

GRUDGE BEARER

A Warhammer novel

By Gav Thorpe

Barundin Stoneheart is now the king of the dwarf realm of Zhufbar. His ascension should herald hearty celebration, but it only brings the ancient dwarf bitterness and rage. For Barundin's father Throddin was slain on the field of battle. A death caused by the cowardice of a manling, no fate for an honourable dwarf. Honour now demands that Barundin must seek vengeance on his father's betrayer, no matter how long it takes.

But dwarf history is littered with countless grudges and oaths of vengeance. Every action, every battle gives birth to hundreds more. Can Barundin ever hope to plough through all these grudges and still lead his people to victory over their many enemies?



About the Author

Gav Thorpe works for Games Workshop in his capacity as Lead Background Designer, overseeing and contributing to the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 worlds. He has a dozen or so short stories to his name (maybe less, he can't remember), and over half a dozen novels. Dennis the mechanical hamster is now enjoying a small amount of infamy on the internet, and is embarking on a career as an international pet of mystery.

Grudge Bearer can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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The twisted, baying creatures came on in a great mass, howling and screaming at the darkening sky. Some shambled forwards on all fours like dogs and bears, others ran upright with long, loping strides. Each was an unholy hybrid of man and beast, some with canine faces and human bodies, others with the hindquarters of a goat or cat. Bird-faced creatures with bat-like wings sprouting from their backs swept forward in swooping leaps alongside gigantic monstrosities made of flailing limbs and screeching faces.

As the sun glittered off the peaks of the mountains around them, the host of elves and dwarfs stood grimly watching the fresh wave of warped horrors sweep down the valley. For five long days they had stood against the horde pouring from the

north. The sky seethed with magical energy above them, pulsing with unnatural vigour. Storm clouds tinged with blue and purple roiled in the air above the dark host.

At the head of the dwarf army stood the high king, Snorri Whitebeard. His beard was stained with dirt and blood and he held his glimmering rune axe heavily in his hand. Around him his guards picked up their shields, axes and hammers and closed around the king, preparing to face the fresh onslaught. It was the dwarf standing to Snorri's left, Godri Stonehewer, who broke the grim silence.

'Do you think there'll be many more of them?' he asked, hefting his hammer in his right hand. 'Only, I haven't had a beer in three days.'

Snorri chuckled and looked across towards Godri. 'Where did you find beer three days ago?' the high king said. 'I haven't had a drop since the first day.'

'Well,' replied Godri, avoiding the king's gaze, 'there may have been a barrel or two that were missed when we were doling out the rations.'

'Godri!' snapped Snorri, genuinely angry. 'There's good fighters back there with blood in their mouths that have had to put up with that elf-spit for three days, and you had your own beer? If I survive this we'll be having words!'

Godri didn't reply, but shuffled his feet and kept his gaze firmly on the ground.

'Heads up.' someone called from further down the line, and Snorri turned to see four dark shapes in the sky above, barely visible amongst the clouds. One detached itself from the group and spiralled downwards.

As it came closer, the shape was revealed to be a dragon, its large white scales glinting in the magical storm. Perched at the base of its long, serpentine neck was a figure swathed in a light blue cloak, his silvered armour shining through the flapping folds. His face was hidden behind a tall helm decorated with two golden wings that arched into the air.

The dragon landed in front of Snorri and folded its wings. A tall, lean figure leapt gracefully to the ground from its saddle and strode towards Snorri, his long cloak flowing just above the muddy ground. As he approached, he removed his helm, revealing a slender face and wide, bright eyes. His skin was fair and dark hair fell loosely around his shoulders.

'Made it back then?' said Snorri as the elf stopped in front of him.

'Of course,' the elf replied with a distasteful look. *'Were you expecting me to perish?'*

'Hey now, Malekith, don't take on so,' said Snorri with a growl. *'It was a simple greeting.'*

The elf prince did not reply. He surveyed the oncoming horde. When he spoke, his gaze was still fixed to the north.

'This is the last of them for many, many leagues,' said Malekith. *"When they are all destroyed, we shall turn westwards to the hordes that threaten the cities of my people.'*

'That was the deal, yes,' said Snorri, pulling off his helmet and dragging a hand through his knotted, sweat-soaked hair. *'We swore oaths, remember?'*

Malekith turned and looked at Snorri. 'Yes, oaths,' the elf prince said. *'Your word is your bond, that is how it is with you dwarfs, is it not?'*

'As it should be with all civilised folk,' said Snorri, ramming his helmet back on. *'You've kept your word, we'll keep ours.'*

The elf nodded and walked away. With a graceful leap he was in the dragon's saddle, and a moment later, with a thunderous flapping of wings, the beast soared into the air and was soon lost against the clouds.

'They're a funny folk, those elves,' remarked Godri. *'Speak odd, too.'*

'They're a strange breed, right enough,' agreed the dwarf king. *'Living with dragons, can't take their ale, and I'm sure they spend too much time in the sun. Still, anyone who can*

swing a sword and will stand beside me is friend enough in these dark times.'

'Right enough,' said Godri with a nod.

The dwarf throng was silent as the beasts of Chaos approached, and above the baying and howling of the twisted monsters, the clear trumpet calls of the elves could be heard, marshalling their line.

The unnatural tide of mutated flesh was now only some five hundred yards away and Snorri could smell their disgusting stench. In the dim light, a storm of white-shafted arrows lifted into the air from the elves and fell down amongst the horde, punching through furred hide and leathery skin. Another volley followed swiftly after, then another and another. The ground of the valley was littered with the dead and the dying, dozens of arrow-pierced corpses strewn across the slope in front of Snorri and his army. Still the beasts rushed on, heedless of their casualties. Now they were now only two hundred yards away.

Three arrows burning with blue fire arced high into the air.

'Right, that's us,' said Snorri. He gave a nod to Thundir to his right. The dwarf lifted his curling horn to his lips and blew a long blast that resounded off the valley walls.

The noise gradually increased as the dwarfs marched forwards, the echoes of the horn call and the roaring of the Chaos beasts now drowned out by the tramp of iron-shod feet, the clinking of chainmail and the thump of hammers and axes on shields.

Like a wall of iron, the dwarf line advanced down the slope as another salvo of arrows whistled over their heads. The scattered groups of fanged, clawed monsters crashed into the shieldwall. Growling, howling and screeching, their wordless challenges met with gruff battle cries and shouted oaths.

'Grungni guide my hand!' bellowed Snorri as a creature with the head of a wolf, the body of a man and the legs of a lizard jumped at him, slashing with long talons. Snorri swept his axe from right to left in a low arc, the gleaming blade

shearing off the beast's legs just below the waist.

As the dismembered corpse tumbled down the hill, Snorri stepped forward and brought his axe back in a return blow, ripping the head from a bear-like creature with a lashing snake for a tail. Thick blood that stank of rotten fish fountained over the king, sticking to the plates of his iron armour. Gobbets caught in his matted beard, making him gag.

It was going to be a long day.

The throne room of Zhufbar echoed gently with the hubbub of the milling dwarfs. A hundred lanterns shone a golden light down onto the throng as King Thrandin looked out over his court. Representatives of most of the clans were here, and amongst the crowd he spied the familiar face of his son Barundin. The young dwarf was in conversation with the runelord, Arbrek Silverfingers. Thrandin chuckled quietly to himself as he imagined the topic of conversation: undoubtedly his son would be saying something rash and ill-considered, and Arbrek would be cursing him softly with an amused twinkle in his eye.

Movement at the great doors caught the king's attention. The background noise dropped down as a human emissary entered, escorted by Hengrid Dragonfoe, the hold's gatewarden. The manling was tall, even for one of his kind, and behind him came two other men carrying a large ironbound wooden chest. The messenger was clearly taking slow, deliberate strides so as not to outpace his shorter-legged escort, while the two carrying the chest were visibly tiring. A gap opened up in the assembled throng, a pathway to the foot of Thrandin's throne appearing out of the crowd.

He sat with his arms crossed as he watched the small deputation make its way up the thirty steps to the dais on which his throne stood. The messenger bowed low, his left hand extended to the side with a flourish, and then looked up at the king.

‘My lord, King Thrandin of Zhufbar, I bring tidings from

Baron Silas Vessal of Averland,' the emissary said. He was speaking slowly, for which Throndin was grateful, as it had been many long years since he had needed to understand the Reikspiel of the Empire.

The king said nothing for a moment, and then noticed the manling's unease at the ensuing silence. He dredged up the right words from his memory. 'And you are?' asked Throndin.

'I am Marechal Heinlin Kulft, cousin and herald to Baron Vessal,' the man replied.

'Cousin, eh?' said Throndin with an approving nod. At least this manling lord had sent one of his own family to parley with the king. In his three hundred years, Throndin had come to think of humans as rash, flighty and inconsiderate. Almost as bad as elves, he thought to himself.

'Yes, my lord,' replied Kulft. 'On his father's side,' he added, feeling perhaps that the explanation would fill the silence that had descended on the wide, long chamber. He was acutely aware of hundreds of dwarfs' eyes boring into his back and hundreds of dwarfs' ears listening to his every word.

'So, you have a message?' said Throndin, tilting his head slightly to one side.

'I have two, my lord,' said Kulft. 'I bring both grievous news and a request from Baron Vessal.'

'You want help, then?' said Throndin. 'What do you want?'

The herald was momentarily taken aback by the king's forthright manner, but gathered himself quickly. 'Orcs, my lord,' said Kulft, and at the mention of the hated greenskins an angry buzzing filled the chamber. The noise quieted as Throndin waved the assembled court to silence. He gestured for Kulft to continue.

'From north of the baron's lands, the orcs have come,' he said. 'Three farms have been destroyed already, and we believe they are growing in number. The baron's armies are well equipped but small, and he fears that should we not respond quickly the orcs will only grow bolder.'

‘Then ask your count or your emperor for more men,’ said Throddin. ‘What concern is it of mine?’

‘The orcs have crossed your lands as well,’ replied Kulft quickly, obviously prepared for such a question. ‘Not only this year, but last year at about the same time.’

‘Have you a description of these creatures?’ demanded Throddin, his eyes narrowing to slits.

‘They are said to carry shields emblazoned with the crude image of a face with two long fangs, and they paint their bodies with strange designs in black paint,’ said Kulft. This time the reaction from the throng was even louder.

Throddin sat in silence, but the knuckles of his clenched fists were white and his beard quivered. Kulft gestured to the two men that had gratefully placed the chest on the throne tier, and they opened it up. The light of a hundred lanterns glittered off the contents – a few gems, many, many silver coins and several bars of gold. The anger in Throddin’s eyes was rapidly replaced with an acquisitive gleam.

‘The baron would not wish you to endure any expense on his account,’ explained Kulft, gesturing to the treasure chest. ‘He would ask that you accept this gesture of his good will in offsetting any cost that your expedition might incur.’

‘Hmm, gift?’ said Throddin, tearing his eyes away from the gold bars. They were of a particular quality, originally dwarf-gold if his experienced eye was not mistaken. ‘For me?’

Kulft nodded. The dwarf king looked back at the chest and then glowered at the few dwarfs that had taken hesitant steps up the stairway towards the chest. Kulft gestured for his companions to close the lid before any trouble started. He had heard of the dwarf lust for gold, but had mistaken it merely for greed. The reaction had been something else entirely, a desire for the precious metal that bordered on physical need, like a man finding water in the desert.

‘While I accept this generous gift, it is not for gold that the King of Zhufbar shall march forth,’ said Throddin, standing up.

‘We know of these orcs. Indeed, last year they were met in battle by dwarfs of my own clan, and the vile creatures took the life of my eldest son.’

Throndin paced forward, his balled fists by his side, and stood at the top of the steps. When he next spoke, his voice echoed from the far walls of the chamber. He turned to Kulft. ‘These orcs owe us dear,’ snarled the king. ‘The life of a Zhufbar prince stains their lives and they have been entered onto the list of wrongs done against my hold and my people. I declare grudge against these orcs! Their lives are forfeit, and with axe and hammer we shall make them pay the price they owe. Ride to your lord, tell him to prepare for war, and tell him that King Throndin Stoneheart of Zhufbar will fight beside him!’

The tramping of dwarf boots rang from the mountainsides as the gates of Zhufbar were swung open and the host of King Throndin marched out. Rank after rank of bearded warriors advanced between the two great statues of Grungni and Grimnir that flanked the gateway, carved from the rock of the mountain. Above the dwarf army swayed a forest of standards of gold and silver wrought into the faces of revered ancestors, clan runes and guild symbols.

The thud of boots was joined by the rumbling of wheels and the wheezing and coughing of a steam engine. At the rear of the dwarf column, a steamdozer puffed into view, its spoked, iron-rimmed wheels grinding along the cracked and pitted roadway. Billows of grey smoke rose into the air from the fluted funnel as the traction engine growled forwards, pulling behind it a chain of four wagons laden with baggage covered with heavy, cable-bound, waterproof sacking.

The autumn sky above the World’s Edge Mountains was low and grey, threatening rain, yet Throndin was in high spirits. He walked at the head of his army, with Barundin to his left carrying the king’s own standard, and marching to his right the Runelord Arbrek.

‘War was never a happy occasion in your father’s day,’ said Arbrek, noticing the smile on the king’s lips.

The smile faded as Throding turned his head to look at the runelord. ‘My father never had cause to avenge a fallen son,’ the king said darkly, his eyes bright in the shadow of his gold-inlaid helmet. ‘I thank him and the fathers before him that I have been granted the opportunity to right this wrong.’

‘Besides, it is too long since you last took up your axe other than to polish it!’ said Barundin with a short laugh. ‘Are you sure you still remember what to do?’

‘Listen to the beardling!’ laughed Throding. ‘Barely fifty winters old and already an expert on war. Listen, laddie, I was swinging this axe at orcs long before you were born. Let’s just see which of us accounts for more, eh?’

‘This’ll be the first time your father has had a chance to see your mettle,’ added Arbrek with a wink. ‘Stories when the ale is flowing are right enough, but there’s nothing like seeing it firsthand to make a father proud.’

‘Aye,’ agreed Throding, patting Barundin on the arm. ‘You’re my only son now. The honour of the clan will be yours when I go to meet the ancestors. You’ll make me proud, I know you will.’

‘You’ll see that Barundin Throdingsson is worthy of becoming king,’ the youth said with a fierce nod that set his beard wagging. ‘You’ll be proud, right enough.’

They marched westwards towards the Empire until noon, the towering ramparts and bastions of Zhufbar disappearing behind them, the mountain peak that held the king’s throne room obscured by low cloud.

At midday Throding called a halt and the air was filled with the noise of five thousand dwarfs eating sandwiches, drinking ale and arguing loudly, as was their wont when on campaign. After the eating was done the air was thick with pipe smoke, which hung like a cloud over the host.

Throding sat on a rock, legs splayed in front of him,

admiring the scenery. High up on the mountains, he could see for many miles, league after league of hard rock and sparse trees and bushes. Beyond, he could just about make out the greener lands of the Empire. As he puffed his pipe, a tap on his shoulder caused him to turn. It was Hengrid, and with him was an old-looking dwarf with a long white beard tucked into a simple rope belt. The stranger wore a hooded cloak of rough-spun wool that had been dyed blue and he held a whetstone in his cracked, gnarled hands.

‘Grungni’s honour be with you, King Throndin,’ said the dwarf with a short bow. ‘I am but a simple traveller, who earns a coin or two with my whetstone and my wits. Allow me the honour of sharpening your axe and perhaps passing on a wise word or two.’

‘My axe is rune-sharp,’ said Throndin, turning away.

‘Hold now, king,’ said the old dwarf. ‘There was a time when any dwarf, be he lowly or kingly, would spare an ear for one of age and learning.’

‘Let him speak, Throndin,’ called Arbrek from across the other side of the roadway. ‘He’s old enough to even be my father – show a little respect.’

Throndin turned back to the stranger and gave a grudging nod. The peddler nodded thankfully, pulling off his pack and setting it down by the roadside. It looked very heavy and Throndin noticed an axe-shaped bundle swathed in rags stuffed between the folds of the dwarf’s cloak. With a huff of expelled breath, the dwarf sat down on the pack.

‘Orcs, is it?’ the peddler said, pulling an ornate pipe from the folds of his robe.

‘Yes,’ said Throndin, taken aback. ‘Have you seen them?’

The dwarf did not answer immediately. Instead he took a pouch from his belt and began filling his pipe with weed. Taking a long match from the pouch, he struck it on the hard surface of the roadway and lit the pipe, puffing contentedly several times before turning his attention back to the king.

‘Aye, I seen them,’ said the dwarf. ‘Not for a while now, but I seen them. A vicious bunch and no mistake.’

‘They’ll be a dead bunch when I catch them,’ snorted Throandin. ‘When did you see them?’

‘Oh, a while back, a year or thereabouts,’ said the stranger.

‘Last year?’ said Barundin, moving to stand beside his father. ‘That was when they slew Dorthin!’

The king scowled at his son, who felt silent.

‘Aye, that is right,’ said the peddler. ‘It was no more than a day’s march from here, where Prince Dorthin fell.’

‘You saw the battle?’ asked Throandin.

‘I wish that I had,’ said the stranger. ‘My axe would have tasted orc flesh that day. But alas, I came upon the field of battle too late and the orcs were gone.’

‘Well, this time the warriors of Zhufbar shall settle the matter,’ said Barundin, putting his hand to the axe at his belt. ‘Not only that, but a baron of the Empire fights with us.’

‘Pah, a manling?’ spat the peddler. ‘What worth has a manling in battle? Not since young Sigmar has their race bred a warrior worthy of the title.’

‘Baron Vessal is a person of means, and that is no mean feat for a manling,’ said Hengrid. ‘He has dwarf gold, even.’

‘Gold is but one way to judge the worth of a person,’ said the stranger. ‘When axes are raised and blood flows, it is not wealth but temper that is most valued.’

‘What would you know?’ said Throandin with a dismissive wave. ‘I’d wager you have barely two coins to rub together. I’ll not have a nameless, penniless wattock show disrespect for my ally. Thank you for your company, but I have enjoyed it enough. Hengrid!’

The burly dwarf veteran stepped forward and with an apologetic look gestured for the old peddler to stand. With a final puff on his pipe, the wanderer pushed himself to his feet and hauled on his pack.

‘It is a day to be rued when the words of the old fall on deaf

ears,' said the stranger as he turned away.

'I am no bearding!' Throandin called after him.

They watched the dwarf walk slowly down the road until he disappeared from view between two tall rocks. Throandin noticed Arbrek watching the path intently, as if he could still see the stranger.

'Empty warnings to go with his empty purse,' said Throandin, waving a dismissive hand in the peddler's direction.

Arbrek turned with a frown on his face. 'Since when did the kings of Zhufbar count wisdom in coins?' asked the runelord. Throandin made to answer, but Arbrek had turned away and was stomping off through the army.

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