

THE HEART OF CHAOS

Slaves to Darkness • Book 3

A Warhammer novel by Gav Thorpe

The corrupting influence of Chaos permeates the Warhammer world, corrupting all those who encounter it. Once a noble knight of the Empire, Kurt Leitzig has forsworn his former allegiances and now stands on the very brink of immortality and daemonhood. But can Kurt's former lover, Ursula, raise an army that will stop him before his soul is lost forever to the Dark Gods?



Gav Thorpe works as Lead Background Designer of the Key Design team at Games Workshop, and so is one of the people responsible for the development of the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 universes. Dennis the mechanical hamster, having been scorned by his new lady, has now returned to the fold but is still sulking.

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from THE HEART OF CHAOS

URSULA, RUPRECHT, LEERDAMME and several knights were standing close to the smouldering ruins of the village's longhouse, warming themselves against the chill, as Johannes and Boerden appeared at the edge of the village on their cantering steeds. More knights gathered at their approach, and a circle had assembled as the two dismounted, handing their reins to squires who ran forwards from the crowd.

'It's the Norse, for sure,' said Boerden, his lined face grim with-in the raised visor of his plumed helm. 'A lot of them.'

'They have a war beast,' panted Johannes, stepping close to Ursula. 'A hairy monster with a wooden fort upon its back, sheathed in bronze shields. Their leader rides upon a destrier of midnight black, with flames for eyes.'

There was some chuckling from a few of the knights and murmured comments.

'Shut your yapping,' snapped Boerden, rounding on the knights. 'It's true! There's five hundred warriors, if there's ten, and cavalry and chariots. These are not the old men and boys we've faced the past several weeks. They march at speed and will be here before the end of the watch.'

'They must have taken all the warriors and fallen back before us, sacrificing their homes and families to draw us on,' said Johannes, still breathless. 'Every fighter from a dozen villages is there. Prepare for battle, full battle!'

There was a pause, as the knights stayed to hear more news. Ursula stepped towards them, pulling her sword from its sheath. This was Ulfshard; the ancient elven blade forged thousands of years before, heirloom of the chieftain Marbad who fought alongside Sigmar at Black Fire Pass. In its pommel, a blue gem burned with harsh light, and its blade was wreathed in faint flames. Upon seeing the blade, the knights were stilled, their attention fixed again on Ursula.

'War is upon us once more,' she told them. 'Bring me victory in this one last fight and your duty is done. Slay the wild men this one more time, and our campaign is complete. We shall leave these desolate shores without defeat, and you can return to your lands and homes to gather your strength for the new year, when more glory awaits us. For Sigmar!'

With grunts and cheers echoing the battle cry, the knights drew their swords and held them aloft, the sharpened steel glittering in the cold winter sun. As they dispersed, shouting for their horses, calling to the sergeants and men-at-arms, Leerdamme gave Ursula a polite nod and headed off towards his ship. Boerden and Johannes remained with Ursula and Ruprecht.

'This war beast is larger than a town house,' said Johannes. 'It has great tusks that could disembowel a regiment and feet that'll crush us underfoot by the dozen. We have never fought anything like it before.'

'Will a cannon kill it?' asked Ursula.

'Several cannons, perhaps,' said Boerden, removing his helmet and tousling the sweat out of his thin, greying hair.

'Then we have nothing to fear,' said Ursula, waving her arm towards the greatship and three wolfships down in the fjord. A single rolling salvo from their small fleet was enough to crush any force they had met so far, flattening huts and obliterating longships. Today would be no different, even if they were low on shot.

'Aye, we do have plenty of cannons,' said Boerden with a grin as he looked out over the ships gradually weighing anchor and beginning to move closer in to the shore. His expression changed to one of consternation at the sound of a musket retort echoing off the steep cliffs surrounding the inlet. It was a warning shot.

At the tip of the mainmast on the *Glorious*, furthest out of the fleet to keep watch for enemy at sea, a red pennant was raised

– longships were approaching. If it was simply a ship or two, then the wolfship was more than capable of holding its own while the other vessels bombarded the enemy on shore. The pennant dipped and rose indicating two ships. Then dipped again. Three ships. And again. Four ships. Ursula felt disquiet in her stomach as the warning flag dipped and rose seven times. Eight longships in total, and more than enough to swarm over the wolfships and transports. The *Graf Suiden* would be needed, but that would mean abandoning the troops on shore to deal with the horde that was by now only a couple of miles away.

‘What will Leerdamme do?’ Ursula asked, looking at the knights and Ruprecht.

‘He’ll protect the fleet, that’s all he can do,’ said Ruprecht. ‘If we lose our ships, we are stranded here and it’ll not matter whether we die in battle or from cold and starvation. You can be sure that the Norse will have taken every provision from their homes. There will be nothing to forage, even if we could find our way along the coast by land.’

‘There is still time to retreat,’ said Boerden, putting his helmet back on.

‘Retreat?’ snarled Ursula. ‘Retreat? We still have more than eight hundred knights and soldiers. We outnumber them, and our ships outgun theirs. Why do you choose to snatch at defeat when victory and glory can still be ours?’

‘Ursula’s right,’ said Johannes with a scowl at Boerden. ‘Why, our knights alone could deal with this rabble!’

‘Then it’s time we joined the others, isn’t it, boy?’ said Boerden, turning and walking away.

Johannes’s shoulders slumped and he turned to Ursula, but she was already striding down the street towards the shore with Ruprecht. With a sigh, he signalled to his squire to bring his mount to him. Putting one foot in the stirrup, he glanced over his shoulder once more, but Ursula was now out of sight behind the smoking ruins of the village.

THE ARMY WAS arrayed for battle a short way north from the smouldering ruins of the village, two hundred crossbowmen, three hundred spearmen and three hundred knights waiting as

the advance of the Norse echoed across the hills. Ursula stood facing her army, Ulfshard burning in her hands.

‘Once more the warriors of the Dark Gods assail us!’ she shouted to her army. ‘Once more we must fight to protect those things we hold most dear. If we should fail today, then tomorrow these warriors will be heading to our shores to burn our homes and slaughter our families. We are all that stands between these raiders and our kin, and they look to us to be strong today.’

She raised Ulfshard above her head and they knew what happened next. Kneeling, the army as one bowed their heads in prayer, the knights dismounting to pay homage to Sigmar.

‘Almighty Sigmar,’ began Ursula. ‘Hearken to our praise, hear our gratitude, pay heed to our prayers. Grant us your strength in this battle. Grant us the fortitude to finish what we have begun in your name. Look over us in war and cast your divine protection across us. Let us remember that you watch our deeds and may we stand well in your judgement. In your great wisdom grant us the power to see victory today. For Sigmar!’

The resounding bass beat of the Norse war drum echoed louder and louder over the assembled army as they rose to their feet and the knights mounted their horses. All eyes were turned to the hills ahead, to the north and the bare skyline. Now and then, some glanced nervously over their shoulders out to the fjord, and the ships tacking against the wind to meet the longships approaching from the Sea of Claws.

Atop the crest line a single figure appeared, silhouetted against the pale mountains that lay beyond. He was mounted on a snorting steed that stood twice the height of a man, its mane and tail burning like a dark red flame, its coat almost pure black. The warrior himself was a giant of a man, clad in dark armour with the white fur of a Norscan bear draped across his shoulders, its gilded skull set into a helm that covered his face except for his mouth and chin. In his left hand, he hefted a long single-bladed axe, and in his right a long iron shield pierced with spikes fashioned from bronze-bound bone. He raised his axe above his head and his army moved forward.

Banner after banner appeared on the ridgeline, some tattered, fluttering rags daubed with crude dye in twisted faces and incomprehensible runes. Others were collections of skulls, bones

and weapons hanging from thick crosspieces by heavy chains. The warriors spread out around their banners, clashing their axes, swords and hammers against their round wooden shields, waving their weapons in the air and baying to the sky. Amidst the clamour, the heavy beat of the drum could still be heard.

A gap appeared in the line, and from beyond the far side of the hill, a wooden structure rose into view, much like a Norse hill fort; a square palisade made from sharpened logs with gaps cut into them to allow those inside to cast spears and stones onto those below. In front of the tower stood a huge drum, as broad as a man is tall and on wooden platforms on either side, two burly Norse swung large bone-handed hammers, pounding out the incessant beat.

The war beast itself could now be seen, a monstrous mammut from high in the Norscan mountains. Taller even than the wooden tower upon its back, its shadow stretched over the Norse host. Its long shaggy fur was braided with skulls and entwined with chains; the four massive tusks that jutted from its jaw were tipped with iron spikes and hung with more trophies. Bronze shields hung on straps down its enormous flanks, and its ankles were bound with studded rings of silvery metal. Two trunks swayed independently of each other between the tusks, scenting the air and picking at the ground. Its eyes could not be seen, hidden behind pierced half-spheres that jutted out of a bronze cap riveted into its skull. Each metal plate was painted in blood with runes of the Dark Gods.

A nervous murmur spread around Ursula, and horses whinnied and shifted in fear. To the west, along the coast, barbaric horsemen could be seen galloping their mounts around the village, attempting to seize the flank of the defenders. Meanwhile, more gaps parted in the Norse line, allowing heavy chariots of wood and iron to roll forwards, their crews stripped to the waist, angular sigils tattooed across their chests, their beards and hair woven with balls of bronze and gold. Each had a black pennant emblazoned with a golden rune hanging from tall poles on the yokes. The beasts that drew the war machines were mutated abominations, vile crossbreeds of giant wolves and horses. Each had a flowing black mane and hooves, but with canine heads and dagger-like fangs.

Two more figures then appeared beside the warlord. One was clad in rags that blew against the wind, his face covered with a long hood with a single gaping eyehole where no normal man would be able to see. He was hunched, his back twisted almost at a right angle to his legs, but came forward with surprising agility, bells and chimes hung from the hem of his tattered robes clanging and ringing with every contorted step.

The other was encased in a suit of armour chased with gold and gems, his face pierced with rings and studs, his hair cropped to a scalplock that hung down the length of his back. In his hands, he carried an elegantly curved sword, obviously not fashioned by the primitive metalworking skills of the Norse. The two looked to the chieftain mounted on his stamping daemonic mount and each received a nod.

Quiet descended upon the horde. Even the mammut stopped in its advance, its trunks lowered to the ground. The robed man lifted his arms to the sky and began to chant, while the armoured figure ran to the nearest chariot and leapt aboard, gesturing for the crew to urge the machine forwards. Seeing their leader advancing, the other chariot riders whipped their beasts forwards, and the six chariots began to progress down the slope. Behind them, the infantry marched forwards around their banners, the warlord and mammut at their centre.

The Imperial army was arrayed with the knights on the right flank as a single mass, while the regiments of crossbowmen and spearmen were alternated with each other, the long lines of missile troops and the dense blocks of spearmen giving the impression of the battlements on a castle wall.

'Crossbowmen, forward!' bellowed Boerden, most senior of the knights and in battle the commander of Ursula's small army. A veteran of half a dozen campaigns, his powerful voice carried over the noise of the approaching Norse easily.

The two hundred crossbowmen paced forwards, moving some seventy yards ahead of the spear line. At Boerden's second command they halted and raised their crossbows to their shoulders. Raising his sword in the air, Boerden stood up in his stirrups and, after a moment's pause, dropped the blade. The order was shouted along the line and the crossbowmen let loose, each regiment of twenty unleashing their bolts a few moments after the band to

their left, in a wave of black missiles that arced out towards the slope.

The iron-tipped cloud dropped down steeply into the advancing Norse. Red-shafted quarrels bit into the beasts pulling the chariots, thudded into shields and unprotected bodies, embedded in armour and punched through the horned helmets of the attackers. Nearly half the volley had hit their target, and the Norse were forced to clamber over their dead to continue their advance.

With a wave of his sword, Boerden ordered the crossbowmen back into place, giving ground before the advancing chariots, three of which had been halted, their beasts lying dead in the traces, the blood of the crews dripping from between the crudely nailed planks of their shaft-scarred machines.

In the centre, the spearmen and swordsmen of the knights' armies readied their weapons, drawing swords from scabbards and bracing spears against the ground. A boom behind the army signalled the first firing from the ships, as the Norse longships entered the fjord. Some of the soldiers turned to see what was happening, and were swiftly reprimanded by sergeants and knights. Another solitary roar echoed down the valley; Leerdamme and the other ship's captains were well aware of their lack of shot and were making each count. In the gaps between the intermittent cannon fire, the pop and crackle of handguns could be heard as sharpshooters in the rigging and forecastles took long-range shots at the approaching Norse.

Ursula had no time to spare a thought for the newly erupting sea battle. Her focus was entirely on the approaching barbarians, who were now only a hundred yards away. They broke into a trot, gathering speed slowly. She could feel the ground shake as the mammut broke into a lumbering run.

A swordsman to Ursula's left coughed violently, his blade clattering from his grip as he collapsed to his knees. The man next to him turned, only to drop his sword and shield and clutch his throat as he too fell retching to the ground. Like corn scythed at harvest, a line of several dozen soldiers became similarly afflicted, some running forwards gasping, others toppling into their comrades, who backed away and began pushing and shoving amongst themselves to get away from the inflicted men.

'Sorcery!' snarled Ruprecht, pointing towards the robed figure still on the hill. 'Curses from the Lord of Decay.'

'Shallya protect us,' whispered Ursula, as more and more swordsmen fell victim to the unnatural plague or ran away from their infected countrymen. She ran forwards, Ulfshard blazing in her hand.

'Have faith!' she shouted, grabbing men and urging them back to the line. 'Resist their vile spells!'

Seeing their maiden-champion joining them, many of the swordsmen recovered their nerve, though fully a third of them lay dead or writhing at their feet. Even as the line was redressed and order restored, the first of the Norse were within fifty yards. A forest of short spears appeared in their hands and was launched through the air towards the defenders.

A few of the slowest soldiers were skewered through chest, arm or belly by the heavy shafts, but many raised their shields in time. It was then that the true purpose of the attack became clear, as the swordsmen struggled to remove the weighty spears from their shields, now made too heavy to lift with one arm. Many abandoned their protection and instead stood with two-handed grips on their swords as the Norse swarmed in.

With cries of anger and defiance, the two lines clashed. Norse axes bit into mailed shirts, and Marienburg steel cleaved through leather jerkins and heavy furs. In the sudden press of bodies, Ursula could not see what was happening, but was suddenly joined by the reassuring presence of Ruprecht next to her, his heavy warhammer held over his shoulder.

'No place for a leader, this,' he said, grabbing her by the shoulder and barging his way back out of the press. Ursula did not even attempt to struggle against his hefty strength, and instead allowed herself to be pulled free of the melee that was now erupting all along the Empire line.

'Watch for the beast!' shouted Boerden as the mammut trampled forwards, barely a dozen strides from the fearful spearmen. 'Crossbows!'

The order took a moment to relay, and the volley was ragged and ill-aimed, and many of the shots whistled harmlessly past the beast or ricocheted off its armour plates. No few found a mark, however, and the creature raised its trunks and trumpeted in pain

and anger. Lashing with tusks and trunks it gouged a hole in the line of spearmen in front of it, stamping and snapping spear shafts under its weight. The Norse in the tower upon its back threw down javelins into the spearmen, as the creature lurched from side to side, black shafts sticking from its face and legs. The spearmen fought back as best they could, though the thrusts of their spears had little effect on the creature's thick hide.

Its charge ploughed on through the spearmen, leaving dozens crushed and maimed in its wake. Another volley of crossbow bolts struck home, sticking in armour plates and burying iron tips into the softer parts of the beast's flesh. With another deafening trumpet, the mammut stopped suddenly, bending its back legs. Norsemen toppled out of the embrasures in the howdah, plunging to their deaths against the hard ground many yards below.

Out of control, the gigantic beast surged forwards once more, and the spearmen broke and scattered before it as it charged, sweeping left and right with its tusks, scooping men from the ground and flinging them high into the air, crushing them beneath its armoured tread. Barely a dozen yards to Ursula's right, the creature continued its rampage out through the back of her army and into the village, smashing through the ruins of huts and onwards.

Through the gap that had now opened, Boerden led the knights, their horses at a gallop, lances lowered. Like a steel hammer they crashed into the Norse, horses biting and stamping, lances punching through chests and necks, rupturing organs and snapping bones. The sound of the impact of three hundred knights at full charge was like a thunderclap and the Norse were almost physically hurled back by the force of their attack.

The chariots, which had dropped behind the infantry, now counter-charged, draught-beasts snapping with their long fangs, scythed wheels dismembering horses and fallen men, the crew jabbing at the survivors with their long spears. The armoured warrior stood on the yoke of his chariot, slashing left and right with his sword, until a knight's lance caught him high on the shoulder, flinging him under the rumbling wheels of his own chariot.

His battered form rose up from the churned mud behind it, but a moment later a second lance head pierced his side, knocking him from his feet and dragging the knight from his mount. A

flailing hoof from the warhorse caught the champion in the side of the head and Ursula could see blood sprayed from the grievous wound, the warrior flung to the ground, his body now still.

Their impetus lost, the knights wheeled around and retreated, preparing for another charge. However, seeing the Norse horsemen who had been making their way around to the rear of the army during the fighting, they set off at a brisk trot to confront this new threat.

A sudden sense of fear gripped Ursula and she turned her attention to the fight between the Norse and swordsmen. In the middle of the fighting was the Norse chief, atop his daemonic mount, hewing in all directions with his long axe, every stroke severing a head or limb. Sword blades glanced harmlessly off his armour, while his riding beast seemed equally impervious to harm, crushing soldiers beneath its bulk and gouging with its long fangs and horns.

Without a thought, Ursula charged forwards once again, hurling herself through the retreating throng. A soldier in front of her was flung backwards, a Norse axe embedded in his skull. As the enemy warrior stooped to pull it free, Ursula slashed out with Ulfshard, the shining blade parting the Norseman from shoulder to ribs with one easy stroke. As he collapsed aside, Ursula thrust through the gap, the tip of her elven blade slicing through the brim of another warrior's helm, splitting his scalp.

Ulfshard was as light as air in her hand, allowing her to easily parry the mace of a barbaric warrior who rushed forwards, and then turn her wrist and flick the glowing blade through his leg, cutting it off above the knee in a splash of steaming blood. A double-handed blow decapitated another Norseman and then Ursula was free, facing off against the chieftain. His beast reared and hissed, pulling back from the light of Ulfshard, and the chieftain fought with the chains of its reins to keep it under control. Stamping its ebon hooves, the creature reared again, howling in pain, and almost of the sword's volition rather than hers, Ursula struck out with Ulfshard.

It was only the merest graze, but the daemonic creature wailed in agony, throwing its rider. The wound erupted into a long gash, peeling away the unnatural skin and flesh, revealing a miasma of energy beneath. The creature's daemonic life-force spilled out like

blood, a dark-hued cloud of billowing energy that smelled like charred flesh and decay. As if consumed by a fire, the creature melted away, gobbets of incorporeal flesh bubbling and sizzling on the cold ground.

Ursula heard shouting behind her and saw Ruprecht trying to fight his way through the throng of Norsemen and Empire soldiers, and she realised that in her attack, she had broken through and was isolated. A chuckle focussed her attention quickly though, as the Norse chieftain rose to his feet, using his axe to push himself upright. He was almost twice Ursula's height, and with the weight of his armour, more than three times as broad. The axe was nearly as long as she was tall, and now that she was close, she could see black runes etched into its blade, pulsing with a life of their own.

'The she-bitch,' spat the champion in crude Reikspiel, standing upright. 'Sutenvulf will be surprised to hear you fall to blade of Jolnir of the Skaerling.'

The name struck a chord in Ursula's mind and for a moment she lost her concentration, letting down her guard.

'Sutenvulf?' she said. 'The southern wolf? Kurt? He's alive?'

'I shall give him your bones as a gift,' Jolnir said with a grin that displayed fang-like teeth and blackened gums. 'Perhaps he will mount them on a spear and parade them when we destroy your lands.'

'Shut up,' Ursula said, her venom-filled voice like a slap in the face to the chosen warrior. Ursula could hear Ruprecht's panicked shouting behind her.

'Even if you kill me, witch, the tide will come,' he said, his voice a bass growl. 'But that is not going to happen.'

With a roar he leapt forward with speed surprising for his considerable size. His axe flew down towards Ursula's head. Ulfshard leapt up to meet the unholy blade, shattering its head into shards that exploded into the Norse warrior's face. As he stepped back, Ursula drove the elven sword into the gap between helmet and breastplate, the tip digging into Jolnir's throat and erupting out of the back of his head. He fell to one side, dragging Ursula's sword arm down.

A moment later, Ruprecht was there, hammer in hand. Ursula looked round at him, and then beyond to where the Norse were

breaking and fleeing, outnumbered, their leader dead. She looked Ruprecht in the eye.

'Worried?' she said, pulling Ulfshard free and lifting it up in front of the tall Talabheimer.

'Why ever would I be?' he said with a scowl. He looked out towards the fjord, and she followed his gaze. Two longships were nearing the shore, the *Graf Suiden* alongside. 'Enough of this, there's still more fighting to be done'

*Can Ursula fulfil her quest to destroy Kurt,
her former lover, before he unleashes a
terrible evil upon the Old World?*

Find out in:

THE HEART OF CHAOS

Also by Gav Thorpe

THE CLAWS OF CHAOS

Slaves to Darkness • Book 1

KURT LEITZIG HAD always dreamed of being a knight of the Empire, to ride against Emperor Karl-Franz's enemies at the head of the most elite troops in the Old World. Ever since his family were burnt by the witch hunters he has been searching for his place in the world. Now the call-to-arms has come. Battle will soon be joined and there is much glory and honour to be won.



THE BLADES OF CHAOS

Slaves to Darkness • Book 2



FOLLOWING THE CATAclysmic events in *The Claws of Chaos*, Kurt Leitzig sits uneasily as a chosen warrior of the gods. To prove himself to the Norse tribes, Kurt gathers a war party and sails to the fabled lands of Araby. But just as their supplies run low and disease becomes rife, they discover a deserted city of rising pyramids and long forgotten tombs. Overtaken by their lust for gold, the pillagers awaken an army that has been dead for thousands of years – the dreaded tomb King Nephthys has been unleashed!

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