

# ***ANCIENT BLOOD***

*A Warhammer novel*

*By Robert Earl*

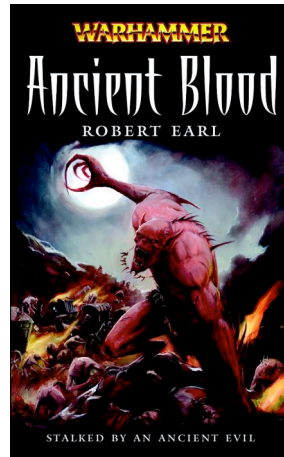
Life in the Old World is a constant struggle for survival, especially for the nomadic Strigany, outsiders who wander the lands of the Empire.

When reports of strange illnesses and disappearing bodies increase, the Elector Counts of Averland and Stirland cast blame upon the Strigany and hatch a plan to get rid of this menace once and for all.

Brutal ex-witch hunter Blysedon is employed to recruit and lead a massive force of mercenaries to round up the Strigany and

exterminate them. But they find the tables turned when they discover the Strigany are prepared to fight back to protect their honour, and have dark and ancient allies who rise to their defence.

Florin & Lorenzo author Robert Earl throws new light on the secretive and gruesome world of the Strigoi vampires and the Strigany in this blood-soaked novel.



## **About the Author**

Robert Earl graduated from Keele University in 1994, after which he started a career in sales. Having worked and travelled in the Balkans and the Middle East, he now lives in England.

The following is an excerpt from *Ancient Blood* by Robert Earl. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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‘IT’S REALLY QUITE simple, your lordship,’ Stirland’s chancellor told him, as his liege paced up and down the great hall of his castle. ‘As we have discussed, there is a key for every lock, and the key for Averland is the Strigany.’

‘But it’s ridiculous,’ Stirland said. ‘What does he care what happens to the Strigany? If they rob the burghers it serves the swine right. To think of all the trouble I had getting my tribute from Arnborst this year. I still say we should have hung some of the burghers. Burghers! Like they’re any better than honest peasants who pay their tithes.’

‘Yes,’ the chancellor said vaguely as he watched his master pace. It was always this way. The elector count always ended up arriving at the right decision, but, by Sigmar’s balls, he always took the longest route to get there. The click of Stirland’s boot heels echoed off the granite walls of the empty hall, and his face worked with thought. It worked hard. The chancellor waited.

‘Anyway,’ Stirland said, gesturing towards his chancellor, ‘I like the Strigany. Old Tilly is the best damn horse trainer I’ve ever had. I think that even Heinz might have some Strigany in him, the old villain. We were lucky to have a man in the cells to behead in his place. As it is, he’s got to stay in hiding until Averland leaves, even though he was well within his rights to clip him.’

‘Within his rights, your lordship? To strike a nobleman?’

‘Well, no, not exactly.’ A moment of unaccustomed doubt flickered across the count’s face. Then it was gone, washed away by a happier memory.

‘I remember my younger days, too. When I was a student in Altdorf... Well, let’s just say that Strigany girls leave nothing to be desired, nothing at all.’

The count leered happily at the memory, and the chancellor resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

‘I doubt if Averland will be persuaded by that argument, my lord,’ he suggested, and Stirland barked with laughter.

‘I doubt you’re wrong,’ he scoffed, ‘weak-blooded bastard that he is. He even sent Gertrude away, you say?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the chancellor said, nodding. Gertrude had been sent to ease Averland’s discomfort after the hunting expedition. ‘She said he looked quite terrified when she offered to... well, you know, comfort him.’

Stirland chuckled.

‘Doesn’t like hunting, doesn’t like drinking, doesn’t like women. I don’t know what’s wrong with...’

The count stopped pacing, a sudden suspicion burning in his eyes. He looked around, and lowered his tone, before voicing his concern.

‘You don’t think he’s a cultist, do you? A follower of one of the Dark Gods, Sigmar curse them?’

‘No,’ the chancellor reassured him, ‘even the witch hunters would hesitate to equate a lack of appetite with the worship of the Dark Gods. No, he’s just weak-blooded, or perhaps more than that. I recently received a letter from my old friend Professor Fritz Van Jungenblauen from Marienburg. He has a theory that the raising of a babe can affect the way it behaves in later life.’

‘That’s Averland stuffed then,’ Stirland leered. ‘Remember his mother? Challenged the top courtesan in Altdorf to a competition, apparently. Won, too. Not that she wasn’t a damned fine-looking woman in her day. I saw a painting of her once. Had an arse like two pigs in a blanket. Lovely.’

‘Jungenblauen’s theory would certainly hint at a connection between the character of the countess and the nervousness of her son in these matters.’ The chancellor nodded.

Stirland grunted. ‘Makes some sort of sense, I suppose. Still, don’t see why he should have it in for the Strigany.’

‘Jungenblaum theorises that, in order to survive, the fragile mind projects those parts of itself that it finds disturbing onto other individuals or groups. In this way, it sublimates unpleasant feelings, and protects its vestige of pride.’

‘What’s that mean in Reikspiel?’

‘Averland’s a lunatic.’

‘I could have told you that,’ Stirland said. Then he sighed. ‘But I understand what you’re saying. By playing along with Averland’s foibles, and helping him to persecute the Strigany, we’ll make him our ally.’

‘Precisely. It’s always better to go with the grain of a man’s character. That’s why, if you remember my liege, I advised against taking him hunting.’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ Stirland said, waving the comment away. ‘Never mind that now. What we have to decide is, what should we suggest be done to the Strigany?’

The chancellor looked down at his immaculately polished fingernails. ‘There have been precedents, from history.’

‘What precedents?’

The chancellor looked at Stirland.

Stirland looked back.

‘No. Oh no, there’ll be none of that. Nothing worse than the unsporting spilling of blood, even Strigany blood, damn them.’

‘In that case, perhaps you would care to read the proclamation I have prepared? It should provide Averland with what he desires, and us with the basis of our alliance.’

Stirland unfurled the scroll his chancellor handed him with a wry smile. The old rogue always seemed to know where their deliberations would end. Then, he read the proclamation, and the smile left his face.

‘This is a bit strong,’ he said.

‘As strong as it needs to be,’ the chancellor said, ‘without spilling blood, at least, not too much.’

‘And you’re sure there’s nobody else we could better ally ourselves with?’

‘My lord, I believe that we have already discussed that exhaustively.’

‘Well, stuff it then,’ Stirland said, frowning, ‘I’ll do it. Damned if I like it though.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the chancellor said, and, with a bow, he left his master to his thoughts.

IN THE SAME HALL, a couple of hours later, the Elector Counts of Averland and Stirland met, neither of them realising exactly what they were about to set in train. It was late afternoon, and the sunlight streamed in through the high, narrow windows. The light warmed almost every flagstone of the hall, but when the counts met to embrace they found that they were standing in a patch of darkness.

Stirland ignored the feeling that this was an omen. Instead, he gestured his guest towards a table, and the platter that awaited them.

‘Take a seat, Lord Averland,’ he said, ‘and have a glass of wine with me.’

‘Thank you,’ Averland said, ‘although I’d prefer a glass of boiled water.’

He still sounded as if he had the flu, Stirland noticed. The hunt master’s fist had crushed his nose nicely. Congratulating himself on saving the old villain by executing a poacher instead, Stirland poured a goblet of boiled water for his guest, and, after a moment’s hesitation, poured water for himself, too.

The things we do for diplomacy he thought, as he drank the damned stuff.

‘So,’ he said, sitting down at the table, and looking across at Averland, ‘it’s been a real pleasure having you as my guest. Your tastes are obviously more sophisticated than mine.’ Sigmar forgive me for the lies, he thought. ‘I must say, I’m glad you were such a good sport about the hunting.’

‘Yes,’ Averland said, his tone miserable, and his eyes as downcast as always. ‘By the way, my aides tell me that the lunatic who attacked me was executed this afternoon.’

‘That’s right,’ Stirland said. ‘I did send you an invitation, but your man told me you were otherwise engaged.’

Averland shivered. ‘I’ve never liked the sight of blood,’ he said, and took a sip of water.

‘Anyway,’ Stirland said, and, clearing his throat, he started reciting the lines his chancellor had given him. ‘Although I’m a little embarrassed by the rustic nature of my court, I am glad to have learnt so much from you.’

‘Really?’ Averland asked, scepticism evident on his face.

‘Oh yes,’ Stirland lied, ‘especially about the Strigany. I never realised quite what a plague they were.’

Averland looked as if he’d been slapped. His eyes, usually hooded and downcast, flashed as they fixed on Stirland, and his pallid complexion exploded in blossoms of red and white. Meanwhile, his mouth, usually a miserable frown, twisted into a feral snarl.

Sigmar, thought Stirland, what did I say?

Then Averland spoke, and Stirland realised that the sudden blast furnace of hatred that had opened up in his guest’s face had nothing to do with him, and everything to do with the Strigany.

‘Yes!’ Averland hissed, and Stirland drew back from the man. He suddenly seemed a lot bigger. ‘Yes! They are a plague. They spread disease, like rats, and they consort with the Dark Powers, bargaining with them for our destruction. They say they don’t, but they do. You can tell just by looking at them.’

Averland, unable to contain himself, sprang from his chair, and paced towards one of the windows. He seemed a different man, a more powerful man. In fact, Stirland realised, he was a more powerful man. His permanent stoop had gone as he stood tall, his stomach in and his chest out. He wasn’t wringing his hands, either. He was punching the fist of one into the palm of the other.

‘Ever since I was a boy, I’ve been able to smell the filth that clings to the Strigany, the disease. They come to our lands, polluting our air and corrupting the morals of our womenfolk and parents.’

‘Yes, well, as you say,’ Stirland said, agog at the transformation in his fellow nobleman. Averland’s hatred had filled him with such a

terrible energy that he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. No wonder he didn't have any passion left for anything more wholesome.

Averland, his eyes ablaze with the captured light of the setting sun, turned back to his host, his small, neat teeth bared in a hungry smile. Stirland shifted uncomfortably, and his fingertips brushed against the hilt of his dagger, as Averland came striding towards him.

Then he relaxed as Averland slapped him on the shoulder, the gesture obviously an awkward imitation of one of Stirland's own.

'I am glad that you have seen the truth of this, my friend,' Averland said. 'We may have different interests, but I can see you have a rare intelligence. Not many people understand the threat the Strigany pose, the horrible, horrible threat, but we do, and as noblemen of this great Empire it is our duty to do what needs to be done.'

By Sigmar's fist, thought Stirland, amazed. Spirit, camaraderie, and maybe even the ability to tell a story, I might get to like this lunatic yet.

'And what needs to be done, as you know, are the Strigany,' Averland said.

'Ah, yes,' Stirland said, seizing the moment. 'Yes, exactly. In fact, my chancellor...'

Averland, however, was no longer listening. Instead, he was gazing rapturously back through the windows towards the sun, staring right into the burning heart of it.

'There is only one solution,' he said, smiling, 'and together, we can do it.'

'Exactly,' Stirland said, as emphatically as he could. He even slapped his palm onto the table in an effort to get Averland's attention. 'Exactly what I think, too. We will exile these terrible folk from our fair lands. I even have a place in mind, an old demesne I inherited, called Flintmar.'

'Exile?' Averland turned back to him, confusion clouding his flushed features. 'Oh, I thought you meant... Well, never mind. Get

them all in one place, and then we'll see. Yes, round them up, and then we'll see.'

The fire of his passion left him. His shoulders slumped back down, and his eyes dropped to the floor. He returned to his chair, absent-mindedly wiping his hands on his tunic, and stared into his flagon of water.

'So, that's decided then,' Stirland said. 'Now, how about we celebrate?'

'Celebrate,' Averland said vaguely, his thoughts a carnival of murderous possibilities. 'Maybe later.'

Stirland grunted, and, deciding that he'd had enough of diplomacy for one day, emptied his goblet of water onto the floor, refilled it with wine and started to drink.

THE CROWS HAD BEEN busy. Their beaks were dark with gore, and when they flapped away from the rotten excess of their feast, their movements were heavy and slow.

Chera, of the caravan of Malfi, didn't blame the birds for their gluttony. On the contrary, she welcomed the sight of it. Ever since she had been old enough to toddle along behind her father's wagon she had regarded them as birds of good omen. Wherever she had seen crows gathered and fattened, there had been rich pickings for her family and their caravan.

Today was no exception. The dead streets of the hamlet they had discovered were alive with the birds, with rats, too, and dogs, and a flabby pig, whose owner's death had provided him with both freedom and food.

Most of the scavengers fled as the Strigany, all two dozen of them, dismounted from their wagons and entered the hamlet's main street. Only the pig remained, its tusks pink as it lifted its head from the rancid body upon which it had been feasting.

Chera watched her father unslung his blunderbuss. He had found it in a town a few weeks ago, and ever since, despite the cost of black powder, he had been like a child with a new toy. As she watched, he eagerly drew back the hammer, poured a measure of



fine black powder into the firing pan, and carefully lit the fuse with his pipe. Then he took aim at the pig.

The animal looked back at him. In this part of the Empire, not even the peasants knew much about black powder, and their animals knew nothing. There was little in the pig's eyes but curiosity, and the spiral of its tail twitched in welcome.

'Don't shoot him, domnu,' Chera said, putting her hand on her father's arm. 'Look how friendly he is.'

'Friendly!' her father scoffed, pulling back the hammer. 'Try telling that to the man he's been eating.'

'Can't tell him anything,' Chera shrugged, 'he's dead.'

'You're too soft-hearted,' Malfi told her, and aimed at the point between the pig's eyes. Then a voice spoke in his ear, and he jumped.

'We happily feast upon those who devour us,' it said, and the domnu looked down to find the wizened figure of Petru Maria, who was standing beside him. She hadn't been standing there a second before, of that he was sure.

'What's that you said?' he asked, trying to hide his surprise.

'It's what's written above the lintel of every wagon on our caravan,' she told him. 'We happily feast upon those who would devour us.'

'Has that always been our motto, Maria?' Chera asked, and the crone nodded.

'Yes, my sweetness, and we have always honoured it.'

'For Freia's sake,' the domnu said, realising that, as usual, he had been outmanoeuvred by his daughter and Petru Maria. He lifted the blunderbuss, took aim at the corpse the pig had been feeding on, and fired.

There was a roar, a gout of red flame, and a cloud of dense black smoke. The domnu had been pushed back by the blast, and his pipe had been sent spinning out of his mouth. Chera picked it up for him, as the smoke cleared and he examined his handiwork. The corpse had been hit dead centre, its ribs and flesh splattered in a wide arc across the street. The pig was a dot racing into the distance.

‘Oh, good shot daddy, I mean, domnu,’ she said, handing Malfi back his pipe.

‘Yes, well,’ he said, patting the stock of his gun with the absent-minded fondness of a man for a favourite child. ‘We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get on with it. It’s a fine day, so let’s start with putting everything on the street, bodies and loot both.’

Chera gave his arm a quick squeeze of affection, and then joined the rest of the Strigany as they went to work. Like all of them, she wore an oiled apron, and thick leather gloves, the tops of which flared out almost to her elbows. A few of the other Strigany wore bandanas around their mouths, but not many, and not Chera. The smell of rotting corpses was something that she had long been accustomed to, and even the plague held no terrors for her. In Malfi’s caravan, you either died of the plague young or not at all. Beneath the ragged thatch of her hair, Chera’s pinched features bore testament to her victory over the plague. They were still marked with a cicatrice of pale scars, the white marks and pock marks the ghosts of the disease she had overcome.

The people she found within the darkness of the first house had not been so lucky. Even though the stinking confines of the house were lit only by the meagre strip of daylight that came through the door, Chera could see that there were at least three generations of a family, rotting together, as closely as they had once lived.

The adults lay on the floor, their bodies twisted like driftwood amongst the meagre furniture. Chera assumed that they had been the last to go, because the beds were sodden with the decaying remains of their children.

She examined them, and saw that their bodies bore testament to the sickness that had been their ruin. Their throats were swollen into thick, choking collars, their eyes were red marbles of burst blood vessels, and their bodies were cratered with suppurating sores.

It was the plague, all right.

Chera reflexively quashed the feeling of sympathy she had. These were bodies, that was all. They weren’t people: not the little boy who clung to his grandmother’s bloated neck, not the husband

who lay cradling his wife, and not the girl who had died strangely alone, huddled in a corner.

No, they weren't people. They were bodies that had to be destroyed so that people could live.

Chera carried on telling herself that as she wielded the long pole of her billhook, snagging the steel hook into the first body and dragging it out onto the street. Then, she went in to fetch the next, and the next, and, as she carried on with this grisly work, it became easier and easier for her to forget about the nausea that twisted within her chest.

Some others were losing that struggle with their instincts. Chera heard the sounds of their vomiting or of sobbing weaving through the bump and the slither of their grisly work.

That was all right, she thought, that was good. They were Strigany, which meant that they were tough enough to work through their suffering. Anyway, as Petru Maria said, it was only when you lost that feeling of horror altogether that you had to worry. Although she never said what exactly you had to worry about, Chera believed her.

She dragged the last body out of the house she had chosen, took a deep breath of relatively fresh air, and went back indoors to complete the more agreeable part of her task.

After so many years, she had an instinctive knack for where to look. Her fingers rustled through the stinking bedding as eagerly as if it had been sweet corn, and when her fingers closed around the purse of copper coins she smiled. She counted them, and then dropped them into the pouch in her apron.

Next, she turned to the tools that hung from one wall. The man had been a cobbler, by the look of it, and Chera wasted no time in bundling the tools of his trade into a blanket. After that, she looked through the cooking area. There was nothing worth having, but for the copper pot that rested on a huge clay brick stove. She dropped the cobbler's tools into it, and prepared to drag it out into the street.

That was when she heard the noise from within the stove.

It was a wordless sound of pure animal panic. A bird that had flown down the cold chimney and become trapped, perhaps, or a cat locked away by its owners during their delirium.

Then the sound came again, and Chera, deciding that the thick leather of her gloves would be proof against either beaks or claws, went to open the stove door. There was a flurry of movement from inside, and the small creature shrieked as it was exposed. The thing extended two hands to ward her off, and Chera realised that it was not a thing at all. It was a child.

As always, when she met somebody who was not from her caravan, Chera instinctively raised her hands to cover her pockmarked face. Then, seeing how terrified the child was, she dropped her hands and smiled.

‘Hello,’ she said, and dropped to her knees. ‘What are you doing in there?’

The child made no reply. In the gloom of the stove, and beneath the soot that covered it, there was no way of telling if it was a boy or a girl. The flat shine of its terrified eyes could have belonged to either sex, and the tangled nest of its hair gave no clue.

‘I’m Chera. My people have come here to help you. What’s your name?’

The only reply was a lowering of the hands, and a drawing up of the skinny legs. The child peered over the scraped knees, as if hiding behind them.

‘Are you hungry?’ Chera asked. ‘We can go and eat some porridge if you want, with honey in it. It’s my favourite. What’s yours?’

For the first time, the youngster dragged its gaze away from Chera for long enough to scan the room beyond. She was thankful that she’d cleared the room of the child’s family before finding it.

No, not the family, she automatically corrected herself, the remains of the family.

‘I think that you should come with me,’ she said, edging a little closer to the stove. ‘I’ll look after you.’

‘Where’s Franz?’

The voice was no more than a whisper, but it was enough to tighten Chera's throat with sympathy.

'There is nobody here anymore,' she said. 'Who was Franzi?'

'My brother,' the girl whispered from within the darkness of her hiding place. 'He's only little. We shouldn't leave him on his own.'

Chera thought about the little body that she had found curled up in the chill embrace of its grandmother's dead arms. She blinked.

'They've all gone to Morr's garden,' she said. 'Franzi will be all right there. Now, come along. Come and eat something. We'll look after you now.'

She reached forward, and for a moment the girl drew back. Then, coming to a sudden decision, she leapt forward, wriggling out of the stove to throw herself against Chera's stained leather apron, and wrap her arms around her neck.

'Good girl,' Chera said and, drawing a blanket over the child's head, took her quickly away from the rotting remains of her old life, and to the beginnings of her new one.

BY EARLY AFTERNOON, Domnu Malfi's caravan had picked the plague-blighted hamlet clean.

The festering remains of the inhabitants lay stacked in the street, like so much cordwood, and their valuables had been collected, cleaned, divided up and stowed in the wagons. They included the girl that Chera had found. Petru Maria had taken the child, bustling her into her wagon, as eager as a mother hen with a lost chick. She would care for the orphan until a family could be found who would take her.

As the Strigany finished dusting the heaped bodies with the corpse powder that would make them burn, the petru returned. She stood on a barrel so that she could see down the festering lines of the dead, and, although she held a black-bound book of Morr in one hand, she didn't bother opening it. The blessing that she recited over the dead was the old one, the usual one, the one that she had recited a hundred times before.

Although the words were old, the crone's impassioned recitation was as fresh as blood on snow.

‘We are all made by the gods,’ she began, when everybody had gathered around, ‘strong or weak, fair or foul, man or woman. Whatever we do in this life it is no more than the will of our creators, for we owe them everything.’

Even before she had finished the sentence, her whiskered lips drew back over her remaining fangs, in a snarl of derision.

‘At least, that is what they would have us believe,’ she scoffed, with such feeling that the words might have been her own, and not those written in the book that nobody else had ever read, ‘but even the gods have their time, and not even they can escape the Garden of Morr. Nor should they.’

Her clawed and blue-veined fingers scratched towards the sky as she continued, as though she was lecturing the gods.

‘To each of us is allotted a time, and the will to make of it what we will. When that time is finished, and when that will is gone, then our work is finished. By then, we have made ourselves the house that we shall dwell in within the Eternal Gardens beyond.’

The crone paused to draw breath, her bony chest heaving with passion. Her people waited, heads bowed, and when she spoke again, her voice soared and rolled, and thundered in a way that should have been impossible for one with such a skinny frame.

‘As we prepare to tidy away after the lives that these people have led, we can be sure that Morr is already guiding them to those dwelling places. Some will be wonderful, others won’t, but whatever these people find in that world will make the suffering of this one seem as fleeting as a nightmare, and the joys no more than a cool breeze on a hot day.’

The petru raised her hands in final benediction, and, as the Reikspiel she had spoken gave way to the incomprehensible hacking of the old tongue, she gesticulated over the ranked bodies as wildly as only a Strigany woman knows how.

It was only as she finished this final catechism that the Strigany realised that they were no longer alone.

The horsemen had come along the road that led out of hamlet and into the forest beyond. One look at them was enough to tell

Domnu Malfi that, whatever they were, these horsemen were no merchants, far from it.

They had the lean and hungry look of professional soldiers: mercenaries, by the look of their ragged mismatch of uniforms, or maybe even bandits, Malfi thought, uneasily. Each of the men carried a lance, and each was harnessed with a unique collection of armour. The steel plates had the battered, ill-fitting look of loot.

Their leader, a grey and grim-faced man with an incongruously colourful feather stuck into his hat, saw Malfi, just as Malfi saw him. He reined in his horse and raised his hand to stop the column that followed him.

He and the domnu regarded each other for a moment. Then the mercenary looked down at the street full of corpses. His eyes rested on one of the smaller bodies, and, if anything, his face grew even stonier.

Malfi took a step forward.

‘Good day, menheer,’ he called out to the mercenary, his voice relentlessly cheerful.

The man looked at him, studying him as if he was something that had been left dead by the side of the road. For a moment, Malfi didn’t think that the warrior would reply, but, before he could think of anything else to say, the man did reply with a single, damning word.

‘Murderers,’ the mercenary pronounced.

Malfi felt his stomach drop, and he exchanged an anxious glance with the men beside him.

‘No. No, that’s not what happened,’ he called out, his hands spread in a placating gesture. ‘We are plague eaters. Look, you can see that we have been cleaning this town of the plague’s victims.’

‘They even murdered the babes,’ another of the riders said, ignoring him. ‘Strigany filth! Thank Sigmar we are finally to be rid of them.’

‘We shouldn’t stand for this, captain,’ another man added, his voice tight with hatred. ‘There’s no mistaking death by poison. I bet the Strigany poisoned their well and then robbed the bodies. We should do more than just move them on.’

The captain said nothing. Malfi looked past him, and tried to decide how many were in the column behind. More than a dozen, definitely, but how many?

Resisting the urge to level his blunderbuss at the men, he squared his shoulders, and decided to become outraged.

‘I have explained to you,’ Malfi said, taking a step forwards, ‘that we are plague eaters. We provide a service for the Empire that none other will. And who might you be, who are so at home amongst the vapours of the plague?’

It was too late for words, however. Even as Malfi was speaking, the captain lifted his hat to reveal the steel skull cap beneath. His men reacted to the gesture immediately, their lances lowering as the feather in their leader’s hat described a blur of colour through the air.

Malfi cursed. For a moment, he wondered if these thugs genuinely disbelieved him, or if they were just seeking an excuse to plunder his caravan. Then he put such distractions from his mind.

‘They’re going to charge,’ somebody said behind him, and, as if those words had been the signal, the captain drew his hat down, and his men started to trot forwards.

‘Ushoran preserve us,’ somebody said, and Malfi could hear the fear in the man’s voice. He turned to find that some of his people had already started to retreat, scuttling down the street to the imagined safety of their wagons.

Every instinct in Malfi’s body urged him to follow them, but he knew better. There was no running from cavalry. They either stood their ground or they died.

‘Jerva, Mallik, Blythe, hold your ground!’ he bellowed. ‘You know better than that.’

A command was shouted from the other end of the street, and the riders closed in, forming dressed ranks.

Malfi unslung the blunderbuss from his shoulder, and turned around to face his people. He was chilled with the sudden realisation of how old the grandparents were and how young the children.

Still, they were Strigany. They would fight.



‘Right, here’s how it is,’ he barked, his eyes glinting with the controlled terror of battle. ‘We either run and let them kill us all, and they will kill us when they catch us on the open road, or we take them here.’

‘So, we hold our ground?’ It was Chera who asked, and Malfi was simultaneously proud and dismayed to see how fearless his daughter looked.

‘No,’ Malfi said, and turned back up the cluttered street, ‘we hold that ground.’

The domnu pointed to the rows of neatly stacked corpses, the abandoned hay carts, the stacked barrels, and all the other obstructions that littered the street.

‘We’ll take ’em at close quarters,’ he said, grinning, ‘and they won’t know what hit them. Remember, go for the horses first.’

The horsemen quickened their pace, and, a moment later, the sound of their hooves was echoing off the walls of the hamlet. There were more than twenty of them, Malfi realised as they trotted forward. More than twenty armed, trained and mounted professional killers; no wonder they looked so confident.

They remained confident even when their formation disintegrated amongst the clutter of the street. This lapse certainly didn’t bother their captain. Incredibly, he was smiling as his horse jinked its way towards the Strigany. It wasn’t until he realised that the Strigany weren’t fleeing from this clumsy charge that his smile faltered.

Then, he saw what Malfi held cradled in his arms, and the smile left his face altogether, slipping away like a rat from a sinking ship.

Suddenly realising what a mistake it had been to fall into this battleground, the mercenary dug his heels in and began to raise his hand. Before he could complete the gesture, Malfi levelled his gun and fired.

The gout of flame threw shadows skittering across the walls, even as the spray of steel chopped into the mercenary and his horse. The range was close enough for the impact to hurl both animal and man tumbling backwards, and they crashed into the rest of their squadron.

Malfi, his head ringing, half hoped that such a well-placed shot might have knocked the heart out of his enemies, but it was not to be. If anything, it merely seemed to encourage them and, howling with rage, they urged their reluctant horses forward.

‘Charge!’ one of them cried, digging his heels into his mount as it leapt over a cart. Behind him, his comrades urged their nervous horses into an awkward gallop, even as one of them tripped and fell with a scream and the snap of breaking fetlocks.

Malfi roared his defiance and drew his sword. Then he charged forwards, leading his people to battle amongst the piled corpses of this blighted town.

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*Ancient Blood* can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.  
Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$9.99 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 537 7

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