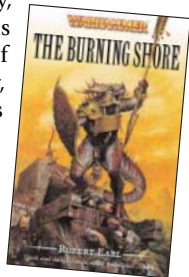


THE BURNING SHORE

A Warhammer novel by Robert Earl

FORCED TO ESCAPE a life of debt and debauchery, Bretonnian nobleman Florin d'Artaud tricks his way onto a flotilla headed to the fabled lands of Lustria. Posing as a veteran military commander, Florin's immediate concerns are to get his troops under control and survive the long, dangerous sea voyage. Once they arrive in Lustria's steamy jungles, the mercenaries find far more than they bargained for and a simple treasure hunt turns into a sinister expedition for forgotten lore. But the ancient guardians of the jungle will not let their secrets be plundered so freely.



ROBERT EARL GRADUATED from Keele University in 1994, after which he started a career in sales. Three years later though, he'd had more than enough of that and since then he has been working, living and traveling in the Balkans and the Middle East. Robert is currently back in the UK with his Romanian wife (who is still giving him hell for using her brothers' names in the Inferno! story 'The Vampire Hunters').

The Burning Shore 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)

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PUBLISHED BY THE BLACK LIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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ISBN: 1 84416 129 3



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from THE BURNING SHORE

'ARE YOU SURE I can't persuade you?' van Delft asked, although he was already sure that he knew what the answer would be.

'Dead sure,' Captain-Owner Gorth said, and spat towards the distant mouth of the river. It was massive, a great hungry maw that opened up out of the green mass of the jungle to vomit its muddy waters far, far out to sea. Even with his ships anchored here, half a mile off that treacherous coast, Gorth couldn't see anything through the silt-laden water.

'I'm damned if I'll risk my girls in that puddle.'

Van Delft had a sudden, fleeting image of his own two girls. Women, really, but no less sweet to him for that. They'd be sitting in the morning room of their house in Marienburg now, sewing or gossiping while they waited for him to bring back their dowries.

Quite why he should have to risk life and limb so that he could bribe worthless young men to marry them he didn't quite know. But then, he'd never tried to understand the elegant world which they seemed to so much enjoy.

'All right,' he sighed, his attention snapping back to the task in hand. 'We agreed that you'd wait for us at sea. No reason why you should change your mind now.'

Gorth nodded, satisfied, and thrust his thumbs into the rope belt that disappeared beneath the bulge of his stomach.

He'd become rich from knowing when to take chances, and when not to. And risking the hulls of his ships in unknown shallows was definitely an example of when not to.

Still, there was no point being mean-spirited. Apart from anything else he quite liked van Delft. Even though he did stink of aristo, there was no pretension about him, and he had an honest ruthlessness that reminded Gorth of himself.

'Tell you what, though, colonel...'

'Commander.'

'Aye, commander, I'll lend you some of my lads to see your boats to the shore. Wouldn't want to lose any more of you whilst your still in my care, so to speak.'

'Very decent of you,' van Delft thanked him. 'Perhaps you could ask them to help us get them into the water the right way up?'

Gorth sniggered happily. Like every other sailor in the flotilla he'd been enjoying watching the mercenaries struggle and curse with their long boats. One of them had already slipped its ropes and upended itself in the water. It bobbed up and down as it rode the gentle swell out to sea like a great wooden tortoise.

'Manolis!' Gorth bellowed, making his bosun jump. 'Don't just sit there. Get those damned boats into the water the right way up.'

'Aye, captain,' Manolis saluted and began to chivvy his men into action. Some of them took charge of lowering the long boats into the sea, whilst others stripped off and dived into the water. A pair of them swam off to round up the escapee, their long, powerful strokes chopping into the sea like axe strokes. Others, laughing with pleasure at the coolness of the water after the scorching heat of the sun, were treading water and waiting to climb into the descending long boats.

Further down the deck Florin let the sailors take over the task with relief. Lorenzo stood sweating beside him, his palms stinging from a rope that had slipped through his hands.

'Well, boss,' he said, rubbing his palms together and looking past the heaving backs of the sailors and into the greenery beyond. 'Looks like things are going to get interesting.'

'Looks that way,' Florin said doubtfully. Now that they were close enough to see the jungle in detail he was beginning to realise how wrong his ideas about it had been.

Even during their stay at Swamptown he'd continued to think of it as more or less a forest. He knew that there would be bigger trees though, and that the heat would be stifling. He also knew that there would be strange plants and animals lurking in this new world, perhaps reptilian brothers of the bears and wolves that inhabited the forests of Bretonnia

In short he had expected the jungle to be recognisable. It wasn't.

There was nothing at all recognisable about the impenetrable green mass that now lay waiting for them upon that alien shore. No mere collection of trees and wildlife this, no shaded domain of bear and boar. Instead its huge form towered above the waves like the bulk of a single monstrous animal. The hollows between its limbs were choked with vines and darkness, the air above it misted with its hot breath.

And, although it seemed poised with the breathless anticipation of a predator in ambush, it was far from silent, this great beast. The whisper of humid winds in the undergrowth, the cries of hunters and the screams of the hunted, the low, constant throb of countless insects; these and a thousand other sounds combined to whisper an entreaty, or perhaps a terrible threat, to the men who would soon be offering themselves to its hungry heart.

'Monsieur d'Artaud,' a voice called behind him, and Florin turned to see Kereveld struggling through the ranks of the dwarfs who were waiting on the other end of the deck. The sorcerer towered above their steel-helmed heads, the great blunt cone of his hat making him seen even more of a giant as he rudely elbowed his way forward. He remained oblivious to their angry stares, as he bumbled along with no more than an occasional, 'Excuse me'.

Following in his wake came his servant, sweating and wheezing beneath a great haversack and a dangling collection of water bottles and map cases.

'Good day to you Menheer Kereveld,' Florin greeted him. 'Let me introduce you to my manservant Lorenzo.'

'A pleasure,' the sorcerer waved away his hand and turned back to Florin. 'The Colonel tells me that I'm to travel with you down the river. You're quite the warrior, by all accounts.'

'Just as you say,' Florin decided, his chest swelling at the flattery. 'In fact it will be an honour.'

A miserable sigh wracked Lorenzo upon hearing that dirty word.

'I do have a few more bits and pieces to take with us, though. I wonder if your man would be so good as to help Theobold here?'

Florin looked at Lorenzo, who nodded and followed the exhausted Theobold back through the milling throng of the crowd.

'Come on then,' an impatient voice called from over the side. 'Let's be having you. Who's first?'

'That will be us,' Kereveld decided, despite Thorgrimm's raised hand, and led the way to the waiting sailor. With barely a pause he hiked up the hem of his robe and clambered awkwardly over the gunwale, the pale sticks of his calves flashing in the sunlight.

'First squad,' Florin called out to his men as he followed this spindly charge. 'Follow me.'

He checked his pack, and vaulted over ship's side, climbing down the cargo net that drooped into the dangerously rocking long boat. Below him the coxswain waited, holding the boat close to the high wooden wall of the ship's side.

'Make your way along to the prow, sir,' he said, pointing to the narrow ledge upon which Kereveld was already shifting uncomfortably. 'Right then, who's next? Come on, come on.'

Florin was content to leave the loading of the boat to the coxswain. Barefoot and clothed in nothing but a red bandanna and a pair of filthy breeches, the sailor was the only man who seemed happy on the dangerously pitching deck. He chivvied the mercenaries into their places, encouraging them with a constant stream of profanities and orders as they stowed their kit and unlimbered the oars.

Lorenzo and Theobold were the last on board, following the great mass of Kereveld's equipment. The men swore nervously as the two servants clambered over them. The boat

was now so low in the water that each sudden movement threatened to tip it over.

'What have you got in all those cases?' Florin asked Kereveld as Lorenzo squeezed in by his side.

'Oh, bits and bobs. You know, tools of the trade.'

'Right then,' the coxswain interrupted them. 'When I say "one" lift your oars and swing the blades back. When I say "two" cut 'em into the water. And when I say "three", pull. Got that?'

A chorus of jibes and curses greeted his instruction, but the sailor just smiled. 'Good. Right then, one!'

'Two!'

The oars splashed into the water in a ragged volley.

'Three!'

And the boat lurched forward.

'Not bad for choir boys,' the coxswain joked. 'Now let's try again shall we? One!'

Slowly, but with increasing speed, the boat began to make its way towards the mouth of the river. By now other boats had left the flotilla, some of them full of men, others low with luggage. The heads and shoulders of the expedition's six mules peered calmly over the gunwale of one, whilst another was slewing this way and that beneath the weight of the dwarfs and their cannon.

Florin's own men were boisterous with nerves, good tinder for the arguments which flared up as one man splashed his fellows with a missed oar stroke, or when another slipped and rocked the boat.

Then the sluggish breeze changed and they caught the first ripe whiff of the jungle. It was enough to silence them. Like cattle that have smelled a wolf they quietened, their eyes wide and alert as they searched the looming coastline.

Before long they had drawn level with the first of the overhanging boughs, its fingers reaching out for them from the banks of the river. Long ropy tendrils trailed down from them into the muddy water, as still as hangmen's nooses in the sultry, unmoving air.

A mosquito landed on Florin's knuckle and began to drink.

'I wish we hadn't come,' Lorenzo murmured. Florin just grunted as he flicked the mosquito away. Three more took its place.

They drew to a halt, the coxswain slowing the beat of their oars so that they held their position against the current. Gradually the rest of the long boats, all of which had now been launched from the distant trio of the ships, caught up with them.

Florin saw the familiar gleam of Orbrant's shaved head in the last boat, and the white flash of van Delft's moustaches in the one preceding it. The commander was lying back against the stern of his boat, lounging as low and as comfortably as if he were a passenger in a Marienburg gondola.

'Right,' the coxswain said firmly as the twelve boats drew into a neat line, bobbing up and down on the muddy river like so many ugly ducklings 'Let's get on with it. One!'

'Two!'

'Three!'

'I wonder how we'll know where these ruins are?' Florin pondered as the boat went forward. 'Will they be right on the river, do you think?'

'Ruins!' Lorenzo spat as though the word were a profanity. 'Who cares if we find them or not? How many ruins do you know that have treasure in them?'

'They were abandoned,' Florin told him, doubtfully. 'The inhabitants wouldn't have had time to take their treasure.'

'Everybody has time to take treasure.'

Although the thought had occurred to Florin, he didn't think it wise to admit as much in front of the lads.

'It's a bit late to be worrying about that now,' he said, conscious of the effect his friend's complaints might have on the men. It didn't help that there was a lot of truth in what he said. After all, what kind of men would just run off and leave their treasure behind?

One of the mercenaries, a short, barrel-chested northerner called Bertrand, seemed to share his concerns.

'Perhaps there'll be no gold,' he told Lorenzo with a shrug. 'But if you can't take a joke you shouldn't have joined up.'

To Florin's relief a murmur of agreement rippled through the men.

'A joke I can take,' Lorenzo lied. 'But I wonder how funny it will seem when we return with empty pockets. There's not a man on this world who'd abandon his treasure. His children, perhaps. His wife, certainly. But his purse? Never!'

Kereveld, who had been rummaging carefully through a wide leather satchel, pulled out a small, mildewed book and waved it at Lorenzo, as if to admonish him.

'You're right about that,' he told him, carefully opening the book. 'But you don't have to worry. The things that built this city weren't men. They were the ancients. Great and terrible beings of unimaginable power. To them gold was just the same as stone, or lead. And when their doom came upon them, they no longer had use for either.'

The boat fell silent as the men thought about that.

Amidst the narrowing banks of the river and the cacophony of screeches and calls that followed their progress, the sorcerer's words hadn't been as comforting as he'd wished.

Sensing this Kereveld looked up.

'So, there will be gold for you. Take my word on it.'

Lorenzo, who never trusted anybody's word on anything, opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut as Florin kicked him.

'What's that book you've got there?'

'An old logbook. The sole survivor of another expedition sold it to a merchant in Swamptown, who sold it to a captain, who was wise enough to sell it to the college,' Kereveld told him. 'It was a real find. There's even a map in it for us to follow. We're not the first humans to make this trip, you see. That's how I know there'll be loot for your men.'

'What happened to the first expedition?'

'The book doesn't really say. I suppose they were all killed off, one way or another.'

Once more silence descended upon the boat, broken only by the riffling of parchment pages and the thoughtful splash of the oars.

'Well,' Lorenzo decided at length, 'that's a great comfort.'

The men's nervous laughter drifted through the mist that covered the water. It floated up to the distant canopy, and disappeared into the choking undergrowth of the shore. And there, amongst the darkness of matted vines and rotting trees, it reached the ears of the creatures that had been following the boats since the river mouth.

They froze at the sound of laughter, these things, their faces void of any emotion as they listened to the alien sound of the invaders. Only after the last of the boats had passed did they twitch back into life, chameleonic skins rippling as they scurried away to carry their strange tidings to their masters.

*What dangers lie ahead for Florin and his
men in the dark, mysterious interior of the
Lustrian jungles? Find out in:
THE BURNING SHORE*

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