

KNIGHT ERRANT

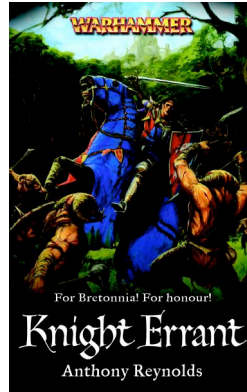
A Warhammer novel

By Anthony Reynolds

The noble knights of Bretonnia are bound by duty and honour to fight for their king, and defend their lands from invaders.

With their father, the Lord of Bastonne, grievously ill, his two sons Calard and Bertelis are left to uphold the glory and honour of their line. When a horde of goblins swarms out of the Forest of Châlons, the knights are summoned to Bordeleaux to gather their forces and repel the foul beasts. Little do they realise,

though, that the true enemy has yet to reveal itself. Deep in the arboreal gloom, something is stirring: a deadly foe that will bring the land of Bordeleaux to its knees and reveal a terrifying secret from Calard's past.



About the Author

After finishing university Anthony Reynolds set sail from his homeland and ventured forth to foreign climes. He ended up settling in the UK, and managed to blag his way into Games Workshop's hallowed Design Studio. There he worked for four years as a Games Developer and two years as part of the Management team. He now resides back in his hometown of Sydney, overlooking the beach and enjoying the sun and the surf, though he finds that to capture the true darkness and horror of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 he has taken to writing in what could be described as a darkened cave.

More Warhammer from Anthony Reynolds

MARK OF CHAOS

EMPIRE IN CHAOS

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CALARD RODE AT the head of the column of knights snaking across the verdant landscape, savouring the feeling of the sun on his back. It had seemed that the entire host had been galvanised by the same concern that plagued Calard: that they would arrive in Bordeleaux too late to make a meaningful contribution in the war against the greenskins, and so the nobles had pushed on with renewed vigour. They awoke before dawn, peasants quickly striking the tents, and the entire force was moving before the first rays of the sun speared over the horizon from the east.

They pushed on at a formidable pace, eating up the miles as they crossed farmland, keeping the forest of Chalons always within eyesight to the south, following the curve of the great expanse of trees. They passed through countless peasant villages and by a dozen fortified stately homes and castles, and, at last, the plains of southern Bastonne rose into the undulating hills of Bordeleaux.

They maintained their relentless pace into the night, leaving the footslogging men-at-arms and the rabble of bowmen commoners far behind, before camp was made. The colourful tents of the nobles were hastily erected by yeomen, and the knights' horses were brushed down, fed and watered. It was long after midnight, after all but a handful of nobles had eaten their fill and retired for the night, when the peasant soldiers arrived in camp. They collapsed to the ground exhausted, choosing to cluster together under filthy blankets rather than expend the energy needed to erect the crude mass awnings that served as their shelters.

They kept up the mile-eating pace for five days. The rains had passed, but the days remained dull and grey. Miserable, cold peasants in the fields leant on their hoes, wiping hands across their brows as they watched the parade of knights pass. Some of them waved, but not a single knight so much as acknowledged their existence. Only the taciturn Empire noble, Dieter, gave the workers a response, nodding curtly to them as they stared at him in curiosity.

‘What crops are being tended?’ Dieter asked, gesturing to the endless rows of tall, gangly plants, his voice clipped and heavily accented. Stakes connected with twine had been driven into the ground along the perfectly straight lines of cultivated plants to keep them upright, and fruit hung in dense bunches from the spindly limbs.

Calard laughed out loud, looking at the Empire envoy to see if he was making some joke that did not translate. Seeing nothing that would suggest humour in the man’s serious face, he shook his head slightly at Dieter’s ignorance. He seemed so learned in some areas, but, in others, his lack of knowledge was astounding.

‘This area is renowned throughout the Old World for its vineyards,’ said Calard. ‘These are grape vines you see stretched out before you.’

‘Ah!’ said Dieter, wagging a finger in the air in pleasure and excitement, as if he had uncovered some great hidden knowledge. ‘This is where your wine is made!’

‘Well, it is where the grapes that make wine is cultivated, yes,’ said Calard, amused at the usually reserved man’s obvious excitement. ‘Do you not have vineyards within the Empire?’

‘Oh yes, some, but not in Reikland.’

Calard frowned. ‘So, what do you drink?’

‘Beer, predominantly, strong, full flavoured and invigorating. Some of the wealthy drink wine, but it is not common.’

‘In Bretonnia, even the lowliest peasant drinks wine,’ said Calard proudly, ‘and none more so than those of Bordeleaux, hence the expression, “the sober man of Bordeleaux”.’

Dieter frowned. ‘I do not understand,’ he said.

‘If something is unusual, or unexpected, it is said to be as rare as the sober man of Bordeleaux.’

Dieter repeated the phrase quietly, committing it to memory as if it were of great import.

‘It’s a jest,’ prompted Calard. ‘In Bordeleaux, there is such an abundance of readily accessible and cheap wine that the inhabitants are jokingly regarded to be constantly inebriated.’

‘Yes, I understand the humour. It is most amusing,’ said Dieter seriously. Calard rolled his eyes as the Imperial envoy turned away. If all the people of the Empire were as humourless as Dieter, it must be a grim place indeed.

There was a shout of alarm, and Calard turned in the direction that some of the knights were pointing, seeing wafts of dark smoke rising into the sky in the distance.

‘It’s probably just peasants burning off refuse,’ said a knight, but there was little conviction in his voice.

‘Men are riding towards us,’ said Dieter suddenly. His accent made his pronunciation amusing to the ears of the Bretonnians, and Bertelis, riding just behind the pair, sniggered.

‘Zey are peasant scouts,’ said Bertelis, imitating Dieter’s accent. Calard smirked, and flicked a sidelong glance at the Imperial noble. His face was impassive. If he realised that he was being made fun of, he made no acknowledgement of the fact.

Four outriders rode towards the column of knights, crude spears in their hands. They rode draught horses more generally used to pull hoes and wagons. It was a rare honour for any peasant to be allowed to ride a horse, and a great sign of status among the unruly commoners, though the heavy steeds were utterly outshone by the noble warhorses ridden by the nobility.

Gunthar pulled his steed up alongside Calard, and addressed the dirty peasants as they drew their horses to a halt alongside the column.

‘What news, yeoman?’

The leader of the motley horsemen, a stinking man with a vicious scar running across his face, nodded his head in deference to

Gunthar. He wore a tabard of iron-studded leather over his body, and, bizarrely, had a dead pigeon strapped to his steel-rimmed helmet. His luncheon meal, most probably, thought Calard in disgust.

‘A village, m’lord, under attack up ahead.’

‘Under attack? Greenskins?’ asked Gunthar curtly.

‘Aye, m’lord.’ Calard and Bertelis exchanged excited glances.

‘How far?’ cut in Calard eagerly.

‘Not far, m’lord, maybe five miles? Up yonder, in the dip past that hill,’ said the scarred yeoman, gesturing with his spear towards a rise up ahead.

Calard and Bertelis instantly kicked their steeds forward, though they wheeled them sharply around when they realised that the other knights were not following their lead.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ asked Bertelis.

‘Have some patience, young lord,’ said Gunthar darkly. ‘It is foolish indeed to rush off to battle without knowing first what one faces.’

‘What one faces?’ asked Bertelis. ‘The peasant said it himself: greenskins.’

‘But how many, and from which direction? These are questions that a knight must ask before he charges off to battle.’

Calard huffed in impatience. His steed, sensing its rider’s excitement, was snorting and stamping its hooves as it turned on the spot.

‘Ah, the lads are just eager to whet their blades,’ said the deep booming voice of the Baron of Montcadas as he rode to the front of the column. ‘I can’t say I blame them, either,’ he added. ‘The last week has been a drain on my patience.’ Calard gave the broad shouldered knight a grin.

The baron’s bushy beard parted in a broad, toothy smile, and he pulled his morning star from his side, the heavy spiked ball falling to hang alongside his horse as the chain was released from its leather binding.

‘Let’s go get ’em, eh lads?’ said the baron, winking towards Calard.

The young knights errant whooped in anticipation, and the baron swung his bulk around in the saddle to address the knights behind him.

‘Knights of Bastonne!’ he roared with the thunder of an angry bear. ‘We ride to battle! Form up!’

With that, the baron kicked his steed forward into a trot.

‘Stay close to me lads,’ he rumbled to Calard and Bertelis, and they fell in alongside the stocky knight of Montcadas. Gunthar pulled his steed alongside them, his moustache twitching in irritation.

‘Don’t tense up, and don’t break formation when the charge is launched,’ he said. ‘Keep tight, and don’t lose your momentum.’

‘We know how to fight, old man,’ retorted Bertelis, but the veteran knight ignored him.

‘Follow the lead of the baron. He will be the point of the lance, and you must ride close. We must be as one, for if we become splintered we will lose our advantage.’

Bertelis groaned in exasperation, and Calard too felt his frustration and embarrassment rise.

‘We are not children,’ Calard snapped, feeling a blush on his cheeks to be spoken to in this manner within earshot of the more senior knights.

‘That will be determined shortly,’ said Gunthar. ‘Just remember what I have taught you.’

CALARD’S HANDS WERE sweating within his gauntlets and his throat was dry, as the knights crested the hill.

The buildings of the village were crude dwellings, constructed from a latticework of sticks, and covered in a thick gruel of straw, mud and manure. Such wattle and daub lodgings were common in Bretonnia, for it was illegal for a peasant to make use of stone in the construction of their own dwellings. The streets were filled with screaming peasants, who ran in all directions.

Several of the hovels were ablaze, and black smoke rose, in billowing clouds above them.

Calard's eyes, however, were drawn to the enemy. He had never seen a live greenskin before, though he had stared for hours on end at the massive stuffed head of one of the brutes, mounted in the castle banquet hall, marvelling at its savage, thick features and gaping, tusk-filled maw. That severed orc head had always made him shiver, but it was as nothing compared to witnessing the brutal creatures in the flesh.

Each of them was as tall as a man, though they were hulking monsters of muscle, far broader and heavier than the peasants they were slaughtering. The air was filled with their savage roars, and they hacked around them with heavy cleavers and cudgels, butchering everything in their path.

The ground reverberated with the pounding of hooves as the knights of Bastonne galloped towards the beleaguered villagers, and Calard felt his breath catch in his throat. He saw one roaring greenskin slam its crude weapon into the shoulder of a screaming peasant, blood spurting from the mortal blow as it drove deep into the man's body. An axe slammed into the neck of another, nigh on severing the peasant's head, and the greenskin monster roared its pleasure as hot blood sprayed into its face.

Scores of peasants had already been massacred, and the few that tried to fight their attackers with pitchforks and hoes were cut down mercilessly. Calard saw a man's head rupture as it was slammed violently into the doorframe of a barn, and heard the cries of peasants that had chosen to die in the flames consuming their homes rather than be torn apart by the animal ferocity of the greenskins.

The village was a scene of nightmarish brutality and horror, with screaming peasants running in every direction, seeking escape, and dozens of hulking, green-skinned creatures revelling in the panic and slaughter. Calard saw a child impaled upon a spear hurled through the maelstrom of battle, and, as he watched, he saw a woman hurl herself from the upper storey of a barn, desperate to

escape the flames threatening to burn her alive, only to be leapt upon and ripped apart by a pair of massive green-fleshed brutes.

‘For Bastonne and the King!’ bellowed Baron Montcadas, swinging his spiked morning star over his head, and the knights kicked their steeds into a gallop. The baron formed the apex of the charge, pulling ahead of the line of knights, and the other nobles of Bastonne formed a tight wedge behind him. Calard guided his steed expertly with his thighs and spurs, and lowered his lance before him as he had been trained, and the knights of Bretonnia thundered into the main street of the village.

A greenskin raised its thick head from the struggling peasant it had just clubbed to the ground, its small eyes glinting with savagery. The spiked metal ball of the baron’s morning star swung into its head with brutal force, and the creature was sent flying backwards, its skull a shattered ruin, before it was trampled beneath the hooves of the knights’ steeds.

Everything was happening in a blur. The riot of noise was overwhelming, as screams of pain and anger mingled with animalistic roars and bellows above the pounding of horses’ hooves and the clanking of plate armour. The heat of the flames washed over Calard like a wave, the hot air scalding his lungs with each breath. Burning buildings flashed past as the knights pounded into the village, and peasants dived out of the way, frantic to escape being trampled to death. The stink of blood, death and burning human flesh filled Calard’s nostrils. His heart was pounding and his breath was coming in short, sharp gasps.

‘Keep tight!’ shouted Gunthar, and Calard snapped back into focus. His whole existence seemed to become suddenly centred on the tip of his lance, and he levelled it at the barrelling chest of a greenskin brute that roared its defiance as he bore down upon it.

The creature leapt forward to meet the knights head-on, and Calard followed its every move with the tip of his lance. He took in every detail of the barbarous creature: its foul hide, which was the colour of rotting vegetation; the assortment of rusted armour plates that covered its broad shoulders; its malicious red eyes filled with

bloodlust and bestial hatred. Gore dripped from the heavy bladed cleavers clasped in its massive fists, and thick tusks extended from its lower jaw. Its heavily scarred arms were immense, easily as thick as his thighs.

The lance tip smashed into the orc's chest with a shuddering impact, and Calard tensed his muscles as he drove the lance through the creature's ribcage, as he had been taught on the practice fields of Garamont. The power of the blow shuddered up Calard's arm and into his body, as the vamplate of his lance was driven back into his breastplate, and his body rocked backwards in the saddle. The lance drove clear through the creature's body, impaling it, and the weapon was ripped from Calard's hands.

The fallen orc was trampled beneath Gringolet's hooves, its bones crushed as it was kicked and stamped by the knights close behind. Then Calard was past the orc, his sword hissing from his scabbard in a flash of silver. In what seemed like a fraction of a second, he had been blooded in battle, and had made his first kill with the lance.

Calard's blade flashed out, glancing off the skull of an orc as he surged past, and other greenskins were lifted into the air as they were impaled on the lances of the other knights.

Calard's earlier nervousness was replaced by an empowering surge of adrenaline, and he whooped savagely, voicing his enthusiasm and excitement as the formation of knights thundered through the village, running down and slaughtering the greenskins. Nothing could stand against them, and the feeling of power and speed was intoxicating.

CALARD'S HANDS WERE shaking as he dismounted, and he took a deep racking breath, exhausted and exhilarated. His body was tense, and it felt like he had been fighting for hours rather than the scant minutes that had actually passed.

Kneeling, he wiped the dark blood from his sword on the tunic of a peasant lying face down and unmoving in the mud. The image

of the orc as his lance had impaled it kept flashing into his mind, and he clenched his fist, feeling again the killing blow.

Bertelis whooped as he dropped from the saddle alongside him, and Calard beamed at him as the brothers clasped forearms.

‘Our first battle a noble victory!’ said Bertelis. ‘I saw your strike, brother, a fine blow it was.’

‘As was yours,’ said Calard. Bertelis’s lance had taken an orc in the throat, ripping its jugular free in a spurt of blood.

‘And the baron!’ exclaimed Bertelis. ‘He was like the spirit of Gilles reborn! He must have killed, what, five of them?’

‘It was truly a sight to behold,’ he said, nodding in agreement, awed by the prowess of the knight.

‘You did well, young lords,’ said Gunthar gruffly, pulling his horse alongside the pair of knights errant. ‘You remembered your training in the chaos of battle. More than a few knights have stumbled in their first engagement, freezing up or becoming overwhelmed by their fear. I am proud of you both.’

Calard beamed up at Gunthar, feeling a surge of pride at the rare praise.

Peasant women wailed over the mutilated corpses of fathers, husbands and sons, while others struggled to contain the fires that still raged, but Calard was oblivious to their suffering, focused completely on his own victory. He had been tested in the forge of battle and had proven himself worthy.

‘This was but a skirmish,’ said Gunthar. ‘The enemy was unprepared for our attack, intent on the slaughter of the defenceless, but it is good that your blades have been whetted in blood. Remember this day, for things will never be the same again. Today, you have become men.’

With a curt nod, the weapon master wheeled his horse around, and began barking orders at the men-at-arms bearing the colours of Garamont, who were just now arriving in the village, organising them into work teams. A pit was dug on the outskirts of the village, and the corpses of slain peasants were hurled unceremoniously into the shallow grave. The bodies of the greenskins were dragged onto

the smouldering remnants of a hovel gutted by fire, and the air was soon filled with a nauseating stink as their flesh was consumed in the flames. More than half the village had been levelled by fire, and peasants poked through the ruins to salvage anything of value.

‘Knights of Bastonne! The armies of Bordeleaux are near!’ bellowed Baron Montcadas. ‘We push on!’

Calard pulled himself into the saddle once more, feeling older and more self-assured than he had only an hour earlier. He accepted a new lance offered to him by a soldier, bearing the colours of his father, and at the sound of a horn blown by one of the knights the nobles of Bastonne rode from the devastated village. The men-at-arms and bowmen trudged along in their wake, stomping and slipping through the mud.

The peasant villagers watched them go, their faces pale, and streaked with blood and filth as they stood despondent amid the scene of destruction all around them.

The warriors of Bastonne did not look back.

CALARD’S JAW DROPPED as he drew to a halt atop the rise and looked down upon the seething battle underway below.

They had ridden for half a day before encountering the scouts of Bordeleaux.

Clarion horns sounded, and thousands of knights churned up the earth as they thundered across the field, lances lowering as they smashed into the massed ranks of the enemy. The greenskins surged like an overwhelming tide, their numbers inconceivable. Dim roars and screams carried up to the knights of Bordeleaux, and barbarous drums echoed across the battlefield. The greenskins pounded weapons against their shields, creating a resounding din, like the beating heart of some infernal god of war.

The earth was littered with the dead and dying, hundreds of broken figures that twitched and moaned in pain. Horses with legs broken beneath them screamed in inhuman agony. Dark clouds of arrows descended through the air, killing hundreds with each volley.

‘Ah, what I would give to have a handful of cannons from Nuln here, now,’ said Dieter, to no one in particular. Bertelis flashed a look of disgust at the Empire soldier.

Thousands of men-at-arms and greenskins were locked in brutal combat, and Calard could see the line of the Bretonnian forces begin to buckle against the strength and ferocity of the foe. Even as he watched, he saw a heraldic black and white banner fall amidst the mayhem, and a few men-at-arms broke ranks, fleeing away from the foe. These men were like the first rocks that started an avalanche, and soon hundreds of men-at-arms were streaming back towards their own battle lines. Scores of them were cut down by the enemy that surged forwards as they fled, and hundreds more would have been slaughtered were it not for the knights that powered into the greenskins, stemming the gap in the line. They ploughed through the undisciplined enemy ranks, felling dozens with lance and sword, and scattering the survivors before them.

The greenskin lines parted, and rattling chariots of crude design were dragged through the breach by giant war boars, murderous scythes spinning from their axles. Calard cried out as he saw a trio of these machines of war smash into a phalanx of knights. Nobles fell heavily as their steed’s legs were cut from beneath them, while other knights were lifted from their saddles by the thick spears thrust by the orcs riding upon the backs of these wheeled constructs. The gigantic war boars, bristling with blood lust, gored and ripped with thick tusks capped with iron, and noble warriors of Bordeleaux were crushed beneath the metal studded rims of chariot wheels.

The carnage was breathtaking. This was war, with thousands of men and beasts clashing in mortal combat.

A formation of knights, its momentum lost, became mired in combat, deep within an enemy formation. Their horn blower sounded his instrument frantically, as the greenskins surrounded them on all sides and began dragging them from the saddle, cleavers hacking at the knights savagely.

A lance of knights, hearing the distress call, wheeled their steeds around to aid their comrades, and it was then that Calard saw a fresh

line of orcs erupt from the tree line, riding upon the backs of hulking boars. The powerful beasts hurtled across the ground, angling towards the flank of the knights who were oblivious to the threat. The knights of Bordeleaux overlooked the field from a vantage point, and only they could see the danger. The boar riders would slam into the flank of the knights, and more proud Bretonnians would be slaughtered.

‘Ride!’ shouted Baron Montcadas, kicking his steed onwards, and the knights of Bastonne powered down the grassy hill to intercept the threat. Calard, his face flushed with anger, shouted a wordless war cry, which was lost amongst the cacophony of war, as he urged Gringolet on, willing the stallion to gallop faster.

Too late, the boar riders realised this new danger, and tried to haul their bulky steeds around to face the knights’ charge. The creatures were stubborn, obstinate beasts, and they snarled and slavered as their riders pulled brutally at them. Several of them threw their riders, bucking and spinning, and the massive tuskers gored each other in the confusion. The scent of blood drove them to madness, and they ripped at each other, as their riders tried frantically to control the wild beasts. Then the knights of Bastonne slammed into them.

Calard’s lance glanced off the armoured shoulder of an orc, throwing it off balance, and Gringolet’s armoured bulk smashed the creature aside. It lost its precarious balance upon the ridged back of its mount, and fell beneath the flashing hooves of the warhorses, even as the boar was impaled upon the lance of another knight, spitting and snarling as it fell.

There was a sharp crack from nearby, followed by an unfamiliar, acrid smell, and an orc was felled as a lead shot punched through its thick, bony forehead. Calard glanced to his side to see the Empire soldier, Dieter, with one of his long, ornate pistols extended, smoke spilling from the barrel.

A knight alongside Calard was thrown from the saddle as a spear struck his breastplate, and he saw his brother’s lance break as it sank deep into the body of another boar. Tucking his own lance tightly

under his arm, he drove its point into the face of a savagely painted greenskin, feeling the satisfying impact as the long weapon drove through its eye socket and brain, before punching through the back of its skull.

Then the knights were free, having smashed through the flank of the boar riders, splitting them.

‘Wheel right!’ roared Baron Montcadas, swinging his gore splattered morning star above his head, spraying blood all around him. In perfect unison, the knights of Bastonne pulled their steeds around to the right in a wide arc, wheeling to face the remnants of the boar riders.

‘For the glory of Bastonne!’ roared the baron, echoed by the shouts of the knights riding behind him, and charged into the confused enemy.

Calard screamed in savage fury as he killed. His lance was wrenched from his hand, so he drew his glittering sword and split the helmet and head of another greenskin.

Within the hour, the field had been won, and the remnants of the greenskin army was fleeing back into the trees, pursued by small regiments of knights and mounted yeomen.

Calard reined his steed in, breathing heavily. His immaculate blue and red tabard was splattered with blood, and ripped where a cowardly arrow, fired by the enemy, had glanced across his chest. His shield, bearing his white dragon rampant upon a blue and red field was battered and scratched.

In one hand, he held the delicate material of the scarf given to him by Elisabet, and he lifted it to his nose, inhaling the perfume that clung to it, feeling comfort in the familiar scent. He tucked the silk cloth beneath his breastplate, and bent forwards in the saddle to pat Gringolet heavily on the shoulder, whispering to the powerful destrier.

‘You did well, boy. You did well.’

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