

Red Rains Over Orbell Quill

With apologies to Dan Abnett for the rather blatant “inspiration” taken from Red Rain in Brothers of the Snake.

Background

Orbell Quill, known locally as the “Breadbasket of Malfi”, is a crop-producing agri-world characterised by seemingly endless fertile plains, temperate weather, long growing seasons and vast grain yields that feed not just Malfi but much of the surrounding sub-sector as well. The pleasant climate might suggest to an off-worlder that Orbell Quill is something of an idyll. It is not. The serfs who work the fields are kept in a state of isolation, ineducation and religious oppression. Lives are short, ruled by superstition, fear and almost endless physical labour.

Almost endless, that is, because there is one time of year when the fields cannot be tilled: the months of the Blood Monsoon.

High iron oxide levels in the environment mean the rains that fall in a deluge for two months of each 19 month-standard year are crimson. Puddles, rivulets, streams and flash floods make the planet seem to bleed from open wounds across its surface. Crops have been harvested by the time the monsoon begins, although a thick stubble is left upon the continent-wide corn fields to anchor the valuable topsoil, making the plains appear to be covered in splintered bones pushing up through the bloody flood.

Indentured field hands huddle in their communes, waiting for the “Emperor’s Wounds” to close, as a new year of growth can only begin once the Emperor is back to health. Incense is burnt, prayers are given and offerings are floated away on the constant tide of blood red rain.

Adventure Background

This year something darker has come to Orbell Quill along with the rain. In the isolated settlement of Commune XCIX, prayers for the Emperor’s health have been perverted. Villagers still offer prayers and perform ceremonies, but now they are to another god, one who better embodies the blood rain that falls for months on end.

It all started with Pontiff Dulark. After a long career ministering to the Imperial Guard as they fought their many campaigns and crusades around the sector, he was promoted to the rank of archbishop and given the safe, quiet role of seeing to the spiritual needs of the bucolic agri-world, Orbell Quill.

Unfortunately, safety and quiet were the last thing Dulark needed. Hardened by the front lines, a veteran of countless slaughters, he fell first into boredom, then melancholy, then resentment. Which is when he was recruited into a dark cult with promises of a return to the bloodshed, conflict and visceral excitement he craved.

He has since used his position to recruit others to his new cause, and aims to plunge peaceful Orbell Quill into chaos by summoning a daemon so powerful, the Imperium will have no choice but to send in its own forces and turn planet into a war world.

There is just one thing he needs to complete the ceremony now he has worshippers and the rains have begun – an Inquisitor to sacrifice. Or at a push, several sacrifices who each possess Inquisitorial authority.

Timeline

Here's a breakdown of events leading up to the acolytes' arrival on Orbell Quill.

Februarius

5th: Khorne doll pinned to temple door.

Martius

1st: Contact with Settlement XCIX lost.

3rd: Magistratum volunteers go by shuttle to investigate.

5th: Pontiff Dulark (Archbishop of Orbell Quill) murdered.

5th: Magistratum vehicle hangar burnt down.

9th: Contact with Settlement CXV lost.

10th: Luminus Hosterman (Administratum Chief Assessor) murdered.

10th: Contact with Settlement CXV lost.

11th: Brek Garner (Magistratum Chief Constable) murdered.

12th: Contact with Settlement CXV lost.

13th: Leviticus Quinoa (Magistratum Chief Enforcer) murdered.

18th: Contact with Settlement CXV lost.

19th: Winlow Chaff (Magistratum Sergeant) murdered.

22nd: Acolytes arrive

This assumes that the acolytes are somewhere in the vicinity. If they have further to travel, just move the date of the Khorne doll being pinned to the templum back a suitable amount of time.

Briefing

The following gives an overview of the acolytes' briefing. The location and its description are left to the GM's imagination.

On arrival the acolytes are given two packages by their master. One contains a small figure woven from corn stalks. A corn doll. Each settlement on Orbell Quill has their own style of doll, small figures supposed to represent the Emperor which are prayed to and cared for all through the growing season, then floated away on small woven-corn boats filled with symbolic treasures and healing aids when the rains come.

The second contains something darker. Another doll, but one that is woven of rotted corn, damp with congealed blood that refuses to dry out. The doll is burnt in places, and pins stick out from its eyes, heart and genitals. Blood-damp ribbons are covered with minute curses against the Emperor. Just viewing such sacrilege is worth a Corruption Test to avoid gaining d5 Corruption Points.

The inquisitor calls this revolting item a “Khorne-doll” and remarks that he hopes the irony of the name is not as lost on his acolytes as it undoubtedly is on the cultists. Everyone knows that Orbellians are ignorant serfs.

The second doll was found pinned to the temple doors in Sheaf, the capital and only spaceport on Orbell Quill. The characters must travel to the agri-world and uncover the cult responsible.

There is no knowing whether the cult has corrupted the Administratum or Magistratum forces that govern the planet, so the acolytes should maintain a low profile, only revealing their true colours when the cult is traced to its roots.

The inquisitor suggests they begin their investigation by contacting an esteemed contact of his, the archbishop of Orbell Quill, Pontiff Dulark. Having spent most of his life fighting the dark tide of chaos, Dulark can be counted upon as an ally, and has been on the planet for nine years now so should know the lay of the land. The inquisitor makes mention of past adventures during the Tranch Insurrection to send his warm wishes to the “old wardog”, hoping the archbishop isn't getting too bored cooling his heels in a rural backwater like Orbell Quill.

Sheaf

Sheaf is a sandstone-built town characterised by sprawling one storey buildings. Wide highways radiate outwards in all directions, allowing the planet's vast land trains to bring crops to the spaceport. The only unusual buildings are the Administratum's Grain Exchange, the Magistratum's Barleystone Keep, the Fecund Blessing temple and the large, empty spaceport with its banks of towering grain silos and rows of land trains covered up for the rainy season.

By the time the characters have reached Orbell Quill, events have progressed somewhat. Communication has been lost with several outlying communes, and the Magistratum forces sent to investigate have not returned.

In Sheaf itself, a number of high-ranking officials have been found dead, despite, in several cases, being heavily guarded. The Planetary Administrator's aide, the Chief Assessor, is dead. As is the Pontiff and several key Magistratum figures. Fear rules the capital.

The Magistratum are paranoid about any unfamiliar faces, and will make life difficult for character unable to bluff about having official business, especially if they carry obvious weaponry. It will also be difficult to find accommodation. There are no exports during the Monsoon, so most of the guest houses and barracks which house visiting traders and their retinues would have been closed anyway. With the current troubles, many owners have chosen to board up their businesses and stay with relatives as far from both the capital and the lost communes as possible.

Administratum officials will also be suspicious. With so many key figures missing, it's activity has ground to a halt. Rivalries and distrust have caused communication to break down. The acolytes can

expect to be passed from pillar to post as various departments try to avoid getting drawn into the business of nosey outworlders.

Of course, the obvious answer to the Magistratum and Administratum's closed doors is to reveal that the characters work for the Inquisition. This will work wonders in opening doors. But it will also play directly into the Pontiff's hands. Sacrisanct Maisquin, his aide, will soon hear of their presence and make contact, shepherding them towards their doom before they can gather the clues that will give them an advantage in the final conflict.

It was the archbishop who had the Khorne Doll nailed to the doors of the Fecund Blessing temple, fully aware that it would attract the attention of the Inquisition. He then faked his own death to free himself to lead his cult in the final stages of his plan from distant Commune XCIX.

Rain

From the moment the acolytes disembark from their lander, the Blood Monsoon is unmissable.

GMs should emphasise the constant rain. Sometimes it will lighten to a blood-spray drizzle before a clap of thunder like gunshot will cause the heavens to open and the red deluge to commence once more. Anyone outside for more than a few minutes will look horrific. You might want to check a thesaurus for words like blood, gore, wound, viscera and the like...

After a while, the acolytes can be assumed to have got somewhat used to the constant downpour. At this point, GMs may wish to instead describe small details such as the way rain seeps under doorways like a red shadow or stains clothing to appear like it has been worn at an abattoir or surgeon's table.

Also, the rain may occasionally lighten. When this happens characters will hear a ringing in their ears in the absence of constant noise. At other times it will get even heavier, thumping on rooftops and causing torrents which hamper movement and visibility, uprooting plant life and toppling refugee shacks as streams spring from nowhere.

The Murdered Notables

There have been five murders. All except one was the work of Bloodletter demons summoned by the Pontiff by sacrificing an entire village (four villages have been "harvested" for this purpose – the fifth, Commune XCIX, is base to the Pontiff's cult). The murder that is not the work of a demon was the death of the Pontiff himself. It was faked.

The dead:

5th: Pontiff Dulark (Archbishop of Orbell Quill) killed in his bedchamber in the templum complex. See below for the discrepancies in this murder.

10th: Luminus Hosterman (Administratum Chief Assessor) killed in his study in the Grain Hall under guard. All six Magistratum shock trooper guards were torn apart without firing a shot.

11th: Brek Garner (Magistratum Chief Constable) killed in his study at home, a large sandstone complex on the edge of Sheaf. His assistant, sleeping in the next room, his bodyguard, outside, and his family all heard nothing.

13th: Leviticus Quinoa (Magistratum Chief Enforcer) killed in the Magistratum's HQ, the Barleystone Keep, to where he had withdrawn with his family. The cells he was sleeping in should have been impenetrable. Guards on the door also killed. Family in the next cell heard nothing.

19th: Winlow Chaff (Magistratum Sergeant) killed in his office in the Barleystone Keep while working late. Officers in the next room noticed nothing.

Investigating the murders is made more difficult by the breakdown in authority, but should the acolytes manage to gain access to witnesses and the murder scenes they can make Inquiry, Search, Medicae or other relevant checks to ascertain the following common facts:

1. There were no direct witnesses to the killings or the killer.
2. Each murder was horrifically bloody. Flesh and shredded organs were spread like streamers across the room. The body appeared to have been savaged by a wild beast. Not true for the pontiff – there was lots of blood but the wounds were done with an implement (a Guard-issue combat knife in fact).
3. Each victim was alone when killed. None cried out for help. Not true for the Pontiff – who cried out to be sure his servants discovered the murder.
4. Each victim bled profusely, even after death. Not true for the Pontiff.
5. Each victim was guarded. Some guards heard nothing, others were found dead not having let any calls of alarm or fired their weapons. Not true for the Pontiff – he had deliberately dismissed his guards.
6. The point of entry indicates the attacker could scale sheer walls and smash through barricaded windows/doors with enormous strength. Not true for the Pontiff – there were no signs of forced entry as he used a secret passageway.
7. Claw marks can be found cut into ferrocrete and marble. Not true for the Pontiff.

The Pontiff's death was different. A subordinate – Deacon Oatmow – who refused to join his cult was murdered brutally in the Archbishop's bed chambers, stabbed to death by the archbishop himself, the body disfigured enough that no one could tell it was not the Pontiff himself. Yet while there was plenty of blood, there was no forced entry, servants heard the Pontiff cry out (which he did to assure them it was him being murdered) and there was neither a forced entry nor are there any claw marks (the Pontiff and his cultists left by a secret passageway once they were sure the alarm had been raised).

The acolytes may also realise one other killing doesn't fit the pattern. Sergeant Chaff doesn't hold high rank within government. In fact, he was killed because his private investigation into the Khorne doll incident was leading him to ask too many questions. He had learnt that Deacon Oatmow was missing and was following up a hunch that the Ecclesiarchy knew more than they were letting on.

To discover this fact, however, the acolytes must act fast. His family are already packing when the characters arrive on Orbell Quill, and plan to flee the capital to stay with distant relatives in the eastern cantons.

Locals

Those that remain in Sheaf are nervous. The government is paralysed, the Magistratum are paranoid and rumours are flying around wildly about what has happened.

Inquiry rolls (or roleplaying an investigation using other skills) can gather the following facts/rumours. Alternatively, GMs can either make up something absurd or use the rumours table provided for refugees in the Templum.

1: The Emperor is dying. The harvest quotas were too low and now his wounds will not close. The NPC has been dreaming of a flood of blood rain that will scour Orbell Quill to the bone.#

2: The Administratum has rebelled against the government. Those in power are behind the killings and chaos.

3: Every settlement that goes quiet has been sacrificed to the Ruinous Powers. When all 753 settlements on Orbell Quill are silent, all the daemons summoned by those sacrifices will be unleashed on Sheaf.

4: Everything has gone to hell since the archbishop was murdered. The Emperor must have valued him after all the wars he fought in. And now He's punishing Orbell Quill for letting him die.

Instruments of Government

When dealing with either of Orbell Quill's bureaucracies – the Administratum or Magistratum – roll on the Bureaucratic Reactions table to see how that particular squad/department has reacted to the chaos

Bureaucratic Reactions (roll d10)

1-3: Paranoid. Someone is out to destroy order and they're sure they're next. And just because there were no outworlders planetside when it all started doesn't mean the acolytes can be trusted. They will try to get as much distance between themselves and the acolytes as possible, fleeing, hiding or fighting anyone who comes to close.

4-6: Lazy. With no superiors they have fallen into disarray. Guards sit, smoke lho sticks and gamble or drink, ignoring their vox units, administrators sleep at their desks. They will happily lie to acolytes to cover their own skins and foist investigations on someone else.

7-8: Confused. Chaos reigns within the unit. Different members argue over different courses and little happens.

9-10: Paralyzed. Without any new orders, they have fallen back on their training in an attempt to keep order. Clerks shuffle paper and rewrite reports, troops drill but never deploy.

Dealing with officialdom should be a frustrating and possibly rather dangerous activity, driving home the fact that fear now rules Orbell Quill and prompting the PCs to either turn to the church or investigate the lost communes themselves (either of which move the adventure on).

The Administratum

The Administratum mostly governs this quiet agri-world from Malfi so despite having charge of the world, their headquarters is modest. The three storey Grain Exchange is filled with a labyrinth of small offices, storerooms, meeting chambers, data exchangers, cogitator rooms, filing pools and copyist retinue suites surrounding a central market hall where, during the growing season, traders bid for crops not already promised to off-world contractees.

There's little to learn here. But what little there is difficult to find out. Roll on the Bureaucratic Reactions table for each department as the acolytes are passed off, lied to, hidden from, threatened or ignored.

The organisation is split into the following departments: Offworld and Orbit Liaison; Registry of Serf and Cattle; Grain Management; Transit and Locomotionary Matters; Building, Commune and Highway; Planetary Treasury and Tithe; and Environment, Irrigation and Weather Control.

Once the acolytes have discovered which communes are not responding and when they were last contactable, and that a squad of Magistratum volunteers (actually cultists) were sent by shuttle to investigate but never returned, they have reached a dead end here.

To make investigating the Administratum less drudging, GMs may wish to draw the acolytes into the internal workings of the Administratum. GMs may wish to make up side plots on the fly, based on who the acolytes deal with, or the following examples:

All the trained filing clerks have fled ("that's filers for you - always hiding away!"), making it impossible to know which settlements stopped making contact when. The acolytes must brave the subterranean data crypts with only Clerk Haygather, a nervous junior notary, as guide.

Unfortunately, the data crypts are exactly where the filers felt safest and so that is where they fled to, rigging it with various traps against daemons who are coming to take their secrets.

Vice Prothonotary Ambrosius Sandrill, an ambitious department sub-head, takes advantage of the chaos to remove his boss, Prothonotary Gorman Flynd. He plans to take his place in the expectation that the post will be made permanent if he weathers the storm, but his boss is refusing to divulge the pass codes that would allow Sandrill to unlock his cogitator. In the meantime, his boss is chained to the pipes in a long-forgotten maintenance storeroom in the attic of the Grain Exchange.

Occasionally he bangs on the pipes, terrifying the various junior Administratum clerks who sleep in the small attic cells. They believe a daemon is walking on the rooftop at nights, and will soon come for them like it has other important locals. Sandrill reports the disappearance as another murder but investigation will reveal the modus operandi do not match up. For a start there is no body...

The Magistratum

Law enforcement on Orbell Quill is handled by the local Magistratum officers. There is no PDF. The planet is generally peaceful, the population isolated and obedient, and external threats are handled by calling in help from nearby Malfi.

Which is why the Magistratum have reacted so badly to the sudden chaos engulfing the planet. They are not trained for such things. They don't have any armour and most officers don't carry any weapon except a nightstick (which most have never drawn).

Roll on the Bureaucratic Reactions table whenever the acolytes encounter a unit of officers on the streets of Sheaf, and also if the acolytes try to get information from the officers at the Barleystone Keep, Sheaf's Magistratum headquarters.

Just as with the Administratum, there is little to learn from the local lawmen. They can provide dates and rather lax crime reports for the murders. Their investigations have drawn a blank, however, and been abandoned now that so many refugees have flooded the town.

Preventing the itinerants from breaking into boarded up property and stealing food from the locals now takes up most of their meagre manpower (when they manage to organise themselves to act at all that is). The Barleystone Keep is besieged by locals demanding protection from refugees, refugees demanding protection from locals demanding exorbitant prices for food or board, relatives of those swelling the small jail, and a multitude of protesters against everything from the "xenos invasion" to the refusal to issue weapons so the people can protect themselves.

Another fact that the Magistratum can inform the acolytes of is that their transport pool has been sabotaged. Someone set a fire that collapsed the hangar building holding their small collection of low-orbit capable shuttles, armoured vehicles and bikes. The only vehicles left to them are a handful of canvas-sided troop trucks.

Anyone who successfully investigates the wreckage and compares it to the inventory will discover that there is a sub-orbital shuttle unaccounted for (the Pontiff used it to fly to Settlement XCIX).

The Magistratum in Sheaf has four departments: Tithe and Crop, Highways, General Order and Special Investigations, the last of which is handling the murders (although it is the smallest department and more used to dealing with crimes such as missing drunk husbands at harvest time and accidental house fires). Each of the inspectors heading these departments vies with the others for control of the Magistratum as a whole, paralysing the organisation.

In addition to any encounters GMs make up on the fly as the acolytes investigate the Magistratum, they may wish to throw in something like the following:

A unit of Magistratum drag a teenage girl through the crowd. Accused of stealing a heel of cornbread, she begs for mercy, rousing the crowd to anger as she tells them it was to feed her baby brother. Stones are thrown and the Magistratum draw their nightsticks. If this isn't enough to get the acolytes involved (if only to earn a favour from the officers), in the crush the girl falls and needs rescuing. As the Magistratum officers make it to the building (with or without the girl), someone in the crowd points at the acolytes, accusing them of being the outworlders who brought all this upon them.

The Templum

Only the Ecclesiarchy seems to have retained any leadership. With the death of the archbishop, Pontiff Dulark, his aide, Sacrisanct Maisquin has taken charge, providing food and shelter for refugees within the templum, administering the services traditionally held at this time of year and leading prayers for deliverance. This combination of leadership, faith and familiarity has made the Fecund Blessing Templum a beacon for the refugees flooding into town.

So much so that the templum is full to bursting, crowded with refugees who have fled the western cantons in terror of the wildfire rumours that the loss of Communes XCV to XCIX have sparked. Unfortunately for acolytes wanting to learn more, the refugees know little. There are almost as many rumours as there are villagers, all of them containing little more than superstition and imagination. Not that this stops many claiming they saw these things with their own eyes... or, at least, that they know someone who did.

Example Rumours (roll d10)

1. The harvest sent to Malfi was blighted, so the Blood Matriarch has sent her assassins to wreak vengeance.
2. The Emperor is dead and fell powers have taken the universe. The demons will be here to harvest the residents of Orbell Quill when the rains reach their peak.
3. The Magistratum purged the missing communes. Different refugees provide different reasons: chaos was found there, the Magistratum are corrupted and made the villagers into sacrifices, the Magistratum officers were driven mad by an unholy crop blight that blew in from space, etc.
4. The Administratum want to reclassify Orbell Quill as a mining world and have deliberately created the chaos to drive away agri-trade. Only by staying calm and ignoring the false rumours can the locals remain safe.
5. The Inquisition is behind the killings. They have deemed the corn rites unholy and will exterminate everyone on the planet as punishment. First they are paralysing the planet so no one can escape, before opening up with their fell weapons.
6. The Emperor is displeased with the harvest. The rains will never end. Everyone will drown in blood before the planet is forgiven. Only prayer offers salvation. And then only for the soul.
7. Xenos are invading. Black as wheat rot and thin as corn dolls, they are taking villagers away on their sleek ships as slaves and playthings for their dark, alien games.
8. Plague is spreading from the east. It turns men inside out, with wounds that never cease to bleed.
9. Witches that his from the Black Ships are taking villagers as sacrifices for their dark magic, blighting fields and bringing rains heavier than even Old Mumka Stalksack can remember as punishment on those who would have sent them away.

10. Things stalk the rain. Made of blood itself, they are too swift-moving for the eye to see, yet able to tear the throat from a man in the blink of an eye. The Blood Gaunts hunt only those who have harmed others, feeding on the sin of murderers.

There is one useful fact to be learned in the templum if the acolytes persist in their questioning. Locals who are sheltering there bemoan the fact that the “Good Deacon” has fled. They refer to Deacon Oatmow who the Pontiff murdered in his own place. They are saddened and frightened that even such a charitable and steadfast cleric should abandon them. He hasn’t been seen since the night of the Pontiff’s murder. One local will even wonder aloud if he might have been the murderer, although others will shush him, unable to believe that could be the case. If asked, he is described as squat and broad-shouldered with a shaven head and kind brown eyes (remarkably similar to the Pontiff).

Sacrisanct Maisquin

The Sacrisanct can be found daily at the templum, working all hours to provide for the spiritual and earthly needs of his flock. Of course it’s all a front. In reality he’s just fattening them for slaughter.

The Pontiff has left Maisquin with three tasks to perform while he directs the cult’s activities in Commune XCIX: to make himself indispensable to the remaining government, the better to undermine them from within; to gather the weak to the temple so they may be ritually slaughtered when the Blood God’s servant arrives; and to watch for the Inquisition and send them to Commune XCIX, preferably with a retinue of cultists posing as Ecclesiarchal temple guards.

He is whip-thin with a bearing that betrays his military background (he travelled extensively with Dulark in the role of military chaplain before the Pontiff came to Orbell Quill). He is brusque, efficient and clearly overburdened. Yet those who make a Scrutiny check will note he seems to relish the demands being put upon him – although if confronted with this fact he merely snaps that he’s been on the front lines before and won’t be falling apart at the first sign of danger).

He has a unit of Magistratum officers watching the spaceport for the inquisitor’s arrival. However, he naively assumes such a figure would arrive with the kind of pomp and retinue a cleric of high rank would. Unless the acolytes make themselves too obvious, he will not learn of their arrival this way, although if they carry obvious weapons, he will eventually learn of their arrival... they will just get a few days head start on their investigation.

Once Maisquin discovers the acolytes’ presence he will ask for their help, pointing out the fact that he cannot feed and house the refugees for much longer. He will pull strings with the Magistratum and Administratum to get them information concerning the missing communes (although will not pass on anything to do with the murders if possible – he doesn’t want them sidetracked).

He even offers them transport, a Magistratum troops truck he was using to bring in food left in the silos but which he no longer needs now they have been scraped clean, and troops.

The troops are half a dozen templum guards provided by the Magistratum to keep order amongst the refugees. In fact they are cultists tasked with shepherding the acolytes to Commune XCIX.

Too Much Talking Make Mungo Brain Hurt

Some players may find all this investigation boring. Here's a few ideas for injecting some action into their time in Sheaf.

1. Trouble with the Law. Nervous Magistratum guards, worried at the inadequacy of their equipment, try to confiscate weapons and armour from the players. Will they fight and risk becoming wanted men? Flee? Talk their way out?
2. Food Riot. Rumours have spread that the Administratum have stockpiles of food at the Grain Hall. A mob forms and surrounds the gates just as the acolytes are leaving.
3. Stop Thief. A knot of refugees grab what they can from the acolytes in a crowded place (the space port or near the Templum would make good locations). They run into the backstreets of Sheaf and try to lose any pursuit. Alternatively, they run into the backstreets hoping to draw the group into an ambush where a wall can be pushed down on them and refugees wielding fence posts and sickles can finish them off.

Red Harvest

Contact has been lost with 5 communes in the Western Reapyield canton. It started with Commune XCIX but now Communes XCV to XCVIII are also not responding. Residents of neighbouring settlements have fled, fearing they will be next, choking the roads and bringing panic to the capital.

As the acolytes travel westwards they have the opportunity first to talk to the refugees who are braving the rain, then to investigate the lost settlements.

Templum Guards

Characters who try to interact with their guards find them sullen and difficult to draw out. They keep their helmets on never react to any of the hardship they see among refugees. The only time they react is to protect the acolytes when they are attacked by refugees, which they do with overwhelming and unnecessary brutality, showing little remorse afterwards.

Refugees

The first sight the characters had of refugees was probably back in Sheaf. On the road they will find many more. Bedraggled, red-soaked figures trudge through the mire, either carrying or using handcarts to transport their meagre possessions, children and elderly relatives. Many are starving.

Many are dead. The roadside is littered with those who lacked the strength to reach safety. Old, young and infirm are especially common amongst the dead that float in the rising red tide or slosh along flash flood rivers.

Questioning passing refugees reveals little. The rural folk of Orbell Quill are a superstitious lot, broken by generations of isolation and backbreaking labour. The majority have fled only because of rumours.

Refugee Mob

When it seems a good time to spice up the journey, GMs should have a group of desperate refugees try to swarm the acolytes' vehicle, desperate for food, shelter and to escape the dangers further up the highway. The fight is unlikely to be too challenging – the refugees are half-starved and weaponless – but might make a difficult moral quandary for some characters. Give one corruption point to any characters who kill the desperate refugees rather than trying to escape, d5 to any who seem to actually enjoy it.

If the characters get into combat, their guards attack brutally, splitting heads and battering women, children and the aged indiscriminately with their nightsticks in a frenzy of violence. GMs should push this violence to as close to the players' comfort levels as possible, both to make the acolytes' own attacks seem the more repulsive and to foreshadow the fact that these men are actually blood god cultists.

Jip Wheatear of Commune XCIV

Among the huddled throngs, only this young boy shows any spark. He hails the acolytes as they pass. Having become separated from his family, he travelled back up the highway to look for them, passing through three abandoned communes (CSV, XCVI and XCVII) before giving up his search.

He initially stops the acolytes in the hopes that they will have seen his mumka and papka but will happily exchange what he knows for some food and the chance to shelter out of the rain. If either treated kindly or the acolytes reveal they are exotic offworlders, he will even agree to come with them and show them what he has found.

Apart from his enthusiasm and bravado, there is something else unusual about Jip. He is a latent psyker. Of course, unless the PCs have a psyker within their group they have no way of immediately knowing this. Psykers can make a Psniscience roll each day to detect the warp disturbance the boy's untrained mind creates.

His powers should essentially work as a plot device, taking the form of premonitions about imminent danger or facts the PCs have missed, or reflexive defensive effects that can even the odds when the groups are outgunned.

Feel free to let the characters bond with the plucky boy. It'll make it all the more tragic when they have to hand him over to the Black Ships. Or even face the choice of betraying their master and hiding him from the Inquisition.

Lost Settlements

Communes XCV to XCVIII all lie along the massive highway that runs arrow straight from Sheaf's spaceport across the continent. It takes around a week to drive the 4000km. Along the way, the communes the acolytes pass seem more and more abandoned and almost the entire stretch of road has refugees trudging down it.

With their arrival at Commune XCV, it is clear that things are different. Barracks have their doors left open to bang in the blood storm. Inside there are signs of activity hastily disturbed. Rotten food has been left half eaten, chairs and benches are overturned, bedding has long slashes across the blood soaked surface. But there is not a single sign of life.

Each commune has a number of features in common:

1. A “khorne doll” is nailed to the chapel door. Inside the altar has been violently desecrated. Blood abounds but there are no dead bodies. The acolytes gain no more Corruption Points for seeing a Khorne doll again but must make a Hard (-10) Willpower roll on viewing the symbols splattered on the chapel walls or gain d5 points. Anyone with Forbidden Lore (Daemons) will recognise these as symbols of the blood god, Khorne.
2. The central silo, is empty of grain. Rain drips down from an upper chamber... some of it is rain anyway. The majority is blood. The loft is packed full of bodies. Fear checks are in order for any characters who are not Jaded. GMs may also ask for Agility checks if characters panic while perched on silo’s flimsy ladders. Every member of the commune has been rounded up and stabbed, bludgeoned, slashed or hacked to pieces before being dumped here.
3. Looking down from any raised area (such as the silo or a rooftop), gives an acolyte the chance to make an Routine (+10) Awareness test . Success indicates they notice the pattern trodden into the corn stubble around the village. It also gives them the opportunity to test Willpower or gain another 1 Corruption Point. Forbidden Lore (Daemons) identifies this as a summoning pentagram.
4. A Tracking test reveals that there is a crowd of footprints leading into the commune from the east. Amongst those that lead away from the village there is a stranger set – great cloven hooves that can only have been made by a bipedal walker.

Commune XCIX

Commune is nestled in the foothills of the Barleyrock mountain range, great red slabs of reddish rock, running with torrents of crimson rain like bloody tears.

At first sight it seems no different to the other harvested communes the acolytes have passed through. Doors swing in the blustery squall, red rain splashes down, there are no signs of life to be seen.

The most immediate difference (picked up with a Routine (+10) Awareness test) is that the corn still stands in the fields around the commune. In one field, a gargantuan harvest mower sits rusting. Smart characters will wonder how a commune got away without sending in their crops – it could only be done with help from someone in power.

Daemon Attacks

The Pontiff waits in the basement of the Rest Hall with his cultists, sure that his Bloodletter will be able to slay the inquisitor. It is likely that he still doesn’t know that there is not an inquisitor in the group but even if he does discover this fact it changes his plans little. Rather than one sacrifice he now needs to make several (the entire group to be precise).

The daemon that attacks the characters in the chapel, rest hall and silo is an ancient bloodletter. Use the statistics from the Dark Heresy book (not forgetting the changes in the online errata) but give it additional movement and wounds. It strikes from the shadows using its stealth and speed, avoiding a toe-to-toe combat until launching its ambush in the third location.

Should it be defeated, replace these ambushes with crazed cultists.

The daemon will never attack the Magistratum officers provided by Maisquin.

Allies

Troops – wait until most surprising but not so

Jip – one ace in acolytes' hand. Can predict daemon attacks. Otherworldly voice "He's coming".

Chapel

By now the acolytes will be expecting desecration when they enter this low hall. The foulness here is of a different magnitude, however.

The head has been removed from the Emperor's statue and replaced with one from a rotted dog's corpse. A noose of intestines stretches up to the rafters. The statues of saints have the flayed faces of lay clerics from the harvested communes pulled taut over their heads. Blood abounds. And on the floor, pinned down with crop sickles a woman squirms to ease the discomfort of having her entrails stretched out into a pentagram around her.

She tries to whisper something through dry lips. Only by leaning close can an acolyte hear her. By the time she whispers "it's a trap", the daemon has already attacked.

The Rest Hall

The doors to the common hall are locked from the inside, although it requires only 10 points of damage to smash the doors off their hinges. The interior is dark. The windows are boarded up. There is another door but it is behind a curtain at the far end of the hall and only obvious if the room is searched. This second door is locked, and leads to the cellar where the cult waits out their daemon's slaughter of the acolytes.

Should the acolytes discover the cellar, the Pontiff himself will play the part of fearful commune leader, and claim they are hiding in terror from "the beast" that lurks the settlement.

Characters who learned of Deacon Oatmow's disappearance may draw a parallel with the man they see before them with a Routine (+10) Logic or Challenging (+0) Intelligence test. How the Pontiff reacts depends on the characters but he's most likely to stick to his original story if challenged, and call on his frightened villagers to reveal themselves as crazed cultists if attacked.

The Silo

The daemon waits in the silo's loft, making occasional shuffling noises to draw the characters up the ladder. Once someone steps inside, it leaps from the rafters and slams the door, attacking furiously until the other characters manage to open the jammed door before disappearing once more. With the door closed, the loft is pitch black.

Outhouses

Behind the rusting tractors and farm implements, the shuttle stolen by the Pontiff sits covered by a tarpaulin. It's a ancient and battered but still capable of speedy, if noisy, flight. Currently it is powered down and will take a good five minutes idling to get the engines warm enough for flight.

If the villagers hear the shuttle being started, several things could happen, depending on how far through this part of the adventure the acolytes are. Either the Pontiff will come to beg for help in the guise of the commune leader (see the Rest Hall basement encounter), the daemon will be drawn to attack or the villagers will reveal their true colours and mob the building.

If the greater daemon is already on the loose, the characters better have a distraction in place before they announce their location so noisily.

Commune Hall

PCs will find the commune largely empty of human life until they reach the commune hall.

The hall is barricaded from the inside. In the basement, the population of the commune is hiding, waiting for the Pontiff to unleash them. Until then, however, they play the fearful locals at the mercy of an unknown killer. They plead for help from the acolytes, displaying various wounds. In fact these wounds were made by scythes & sickles and were self inflicted.

Some villagers will even volunteer to help the acolytes explore, but they will be taken by the daemon very quickly. The Pontiff hopes that this will allay suspicion of the villagers, but that maybe they will be able to lure the acolytes into a trap first.

Floodgates Open

At some point the locals will show their hand. Facing down a horde of fanatical, blood-crazed cultists should be no laughing matter, even if they are only armed with scythes. Those who aren't jaded should make fear checks upon seeing the utter recklessness of the enemy. It's not human. How can they laugh as you mow them down? Are we playing into their plans? Can we ever win they don't even fear death?

The troops who arrived with the Pontiff will make use of the cultists distracting full-frontal assault to surround the acolytes and attack tactically. They are better armed and armoured and should prove a nasty surprise to acolytes who thought they could survive by laying down fire at the waves of crazies.

And, as if that wasn't enough, the cultists do have one weapon that should make the acolytes fearful. There is a massive, industrial harvest mower in the village. The threshing blades are over 12 metres wide and will make mincemeat of anyone who doesn't get out of its path.

Lastly, the fearlessness of the cultists is not completely without point. If the Pontiff is to summon a dread bloodthirster, he needs blood, and plenty of it. The villagers lives call the bloodthirster near, separated from the village only by the thinning Warp. His presence will begin to twist reality. The rain will begin to contain lumps of flesh or cascades of blood worms. The drumming of water will echo unnaturally. Puddles will deepen so characters slip in up to their necks... or deeper.

And if they cultists manage to kill an acolyte, things will worsen as the bloodthirster pushes through into reality. It is left to the GM to determine the right time for this to happen (if at all). There

should definitely be warning that something bad is going to happen, and a chance for clever characters to work it out, but if they continue killing and dying, the daemon will come. And then the chances of surviving the adventure's climax becomes very unlikely.

And Then a Greater Daemon Appeared...

Let's face it. If Dulark manages to summon a Bloodthirster of Khorne, there aren't many acolyte groups who are going to be able to survive an encounter with it. And stuck as they are in an isolated village with the daemon, an encounter is not going to be easy to avoid.

GMs have a few options for dealing with this event occurring. Those of a less forgiving disposition may simply declare the adventure over, have all the players scratch a Fate Point and start the next one with them in whatever horrifically-maimed, equipment-less state they were found in after the cultists moved on and they had been left for dead.

More generous GMs may give them one desperate chance to flee the settlement provided they can somehow engineer an advantage. Perhaps a distraction – an explosion to draw the daemons attention or one character leading it on a false trail (at the expense of their life) – or using the shuttle hidden in the outhouses. Whatever they come up with, it should have a chance to succeed but if it works, the players should be left feeling they were very lucky to escape if it does so.

Plan B

This surprise twist is optional, and aimed at GMs who have found that the final conflict was solved too easily, perhaps by becoming suspicious of the villagers early, or for GMs who are just plain mean.

Upon either killing or capturing Pontiff Dulark, an acolyte who searches his body finds one last surprise. In his pocket is a hand-vox linked up to a dataslate, which plays a message over and over.

If the acolytes flee, the message will be picked up on the vox-catcher in their truck.

“Maisquin, we are foiled. Sacrifice the human cattle and summon our master's great servant yourself. You know the rites. Blood, my old friend, for the blood god!”

The acolytes are going to have a hard time getting back to Sheaf in time to stop Masquin from locking the templum doors before rousing the refugees to panic by throwing a sack of ghostfire pollen into their midst. As they turn on one another, all he will need to summon up a dire Bloodthirster is incant the correct ritual.

Their only hope is in discovering the Magistratum shuttle hidden in the outhouses. Provided, that is, someone has the ability to pilot it.

And, of course, they have the steel to cut their way through a thousand psychotic refugees to get to Maisquin before the ritual completes.

NPCs

NPCs are unstated so they can be tailored to suit the group of acolytes investigating the mystery. For convenience, here's a list of the major players:

Pontiff Dulark
Sacrisanct Maisquin
Jip Wheatear

And other NPCs the acolytes may tangle with:

Magistratum Officer
Templum Guards
Crazed Cultist

Demons:

Ancient Bloodletter

Bloodthirster – No need for stats, being seen by the beast will result in a character's death unless they spend a Fate Point to have serendipity/the Emperor's favour save them.

Wrapping Up

As well as whatever experience GMs decide to dish out, they may also want to offer players the opportunity to purchase the Jaded talent as an elite Advance for their character. The harvested villages should have taken the edge off any squeamishness characters previously had.