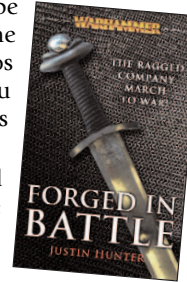


FORGED IN BATTLE

A Warhammer novel by Justin Hunter

SIGMUND AND HIS Ragged Company may not be the most refined soldiers in the armies of the Empire, but when the massed forces of Chaos are bearing down on you in all their horror, you don't worry too much about shiny uniforms and marching in time.

Local farmsteads are falling prey to the feral beastmen. Something is going on and as the beastmen finally amass to take Sigmund's home town Helmstrumburg by force, the Ragged Company must get to the bottom of these sinister events and unravel the secrets of an ancient prophecy whilst fighting for their lives!



Justin Hunter grew up in North Yorkshire in the UK, and has lived and travelled widely across Asia, North America, Europe and East Africa. He currently divides his time between living in the UK, Ireland and New York, where he plays with the Warmonger Club. *Forged in Battle* is Justin's first Warhammer novel

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from FORGED IN BATTLE

THE HALBERDIERS SET off following the path of the beastmen, but after an hour's march Sigmund called a brief halt by a stream. While the men filled their flasks and drank long gulping mouthfuls of water, Sigmund went forward with Edmunt. The giant woodsman was crouched on the ground staring at the forest floor as if it were a book he was unable to read. 'I am no tracker,' he said at last.

Sigmund nodded. None of them were: from their clothes they were soldiers, but in their hearts they were still tailors' assistants, woodsmen, farriers, farmers' boys. And miller's sons, Sigmund told himself.

'If you had to guess, which way do you think?'

Edmunt looked to the left and right: briars and ferns clogged the space between the tree trunks and the ground was thick with moss and well-rotten leaves. Dusk was closing in around them. On all sides the forest appeared impenetrable. Edmunt shook his head. He couldn't tell. It seemed impossible that the beastmen had come this way and not left any sign.

'I don't know,' Edmunt said after a long pause, 'but if I had to guess I would say that they went that way, to the left. There are a couple of farmsteads over the ridge, about half way to Gruff Spennsweich's land.'

He pointed to where the stream splashed down a staircase of slippery black stones. A fern waved as if caught in a breeze and Sigmund's skin prickled. Since they had left the hut he felt as if they were being watched. He cursed himself. It was impossible hunting beastmen like this: they could disappear as easily as wild animals; to the untrained eye they left less trace than a passing ghost. And night was already setting in.

'We'd better get to the nearest farmstead and raise the alarm,' Sigmund said. Edmunt nodded.

'Does Farmer Spennsweich rent out his daughters?' Petr asked and Edmunt laughed out loud.

'Touch one of his daughters and he will use your guts for sausages!'

Behind them the men were filling their water skins. Sigmund felt his skin prickle again. 'Keep your arms to hand!' he hissed, the tension showing in his voice as they started forward again.

SIGMUND LED THE way down along the stream bank. The stones were rough but slippery; they turned under foot and made the going difficult.

Osric shouldered his pack. This was stupid. The only way they knew which way the beastmen had gone was the trail of burnt cottages and farmsteads, the dead bodies of women, children and men. He waited for Elias to go before him. No point having the new guy take up the rear, but taking the last spot made Osric too aware of how exposed they were, strung out like pack-horses in the thick forest at dusk.

'We'll be the ones caught next,' Osric muttered.

As they filed through the forest, Osric kept muttering. Elias didn't know if he should respond or not. 'These are not deer we're hunting,' Osric said, and Baltzer overheard and turned to join in the fun.

'These animals hunt you back,' he whispered. 'We could be walking into a trap. In the forest, at night...'

Elias started to look around him.

Gaston stopped on a stone in the middle of the stream. 'Leave off him.'

Osric gave him a half-smile, half-sneer. Gaston let him go in front, took the position of end man himself, but not even the presence of Gaston could soothe the new boy.

As the first stars began to glimmer through the leaves above, Elias could sense the forest watching and waiting, a hundred eyes behind each tree.

AS MORRSLIEB ROSE behind the stark crags of Frantzplinth, the Ragged Company broke through the trees onto a walled field.

They had come down to more civilised parts. Sigmund paused and conferred with Edmunt. He had grown up near this place, in a cabin deep in the woods.

'If we go that way,' Edmunt said to Sigmund and pointed down towards a patch of tall cedars. 'We will cut out a couple of miles.'

Sigmund nodded and the men scrambled down the hillside, over a dry stone wall, and through the cedar copse. He did not tell anyone what he had seen inside the house. He tried to scrub the memory from his mind: but the unbidden sight kept appearing of the fresh hides of Osman Speinz and his three daughters, hair and face and legs, nailed across the inside of the wall.

WHEN THE DOGS started barking, Gruff Spennsweich went out to quiet them down. The animals were tugging at their chains, teeth bared. He could see shadows moving in the trees. The horses started to toss and neigh in the stables and the farmer's skin prickled.

'Who's there?' he demanded. The shadows moved and he shouted again, louder this time in an attempt to bolster his nerves: but he felt more frightened than ever. A horn blew and Gruff ran back to the house. A strange scent hung in the evening air, vile and musky.

'Dietrik! Olan!' he called the farmhands from the barn then hurried back inside, took the old crossbow from above the fireplace and began to wind it.

Valina, his eldest, stared at him as if he had gone mad.

'Father, what are you doing?'

He had kept the mechanism oiled, but it was still stiff from lack of use, and he began to sweat as it jammed.

'Sigmar's balls!' he hissed and Gertrude, his youngest, and Shona and Werna, the blonde twins, blushed.

Olan and Dietrik stood at the door, uncertain whether to come into the house or not.

'Here! Dietrik,' Gruff said and the farm boy stepped inside and took the crossbow hesitantly. 'Olan, get a pitchfork. Watch the trees. Shout if you see anything.'

Dietrik held the crossbow reverently while Olan hurried across to the barn, a worried look on his face.

'Don't point that at me!' Valina cursed him. The farm-boy blushed and pointed the crossbow out of the doorway.

Gruff took no notice. He was digging through his chest for his blunderbuss. He unwrapped the oil cloth, and the smell of polished iron rekindled memories of hunting when he was a young man, up in the hills. He didn't like to use too much blackpowder – it was expensive – but this time he poured a good measure in and then rammed home a good few handfuls of pellets and smithy scraps.

'THIS IS POINTLESS!' Osric dared to raise his voice. Silently the rest of the men agreed, even Edmunt. They had somehow missed the road and were caught in a defile that seemed to be winding its way back into the mountain. They could barely see anything in the darkness, but if they could hit the road then at least they could make their way to a farm and get some shelter and protection. None of them fancied sleeping rough with a band of beastmen raiders nearby.

Sigmund came and stood next to Edmunt. 'Any idea which way?' he asked. Edmunt shook his head.

Sigmund looked left and right. None of the ways seemed good. 'We'll double back,' he said, 'and follow the stream down.'

It was as good a plan as any. Osric imagined what tales he'd be able to tell Richel and the other handgunners all about the latest chase that Sigmund had led them on. He would have a platter of roast beef and the largest flagon of ale at the Blessed Rest inn. Then he might visit the House of Madam Jolie and see if she had any new girls in.

'Quiet!' Gaston hissed. Osric snarled, but crouched down like the rest.

The men huddled down low and listened. Even though the trees deadened noises, there were men shouting, the distant clang of metal. Then the unmistakable sound of a gunshot. Sigmund sprang forward and his men followed – slipping on the ground and tripping on the undergrowth.

Elias tripped over a tree root and fell face forward into a tangled knot of briars. He felt a hand dragging him out and he yelped with terror, expecting a beastman to tear him apart. A

rough hand grasped his shirt and hauled him to his feet, then Edmund's broad silhouette jogged ahead of him.

ELIAS FOLLOWED EDMUNT'S silhouette through the trees. They ran as quietly as they could until they broke through the foliage and the open sky above seemed almost as bright as daylight. They had found the road. They saw two carriages, their horses lying in pools of blood, and around them were dead human bodies and cavorting goat-headed figures carrying spears and crude shields. Sigmund was at the front. He led the halberdiers in a ragged charge: all of them roaring furiously. Elias opened his mouth but had no idea if he made any noise at all, he just concentrated on following Edmund's hulking shape. Suddenly a beastman loomed in front of him. He jabbed and felt the blade smack through fur and flesh and then the beastman went down and Elias kept running and screaming.

Elias caught another beastman in the gut, but this time the creature did not go down so easily. Elias was so terrified of being killed that he thrust the point of his halberd at it again and again, until it hung, impaled upon the side of the carriage. Elias tried to pull his halberd free, but it was stuck. He had a terrible fear that he would be caught and drew his sword, but when he looked around there were only halberdiers.

The fight seemed to have lasted no more than a few seconds, but suddenly a gun flashed again, and the retort was so loud Elias dropped his sword in fright.

THE CARRIAGE STOOD amidst the ruin of its former occupants and attackers. From the spread of bodies it appeared that the carriage driver had attempted to crash through the beastmen, but the beastmen had torn out the throats of the horses, and with such superior numbers against them the defenders had been doomed. The driver's blunderbuss had crudely beheaded one beastman and turned the creature's shoulders into a mangled mess of lead shot, gore and bone. But he and his two guards lay gutted and dead, their eyes staring blindly up into the starry sky.

The two survivors had run down the road, and it was there that the last beastman was cut down. Sigmund pulled his blade free, turned the body of the creature over with his foot, and cleaned his halberd on the shaggy fur. In their frenzied attack on the carriages, the beastmen had smashed all but one of the lanterns. The remaining lamp swung back and forth, casting eerie shadows. The largest beastman lay on its front about ten feet from the second carriage. Its horns were broad and straight, curling forwards at the ends like the horns of a bull. It had a bull's neck, pale and creamy and thick with muscles. There were many stab wounds on its front, Sigmund knew. He had made half of them himself. It was the one that had killed one of the new boys, Petr – it had cut the lad almost in half.

Osric had already covered Petr with his cloak, but from beneath the cloth a red pool was spreading. Sigmund shook his head. The boy had forgotten all his training and had been an easy kill.

'Is anyone else hurt?' he called out.

No one answered. They gathered together, hushed by the sudden relief of surviving battle.

GUNTER LED THE two men who had survived the attack back down the road.

They were dressed like merchants, with silk cloaks and velvet hats. The taller man was the one with the pistols, one of them in his belt and one hanging – spent – from his hand. Even in the glimmer of lamplight, they could see the quality of their manufacture. The hilts and barrels were worked with silver filigree, but there was nothing delicate about the shots they fired. The barrels were as wide as Sigmund's thumb. A short range, but deadly.

Not far off was proof of its power: a beastman lay on its front, the gaping exit wound raw and bloody. The shot had driven flesh, bone and cartilage before it, and then ripped out of the monster's back, leaving a hole a hand's breadth wide.

'Who are you?' Sigmund asked to the merchants.

'Are you free company?' the shorter man said. He had a Reikland accent, refined and arrogant. The man had a finely

cut beard and his bone structure was delicate. His hands were gloved with the finest kidskin, his deerskin boots trod silent as he strolled up to the halberdiers' captain.

Sigmund pulled himself up to his full height to compensate for his patched jacket. 'Captain Sigmund Jorge, Helmstrumburg Halberdiers,' he said. 'And I want to know your business.'

'Well. How lucky that you came along,' the man said, but there was something about his tone that made Sigmund bristle. If these fools had not been out at night then he would not have lost one of his men. He watched the Reiklander tilt his head towards the dead beastman at their feet. 'Otherwise we would have been in a more than a little trouble.'

'You would be dead,' Sigmund said. 'Now, what were you doing on the road at night?'

The smaller man gave the halberdier a look that suggested he had no right to question him. 'What business is it of yours?'

'I am Marshal of Helmstrumburg,' Sigmund said.

The smaller man gave an affected titter.

'Marshal? Can't you afford a proper uniform?'

Sigmund ignored the jibe. 'What business do you have in Helmstrumburg?'

It was the other man, with the pistols, who spoke next. 'I apologise, marshal. We have a message of some import to deliver.'

'Who to?'

'That, I believe,' the smaller man said, 'is none of your business.'

Sigmund refused to rise to the insult, but Edmund took a step forward. Gunter put his hand out to stop him. The Reiklander looked up at the towering woodsman with a mixture of amusement and fascination.

'Are you going to attack the cousin of Baron von Kohl?'

Sigmund stared at him for a moment then turned his back on the merchants deliberately. 'Gunter!' Sigmund called his sergeant forward. The grizzled veteran's beard looked even more silvered in the lamplight. 'Take five men and bury these bodies. Edmund organise the rest. We'll escort these,' he paused and indicated towards the two merchants, 'two to town.'

Elias was still standing with his sword drawn, his hands shaking uncontrollably.

'You can put that away now,' Sigmund said. Elias nodded but did not move. 'The sword,' Sigmund said, 'you can put it away now.'

Elias reddened and slid the blade into his scabbard.

'Where's your halberd?'

Elias looked back towards the carriages, where the beastman he had killed was still pinned to the painted woodwork.

'Let's go get it,' Edmund said and led the boy back to the farthest carriage, where the beastman had been impaled through the shoulder. The body hung off-centre, Edmund pulled the blade free and clapped Elias on the shoulder.

'Looks like you got one!' Sigmund said and gave him back his halberd.

Elias nodded. I got two, he thought. I got two, he told himself and grinned.

WHEN THE BEASTMEN CORPSES were dumped to the side of the road, Elias could not resist going to have a look. They were not much larger than children, with the beginnings of horns through the matt of fur, like young kids. Apart from the vertical pupils and the needle-sharp teeth, they had a strange beauty about them.

'Just wait till you see the big ones!' Freidel told him as he threw the last corpse onto the pile. 'There's nothing pretty about them!'

Edmund took a cloth and dipped it into the blood of a beastman.

The men chuckled as the new boy was pushed forward. Edmund smeared blood on both Elias's cheeks.

'Now!' he said. 'You're a real halberdier!'

GUNTER'S MEN WERE assigned the job of burying the dead. They set to with crude picks, scraping away half a foot of dead leaves and then moving away as much earth as they could before they hit a tangle of roots.

'That's enough!' Gunter said. The halberdiers took each dead man by the feet, dragged them over to the pit and

dropped them in. The dead coachman's neck had been cut through almost to the bone. His head flopped unnaturally as they put him down.

Gaston leaned down to straighten the head.

'Why did you do that?' Schwartz said as they walked to get the next. 'It won't make any difference where he's gone.'

'I'll remember not to do it for you.'

'Now I didn't say that,' Schwartz said as they lifted the guard from the back of the coach. The dead man's hands still gripped the blunderbuss. He looked to have been in the process of reloading when a spear thrust had run him through.

He was fatter than the coachman. Gaston and Schwartz lifted him like the others, but there was a grunt, and they dropped the body in surprise.

'He's still alive,' Gaston said.

'Never!'

The man's guts were spilling out from under his shirt. Belly wounds were the slowest and most painful sort. Better cut your throat than wait to die of a gut wound.

Gaston drew his knife and held the blade over the man's mouth for a few moments. When he took it away there was a film of condensation.

'He's breathing,' Gaston said.

'Poor bastard,' Schwartz said.

Gaston sighed. There was no point taking the man with them. He'd die if they tried to move him. If they left him where he was then he'd die anyway.

'We can't bury him alive,' Gaston said, and bent over the man's head.

When Gaston stood up the man's neck had been slashed. The deep cut oozed fresh blood. Gaston wiped his knife on the guard's coat. He and Schwartz mumbled a quick prayer to Morr, then lifted the dead man and laid him on top of his erstwhile companions.

THE LAST TO go into the pit was Petr. Baltzer went through his pockets and took out a silver hammer from the thong on his neck.

'For his family,' Baltzer said but no one took much notice. None of them knew who his family were. As long as Baltzer didn't go near their pockets they were fine.

By the time they had finished disposing of the bodies, Morrslieb was rising up through the dark trees trunks.

'Hurry now!' Gunter shouted as they shovelled the dirt back over them all, then they piled up stones and branches to stop wild animals from digging the bodies up again.

THE MERCHANTS' BELONGINGS consisted of some wooden crates and heavy packs.

'Get these men's bags!' Osric shouted but no one volunteered. 'Come on! Freidel! Elias! You two!' he shouted, meaning Schwartz, a stable lad before he joined up, and Kann – a quiet man who had been friends with the man they had just buried. 'Pick this stuff up!'

Baltzer started to chuckle as Freidel lifted one of the satchels onto his shoulders.

Elias lifted a case, but as he did so he felt a stabbing pain in his arm and dropped the crate.

'Careful!' Gunter cursed, but when Elias tried to lift it again his arm refused to take the weight.

'He's wounded!' Freidel called out and the men gathered round and saw the slash on the underside of Elias's jacket: the spreading stain of blood.

Gunter hurried over to inspect his new lad. The cut was not too deep, but it was bleeding freely. 'Freidel – bind this up!'

Freidel took a dirty strip of cloth and bound it around Elias's arm. Elias could barely feel the pain. He could still feel his heart racing.

Freidel tied a knot in the cloth and Elias dropped his arm to his side. 'Is it bad?'

Freidel told him, 'Don't worry, you'll live.'

ONCE THEY HAD walked a little way along the road Edmunt began to get a sense of their bearings. They were higher up the valley than he had thought. It was only a few miles down the road to Gruff Spennsweich's farm.

They paused to pass the merchants' belongings around, and as soon as the loads were redistributed Sigmund was off again, with Edmunt at the front.

Elias felt the blood on his cheeks drying to a scab. He put his hand to his face and looked at the blood on his fingertips. It was red, just like human blood.

He swallowed. He was disappointed with his first battle. He'd been terrified. The thought of being in combat again made him start to sweat.

'Come on, wounded soldier,' Gaston encouraged and Elias forced a smile and went in front of him.

SIGMUND LED THEM down the road towards Farmer Spennsweich's farm. Osric's company led, Gunter's followed. Even though it was dark, the men's legs swung freely now, and they made good going.

The trees pressed in on either side, dark and silent. The men strained their eyes in case one of the shadows should leap out in ambush – but nothing moved and this time no alarms were given.

The road dipped down and forded a stream. They splashed through the water and climbed up a gentle rise. The closer to the top they came the stronger was the faint smell of wood smoke and cooking. Many of the men expected to find the place devastated, like the farm they had seen earlier that day – so when they saw the lights inside the shutters and the thread of pale grey smoke hanging over the cabin, there was a noticeable wave of relief. The soldiers laughed and joked and Baltzer suggested Freidel ask how much Gruff's daughters were for the night.

GRUFF SPENNSWEICH SAT by the door, a piece of straw in his mouth and the loaded blunderbuss across his knees. He had chewed the end down to a sodden mess of fibres and spat it onto the floor.

Valina didn't like him spitting in the house, but he was too preoccupied to notice her frown.

When they heard the tramp of many footsteps Beatrine gasped. 'What's that?'

Gruff Spennsweich had worked all these years to raise his family and now savage animals – animals with just enough intelligence to understand hatred and vengeance and cruelty – were coming to kill all his pretty daughters. He stood holding the blunderbuss, both hands shaking as he checked the bolts on the doorway, then opened the shutters on the window and thrust the gun out.

'Get off my land!' he bellowed. 'Or I'll blow you back to your damned pits!'

Osric saw the gun first and ducked and then all the halberdiers started to run for cover.

'Farmer Spennsweich!' Sigmund shouted and the blunderbuss waved in his direction for a moment. 'Farmer Spennsweich it is Captain Jorg of the Helmstrumburg Halberdiers!'

There was a curse from inside the farm and the blunderbuss was withdrawn. Osric started laughing and all of a sudden the tension of the day's march disappeared and they all started laughing.

AFTER INTRODUCTIONS, GRUFF sent Dietrik out to show the halberdiers where they could sleep for the night.

The barn was split level, with crude wooden enclosures for the livestock. On the top floor straw and sacks were piled up. The press of animal bodies meant the air was warmer, but also was strongly scented with manure, straw and tightly pressed livestock.

Dietrik herded the five cows into one of the enclosures and they jostled against each other, nervously attempting to turn to watch the men come in. The halberdiers piled their packs against the wall.

The men climbed the ladder up to the second level and threw armfuls of straw over the floor, then spread their cloaks over it to make crude beds.

Dietrik came back and Gruff told him to tap a firkin of ale for the men to drink. Valina selected a pair of hams that were drying in the upstairs room and Dietrik carried them out one at a time to the barn. The men started to carve the meat up, chewing the salty meat slowly as the beer was left to settle.

Dietrik brought all of Farmer Spennsweich's best pewter tankards which were then filled and passed around.

AS THE HALBERDIERS relaxed and toasted the generosity of their host, the cows slowly settled down and began to chew their cud.

Outside, the moons cast enough light to illuminate the farmstead. There was a vegetable patch behind the house. The barns were on the other side of the yard. They created a 'U' shaped compound that was typical of the more isolated farmsteads, the three buildings creating a wall that made the settlement far more defensible.

Osric's men were on sentry duty. Due to the danger of a beastman attack the sentries were doubled.

Elias, Schwartz and Kann stuck together as they patrolled round the back. Baltzer and a pair of brothers, Friedrik and Frantz, stood at the gateway, staring down the road that they had come on. The woods were silent, but an occasional bat swooped down around their heads.

Baltzer's nerves were on edge. There was a loud rustle of branches.

'What was that?' he asked.

The rustling continued. It sounded like something large, crashing through the undergrowth. Baltzer's fear was contagious. Soon all three of them were standing alert, their halberd blades pointing into the darkness, but the crashing stopped and a long silence followed.

'Do you think it was anything?' Frantz asked.

'Could have been a bird,' Friedrik suggested hopefully.

Baltzer didn't want to talk about it. His eyes were straining to catch the slightest movement. Frantz yawned and then Friedrik yawned too.

'Will you shut up!' Baltzer hissed.

'Anything?' Kann asked when they had completed a circuit.

'We heard something,' Friedrik said. 'Seen anything?'

The other men shook their heads. Baltzer stood a little way off. This would be the best moment to attack, when the sentries were distracted – but however hard he stared at the moonlit tree-line, he could see nothing.

WHEN THE SOLDIERS had been fed and watered, Gruff locked and bolted the doors and windows and made all the girls bring their mattresses into the living room where he could watch them. Beatrine huffed as she helped the twins lug the mattress the three of them shared from their bedroom. Gertrude was too young to know what was happening. She held her sister's hand.

Valina looked at her father, embarrassed by him. 'They're not criminals,' she said but Gruff didn't pay any notice. He had no intention of saving his daughters from beastmen, just to see them plundered by halberdiers.

AFTER THEY HAD drunk the beer was down to the yeasty dregs, the halberdiers lay on their cloaks and slept. Gunter's men were upstairs in the straw, while Osric's men were down next to the cows.

Sigmund and Edmunt stayed up, their faces bottom lit by the fire.

'It's not like beastmen to come so far down the hills. They've always kept themselves to the high lands. I never heard of them coming down in herds like this,' Edmunt said.

'Why do you think they came so far down?' Sigmund asked.

Edmunt shrugged

'The ones we killed. Do you think they were the ones from Osman's farm?'

Edmunt tossed another stick onto the fire. 'No,' he said at last. 'I do not. Nor did Gunter. There were prints of large beastmen at Osman's, but the ones we killed were all small.'

They sat in silence for a while longer. Behind them one of the men coughed and turned over. 'That means there's more than one band.'

Edmunt nodded.

There was a long pause.

'I don't know about you,' Sigmund said, 'but I cannot believe that this has nothing to do with the fiery star.'

AS SIGMUND AND Edmunt talked, the two Reiklanders made their beds upstairs, away from the halberdiers.

They had insisted that their packs were brought upstairs, and the crates and bags piled together.

Gunter's men left them to themselves. They had no interest in the men's airs and attitudes, nor in their heavy merchandise.

Half an hour after Sigmund and Edmunt had put out the fire with the last dregs of beer and turned the lanterns down to low and hooded them, Theodor checked his pistols were under the crude pillow of his rolled cloak.

He listened until he could hear the halberdiers snoring. When he was sure that they were all asleep he turned to peer at his companion.

Eugen's eyes were wide open. They caught a stray beam of moonlight and glittered strangely in the darkness.

Theodor whispered, so quietly it was almost inaudible. 'Why were we attacked?'

The pale eyes turned down to him slowly, as if Eugen was in a meditative state. There was something disconcerting in his companion's manner.

'I thought everything was agreed!' Theodor said.

Eugen moved silently, and Theodor felt a hand rest on his cheek.

His companion's eyes were dark as he turned towards him, but his teeth glittered with malice. 'Do not question me again.'

The voice was sad, but as his companion spoke he ran a fingernail across Theodor's throat, then the Reiklander lay back, and did not speak again.

*Will Sigmund and his 'ragged company' be able
to defend their homes from the amassing forces of
darkness? Find out in:
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