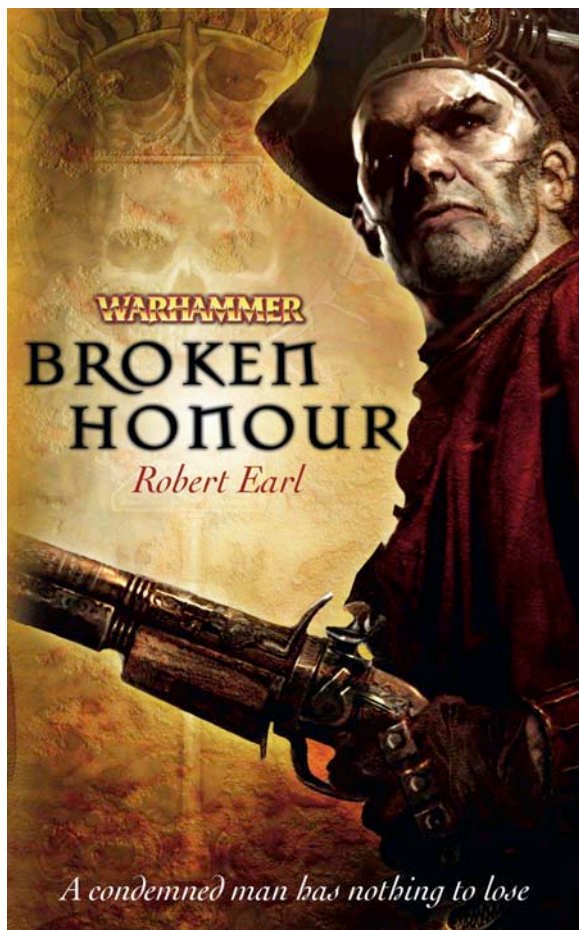




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# **BROKEN HONOUR**

*A Warhammer novel*

*By Robert Earl*

The armies of Hochland are at breaking point. Beset on all sides by the feral beastmen, the safety and prosperity of the province is shattered. These are desperate times. Mercenary Captain Eriksson looks to capitalise on the conflict, buying the freedom of a group of prisoners to form a new free company. The criminals are delighted to be released, but this comes at a terrible price – to fight and die in the upcoming conflict. Eriksson must lead his makeshift company into one bloody battle after another, putting his faith in those who gave up on honour long ago. On the battlefields of Hochland, either damnation or redemption awaits them.

## **About the Author**

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 worked and travelled in the Balkans and the Middle East. He now lives in England, and his credits for the Black Library include the Florin and Lorenzo series and Ancient Blood.

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‘DRUM THE HALT, Dolf,’ Erikson told the youngster. He tried not to wince as the marching company stumbled to a ragged stop just beyond the city walls. A chorus of curses and complaints rang out as men were jostled or pushed back into place by their comrades, and their section leaders began to harangue them back into formation. Erikson pretended not to notice the confusion as a herald cantered up, pulled his horse around and sprang from the saddle.

‘The Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig?’ he asked, and cast a doubtful eye over the mismatched weapons that were waving around above the company’s heaving ranks.

‘That is indeed our name,’ Erikson said, raising his voice above Porter’s sudden stream of curses.

‘Yes,’ the herald said vaguely. He gazed at the company with horrified fascination before tearing his eyes away and delivering his message. ‘The baron commands you to move to a position equidistant between Jung’s Halberdiers and the Most Noble Company of Greatswords. If you would follow me I will act as your guide.’

‘In the front line?’ Erikson asked, suddenly glad of the commotion which was distracting most of the men from

the conversation. 'This is a militia regiment, not a phalanx. Are you sure we're to go in the front line?'

The herald took another glance at the company and shrugged sympathetically.

'Those are your orders,' he said. 'If you wish to be relieved of your position in the line...'

'No, of course not,' Erikson said hurriedly. 'I just wanted to make sure.'

'Very well, if you would follow me then. Double step, if you can manage it.'

Erikson frowned. Forward of the line was a position for one of the great bastion regiments, a bristle of pikemen or the shield wall of a sword company. The only reason that a militia would be sent forwards would be if things were truly desperate.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and smiled as brightly as the rising sun.

'Dolf,' he commanded, looking down into the trusting eyes of his drummer. 'Sound the advance.'

The drumbeat started again, and Sergeant Alter's voice rang out above it, calling the right, left, right of the march. They had not had time to practise double time any more than they had had time to practise much else, but at least they could march with something approaching a military manner. Between them Erikson and Alter had taught the men that much.

Even so, as they passed through the neatly drawn ranks of the state regiments Erikson couldn't help feeling something approaching embarrassment at the state of his ragged company. The feeling was heightened when they staggered to another halt between the halberdiers on one side and the greatswords on the other.

'Don't they look fantastic, captain?' Dolf said, drumsticks idle in his hands as the ranks behind him

gradually shoved and kicked themselves into a square. ‘I always wanted to be in a state regiment, ever since I can remember. One of the sisters told me that my father was a state trooper, although I never knew him.’

Erikson smiled at the wistful tone of his voice, and clapped him on the shoulder. The youngster looked up at him with such transparent hero-worship that it looked as if he wished he had a tail to wag.

‘You never know.’ Erikson winked at him. ‘Carry on the way you’re going and you could end up commanding one.’

Dolf looked sceptically at his captain then back to the block of greatswords who stood beside them. The men were barrel-chested and thick-armed from a lifetime of training, and they carried the great double-handed swords with an easy grace. Their armour was burnished by the sunlight, and the velvet and lace beneath the metal was of the very best quality.

One of the men, his beard large enough to have shamed a dwarf, caught his eye and called over.

‘What are you doing with that war drum, lad? Somebody leave it in the rag and bone?’

Dolf’s mouth worked as he tried to think of a rejoinder. Before he could the rest of the company retaliated on his behalf. They jeered and swore, hurling ribald abuse at the greatswords with an effortless cohesion that was quite at odds with the rest of their manoeuvres.

Erikson smiled behind his hand as he cast his eyes up and down the line. It was neatly dressed, and from this angle it was impossible to see how many regiments stood shoulder to shoulder. He could see the lance tips of cavalry rising from behind a roll in the ground on the left side, but apart from that they seemed to be at the very front of the army.

But why? Why were they here?

It wasn't until Porter started a chant regarding the greatswords' female relatives that he realised why. They were the matting over the pit. The twig holding up the dead weight. The bait in the trap.

They were here to break.

Erikson thought of the regiments that lay on each side of them, and the regiments which they had passed on their way to their position. They were the best armed and most professional in the entire army. After the enemy had destroyed Erikson's regiment and poured through the gap in the line, those regiments would surely close upon them like the jaws of a steel trap.

'Stupid bastard,' he muttered beneath his breath. 'Why didn't I see it sooner?'

By now the greatswords' officers were calling them to order. Erikson waited until Porter got in the last word before signalling to Alter, who bullied the men into something resembling silence.

Erikson was no longer listening. He was too busy trying to think of a way out of the doom which the baron's strategy required them to face. He was so deep in thought that it took him a while to realise that the entire line had fallen into a nervous silence, a thousand ears straining to catch the sound of the enemy's advance.

When Erikson finally heard it the skin on his scalp crawled. It didn't sound like an army. It sounded more like some force of nature. Even the sky darkened beneath a swarm of panicked birds it drove before it. That was more redolent of a storm front than an army.

'I can feel the ground shaking,' Dolf told him, and looked at the captain with eyes that had grown impossibly large within the pinched lines of his face.

‘That’s normal,’ Erikson lied with an easy aplomb. ‘Cavalry always does that.’

‘I don’t think that it’s cavalry.’ Dolf shook his head doubtfully. ‘Look.’

Erikson looked, squinting into the distance. Here and there copses of trees studded the open spaces of the fields, and the shadows they cast were long and dark beneath the rising sun. But now there was another shadow too, a line of darkness which rolled towards the humans’ line as remorselessly as a tsunami heading for a beach.

‘They’re coming,’ Sergeant Alter said with something that sounded strangely like anticipation. Already the musicians were starting to sound the alarm. Erikson, not to be outdone, slapped Dolf on the shoulder.

‘Sound the stand-to, drummer,’ Erikson said as, above the humans’ musicians the first of the enemies’ horns sounded. They rang out with toneless shrieks of discordant sound, and again Erikson felt his skin crawling and animal terror gnawing at its leash within his stomach. As always, he ignored it.

‘Don’t know that one yet, captain,’ Dolf said.

‘Three short one long,’ Erikson told him. My men can’t double time. My drummer can’t sound the stand-to. And my job is to provide a welcome mat for the enemy.

Fantastic.

He drew his sword, the steel feeling ridiculously light as his heart raced, and turned back to hammer home the message one more time.

‘Remember, gentlemen,’ he shouted above the drumbeat and the growing thunder of the enemy. ‘Hold your position and we will live. Break the formation and we will die. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, captain,’ Gunter bellowed.



‘Do you understand me?’ Erikson asked again, and this time the whole company responded. Erikson nodded and turned back just as the first wave crested a hill which was no more than a quarter of a mile away.

In a hundred battlefields he had never seen anything like them before. The beasts which strained beneath crudely lashed-together harnesses were neither boar nor bull nor any other animal which he knew. As they thundered forwards, closing the distance with an impossible speed, Erikson studied the confusion of horns and tusks which sprouted from the creatures’ massive skulls. He could see their wickedly curved fangs too. They were bared impatiently as the charge rolled forwards.

Although no bigger than small ponies the beasts were obviously possessed of an immense strength. They were bound together by crude harnesses of leather and wood, and behind each pair a cart bounced and jolted along. The horrors which rode these contraptions, their bestial features even more vile for being melded with a humanoid form, clung to the woodwork with one hand while holding their axes ready with the other. The misshapen metal was dulled with rust and filth, but here and there sunlight caught a scrape of clean steel.

In the semaphore flash of these weapons Erikson could see that they were doomed. The beasts advanced in a wall that stretched as far as he could see in either direction, and the sheer, murderous weight of the bizarre chariots would be enough to crush them on its own. He had seen it happen before. You couldn’t stop a chariot. When they hit, they...

No.

No, stop that.

Erikson literally shook himself, and noticed that Dolf's drum had fallen silent.

'Carry on drumming,' he said. 'The stand-to continues until I give the order to stop.'

Dolf tore his eyes away from the advance and started drumming, tentatively at first but soon quickening to a solid beat.

The chariots were close enough that Erikson could see the turfs that were kicked up by their hooves. Then so close that he could see the spray of mucus that splattered around their nostrils. Then, when they were so close that he could see the vicious pink slits of their eyes, the thunder broke.

The sound of it echoed from both flanks, a deep boom of harnessed alchemy, and the effect was immediate.

The chariot which Erikson had been watching exploded. The riders disappeared as the vehicle burst asunder in a shrapnel storm of splinters and metal. The beasts that had been pulling it were pulled back and then thrown together by the shattered remains. One of them was already bleeding, its hindquarters a ruin of blood. Its fellow turned on it, animal panic finding escape in the feast of its dying kin.

Erikson stared stupidly as, with a solid beat that made his teeth rattle, a plume of soil and grey smoke rose in a sudden cloud directly ahead of him. It lifted another of the chariots as easily as a breath of wind will lift a dandelion seed. The mangled contraption flipped over in the air, beasts and riders hurled from its tumbling ruin.

Behind him, Erikson could hear the cheering of an entire army. It rang in his ears even as the acrid stink of blackpowder rolled lazily across the battlefield. Another cannon ball, blurring with the speed of Sigmar's comet, scythed along the disintegrating line of the chariots. It

sliced the legs from half a dozen of the beasts, which collapsed with squeals of pain.

One of the chariots, its yoke caught in the harness, flipped over, catapulting its riders ahead of it. A survivor rose to its feet, but only for a second. The advance still thundered forwards, and the beasts which pulled the following chariot gored the survivor as it thundered over the ruin.

The cheering faltered as, despite the rolling thunder of the artillery, the charge swept on. Now the beasts were so close that he could see the flies which swarmed around them. And now they had arrived.

Despite the eye-watering sting of blackpowder smoke, Erikson could smell the beasts as they barrelled into his company. It was the smell of rotten meat and foetid musk, and he would remember it for the rest of his life. At that moment he had no time to think of anything other than the ton of hoof and horn and steel that was smashing into his company.

It hit to the left of him, and although its momentum was hardly slowed by its impact with the screaming mass of its victims, it was slowed enough. Erikson ducked beneath the arc of one of the rider's axes, ignored the agony of the spinning wheel that sheared the flesh off his right arm, and slashed through the fetlock of the nearest beast.

It turned on him, vicious pink eyes wide with pain, and Erikson sprang away from the slash of its tusks. Another man was not so quick. As the crippled beast lunged forwards it caught him in his stomach. It lifted its head and shook, gouging its tusk even deeper into the impaled man. Meanwhile one of the riders, a nightmare thing with a goat's head and arms as thick as a man's leg, was hacking down into the men who swarmed about him

with the wide, easy strokes of a farmer clearing brushwood.

Blood splattered across Erikson's face, but despite the carnage, and despite the shrieks of his dying comrades, he was joyous with relief. For all the damage it had done, the chariot had been stopped. Now the advantage was theirs.

The beast which he had hobbled was the first to be felled, its skull split by a single stroke from Brandt's greatsword. Its fellow died soon after, blinded by spears and bled out by the hundred cuts that sliced open its arteries. The beast which had ridden the chariot leapt clear, but before it could run the company surged forwards, the men roaring with their thirst for vengeance.

It was Gunter who felled the beast. He waited until it had buried its axe in another man's head before leaping forwards, robes flailing, and swinging his warhammer down in a blurred arc that ended up between the thing's slit-pupilled eyes. It fell back in a daze, and a dozen mismatched weapons butchered it as easily as if it had been a trussed pig.

'Back into line!' Erikson cried, grabbing the men and pushing them back towards the square. 'Ten paces back, and form up ranks. Ten paces!'

The men turned to him, their pale and blood-spattered features a study in confusion. There was no semblance of anything resembling a square any more. Just a mob of milling individuals. Erikson felt something close to panic.

'Alter!' he cried. 'Gunter. Porter. Re-form your sections ten paces back. Come on, re-form them.'

'Shall I drum the assembly, captain?' Dolf asked, and Erikson turned to him with the gratitude of a drowning man who has found a single solid timber.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, drum the assembly. Porter, where the hells are you? There you are. Leave that corpse and get your men back into their ranks. Gunter, leave the wounded for now. We will see to them when we’ve re-formed.’

Slowly, terrifyingly slowly, the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig re-formed into something resembling a square. If another chariot had hit them then they would have been finished, driven before it like a flock of chickens before a fox. But even as Erikson bullied his men back into their places he saw that the artillery had done its work. The charge had been broken.

All across the front the remains of the chariots lay scattered like flotsam on a beach after some terrible storm. Here and there beasts cried out in pain or limped and crawled away. An occasional shot still rang out, but now the rolling thunder of the cannonade had dwindled into the occasional ranging shot. Erikson watched a plume of smoke and shrapnel erupt from the ground perhaps a quarter of a mile away, well short of the mass of creatures which had spilled across the green horizon like some dark cancer.

‘All accounted for, sir.’

Erikson took a deep breath and turned to find Sergeant Alter standing to attention. Perhaps it was the battle, but he looked twenty years younger than he had when Erikson had found him rotting in the gaol. Behind him the men had formed up into the beginnings of a square, and Porter and Gunter’s calls still rang out over their charges’ complaints.

‘Casualties?’ Erikson asked, although he could see the bodies that still lay tangled in the mud and amongst the traces of the chariot. Six men who would never eat or

drink or dance again. Six men who would still be alive if they hadn't followed him onto this battlefield.

'Just those six, sir,' Alter told him. 'And a dozen more wounded.'

'Keep them in the centre,' Erikson told him, and looked again at the remains of the chariot.

Yes, he thought. Yes, that might do it.

It would be better than nothing, anyway.

'Then choose one section to go and find another one of those things,' he told Alter. 'We're going to build a barricade.'

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