "I will create an occult talisman that will protect me from eternity shards. I will use a piece of a shard to create the talisman. I will research a ritual to enchant the shard which will create the talisman. The talisman will protect me from shards for as long as I am within Illmound Keep."

The Gaunt Man paused in his research as Parok, warlord of the ravagons, entered the library, bowing low. Behind him, a dozen ravagons knelt before the man they believed to be the Sixth Prophet of their religion.

"My lord!" Parok hissed. "We thought you were lost! This is indeed a joyous day! If you now desire that I destroy Thratchen —"

"Thratchen can wait," the High Lord answered. "Arise, faithful one, you and your kin. I knew your loyalty would never waver."

"We live to serve, lord."

"As it should be," the Gaunt Man said, nodding with satisfaction. "Now, Parok, heed me: I require stormers and Ords, dead or alive, it matters not. I require perhaps two dozen of each."

"Surely, many of my so-called allies have sent their agents to my realm to see if I had met with my demise. Seek out and fetch these stormers. Take your victims from all areas of Orrorsh. Tell no one who sent you, lest I consign you to eternal damnation, for I shall discover any treachery. Now go!"

As the creatures bowed and departed, the Gaunt Man returned to his work, taking no nourishment save for the possibilities that Heketon fed to him.

The moon had passed through all of its phases when the Gaunt Man finally emerged from the library. Clutching the scroll with its occult

ritual written in Stormer blood, the triumphant High Lord strode into his laboratory and began creating the talisman, using a small piece of the Heart of Coyote as the main component. The Gaunt Man cackled with delight. The object which had made his life miserable for the past two years would now become his defense against such a thing ever happening again!

A week later, the ravagons returned from their grisly mission, bearing twenty dead Ords, twenty dead Storm Knights, and six live ones. The Gaunt Man never left his work, but instead ordered Parok to imprison the six live Storm Knights in the dungeons, and to stack the dead bodies in the laboratory.

The remaining ravagons were ordered to guard the Keep, for the Gaunt Man did not require them to seek out more Storm Knights. Many of the realms were sending groups of Storm Knights into the Orrorsh realm to ascertain the Gaunt Man's condition. Many of those Knights wound up at Illmound. No, the ravagons did not need to fly anymore. Stormers, good and evil, entered Illmound in search of answers. None ever left.

Finally, the talisman was complete. The neck chain was made of the finger bones of dead Storm Knights. The amulet which held the eternity shard was a portion of a human skull, carved into the shape of the Carredon's head, with the shard mounted in its mouth. With a nod of satisfaction, the Gaunt Man put on the necklace and placed his cloak over it, so that it would be hidden from the casual observer.

Leaving his lab, the Gaunt Man met Parok, who bowed and said, "Lord, how can we serve you now?"

The Gaunt Man raised his head and stared at the ceiling in thought. "For the nonce, nothing. I must name some new Nightmares to the Hellion Court, plus a staff for the Keep. However, I need one of your strongest people, a true warrior, who you feel can obey precise orders and is not afraid to die serving me. Someone whose strength lies in his sinews, not his mental faculties."

"I know the one to serve you, Lord!" Parok replied, grinning evilly as he thought of a particular ravagon who wished to supplant him but was being rather circumspect in his plans. "May

I ask what he is to do?"

The Gaunt Man grinned wide, stretching thin the skin across his skeletal face, his eyes glowing red with malice. "I wish him to deliver an invitation to a group of Storm Knights in Jakarta. But he must do it in a particular manner."

"An invitation to Storm Knights?" Parok's expression betrayed his surprise.

"Why, yes, Parok!" the Gaunt Man answered sarcastically. "After all, those accursed stormers seem to have so much success these days, I feel that I should recruit some myself. Now hearken, for here is what I want your ravagon warrior to do . . ."

As the Gaunt Man explained his plan, the halls of Illmound shook with the evil laughter of both beings.

A High Lord Resurrected

The Gaunt Man Returns is an adventure for *Torg: Roleplaying The Possibility Wars*. You must have the boxed game to play this adventure, as well as the *Orrorsh* sourcebook.

Adventures for *Torg* occur in the Near Now, where seven different realities and their High Lords have invaded Earth. The mightiest of the High Lords, and the instigator of the Possibility Wars on Earth, is the Gaunt Man, ruler of a realm built on fear. Trapped in a maelstrom by Storm Knights (see the *Torg* novel trilogy), the Gaunt Man is about to return to the fray.

WARNING: This adventure thrusts the Storm Knights into an extremely perilous situation in perhaps the most dangerous of realms. It is recommended for experienced players.

Adventure Background

For most of the first two years of the Possibility Wars, the Gaunt Man has been trapped in a maelstrom with an eternity shard, the Heart of Coyote. During that period, his body has been continually torn apart and reassembled by the power of the reality storm. In his place, Thratchen, a

