



KNIGHT OF THE
BLAZING SUN
JOSH REYNOLDS



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KNIGHT OF THE BLAZING SUN

Josh Reynolds

The Knights of the Blazing Sun are a noble and venerable order of templars dedicated to the warrior-goddess Myrmidia. Hector Goetz is sent to the distant island of Svunum to investigate the disappearance of a group of knights. Reunited with his comrades, he battles vicious pirates and bloodthirsty raiders, but from his increasingly disturbing nightmares Goetz realises that there is more to the place than meets the eye. As northern savages lay siege to the island, a deadly secret is revealed that threatens to damn his order for all eternity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Formerly a roadie for the Hong Kong Cavaliers, **Josh Reynolds** now writes full time and his work has appeared previously in anthologies such as *Specters and Coal Dust*, *Historical Lovecraft* and *How The West Was Weird* as well as in magazines such as *Innsmouth Free Press* and *Hammer and Bolter*.

Feel free to stop by his blog

<http://joshuamreynolds.blogspot.com>

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THE ORCS CAME down out of the Worlds Edge Mountains into Ostermark like a green tide, sweeping villages and towns before them in a cascade of flame and pillage. But the men of the Mark stood firm and met the orcs with pike, shot and sword. Soldiers in purple and yellow livery crashed against barbaric green-skinned savages, matching Imperial steel and age-old strategy against inhuman muscle and brute cunning. Men and orcs screamed and died as the frozen ground turned to mud and the sun swung high in the sky.

Elsewhere, horses pawed the frost-covered earth in nervous anticipation. Their breath escaped in bursts of steam which drifted haphazardly through the close-set scrub trees that surrounded them and their riders. Hector Goetz reached down and stroked his mount's muscular neck. The warhorse whinnied eagerly. 'Easy Kaspar,' he said. 'Easy. Miles to go yet.' Goetz was a tall man, and he wore the gilded armour of a knight of the Order of the Blazing Sun easily, if not entirely comfortably. He glanced down the row of similarly armoured riders that spread out to either side of him and wished he felt more confident in his chances of surviving the coming engagement.

'Just give him a thump, boy,' someone said. Goetz twisted in his saddle, meeting the cheerful gaze of his hochmeister. Tancred Berlich was a big, bluff man with a grey-streaked beard and a wide grin. Red cheeks and a splotchy nose completed the image of a man more concerned with food and drink than fighting and death. He had commanded the Kappelburg Komturie for as long as Goetz could remember. 'Horses are like soldiers... a thump or three is good for morale.'

Goetz chuckled as Berlich gave a booming laugh. His smile faded as Berlich's opposite number from the Bechafen Komturie glared at them through the open visor of his ornate helmet.

'I know that proper military discipline is difficult for you, Tancred, but I would like to remind you that *this is an ambush!*' the man hissed through gritted teeth. Of an age with his fellow Hochmeister, Alfonse Wiscard looked older. His face was a hatchet made of wrinkles and his eyes were like chips of ice. Those cool orbs swivelled to Goetz a moment later. 'Control your hochmeister, brother, or the orcs will be on us far sooner than we anticipate,' he said.

'Leave the boy alone, Wiscard,' Berlich said before Goetz could reply. 'He's got more experience than all of the puppies you brought along combined. Don't you boy?'

'I... have seen my share,' Goetz said, looking straight ahead. 'More than most perhaps.'

'The Talabeclander insults us!' one of Wiscard's men said.

'Quiet,' Wiscard snapped. His face was twisted into as sour an expression as Goetz had ever seen. He felt impressed despite himself. 'Quiet, all of you. We are here to fight orcs, not rehash old grudges.' The provinces of Talabecland and Ostermark had been at each other's throats for decades, for one reason or another. While the only loyalties the members of the Order were supposed to hold were to Myrmidia, the Order itself and the Emperor, in that order, occasionally the old traditional disagreements crept in.

'Besides, the boy's not *really* a Talabeclander; he's from Solland!' Berlich said, pounding Goetz on the shoulder.

'Solland hasn't existed for a long time. Longer than my lifetime,' Goetz protested.

'Modesty. I think he's the heir,' Berlich whispered loudly to Wiscard. 'Old Helborg owes the boy a sword, or my name isn't Tanty!'

'Sudenland is gone, hochmeister. As is its elector,' Goetz said patiently. 'Sudenland' was how his mother had insisted on referring to the dead province, now long since absorbed by Wissenland. It was a peculiarity of the old families, and one Goetz had never been able to shake. 'And

your name is Tancred. I have never heard anyone refer to you as "Tanty".'

'See? See? Only royalty talks down its nose like that! Boy'll be Emperor if he survives,' Berlich laughed.

Goetz craned his neck as a young pistolier rode up. Both horse and rider were clearly exhausted. The pistolier had sweat dripping down his youthful features, cutting tracks in the grime that otherwise covered his face. 'Milords,' he wheezed. 'The Lord Elector Hertwig requests that you see to the flank!'

'Ha! Finally!' Berlich growled, slamming a fist into his thigh.

Goetz watched the young man lead his horse away, both of them covered in sweat and reeking of a hard ride and exhaustion. It hadn't been so long ago that he himself had ridden among the ranks of the pistolkorps. They had taught him the art of riding and of the usefulness of black powder. Thinking of that last one, he wondered what he wouldn't give for a brace of pistols now. Even just one would mean one less orc to face up close. Unfortunately, while Myrmidia was a goddess of battlefield innovation, her followers were forced to follow the law of the land. Gunpowder was far too rare and unstable to be given to a force prone to reckless headlong charges into the maw of the enemy army.

Goetz sighed. He'd earned his spurs as a pistolier, against orcs then as well. Of course, the raiders he and his compatriots had put to flight then had been as nothing compared to the horde that now crawled across his field of vision, from horizon to horizon. He was suddenly quite thankful for the heavy plate he wore, with all of its dwarf-forged strength between him and the crude axes of the green-skinned savages he was even now readying himself to face. He'd seen what an orc could do to an unarmoured man – and an armoured one, come to that – and the more layers between him and that gruesome fate was well worth the inevitable sweat and chafing. Not to mention the smell.

Still, a pistol would have been nice.

'Don't look so glum, boy,' Berlich said, jostling him out of his reverie. 'Cheer up! We'll be charging any minute now!' The hochmeister grinned eagerly, and bounced slightly in his saddle like an excited urchin. 'Blood and thunder, we'll turn them into so much paste!'

Goetz turned back around, peering through the protective embrace of the thicket where they were waiting. While most of the orc army was already engaged in the swirling melee beyond, some canny boss had managed to restrain his impetuous followers. That was impressive, and slightly frightening. Orcs usually had all the restraint of a rabid hound. When one proved capable of thinking beyond putting its axe through the nearest skull, it meant trouble for anyone unlucky enough to be caught in its path. Right at that moment, the unlucky ones looked to be the eastern flank of elector Hertwig's battered force, as a stomping, snorting, squealing flood of orcish Boar Riders hurtled towards the purple-and-gold lines. Goetz tightened his grip on his reins and took hold of his lance, jerking it up from where he'd stabbed it into the ground.

'Thunder and lightning, that's how it'll be!' Berlich said, lifting his own lance. Goetz took a deep breath and set his shield. He caught Wiscard's eye, and the hochmeister nodded briskly.

'We go where we are needed,' Wiscard said, intoning the first part of the Order's creed.

'We do what must be done,' Goetz replied along with all the rest.

'And Myrmidia have mercy on those green buggers because I'll have none!' Berlich roared, standing up in his saddle. 'Let's have at them! Hyah!' Then, with a slow rumble that built to a thunderous crescendo, the Order of the Blazing Sun rode to war. They brushed aside the thicket with the force of their passage and the Order's specially-bred warhorses bugled bloodthirsty cries as they launched forwards.

Seconds later, wood met flesh with a thunderous roar, and the ground trembled at the point of impact. Lances cracked and splintered as they tore through the orc lines, shoving bodies back atop bodies and creating eddies in the green tide. Goetz's teeth rattled inside his helmet as his lance was reduced to a jagged stump of brightly painted wood. He tossed it aside and drew his

sword, wheeling his horse around even as the broken weapon struck the ground. Goetz lashed out as a green shape crashed against him in the press of combat.

The orc's mouth gaped wide, its foul breath spilling out from between a gate of yellowed tusks as the sword passed between its bulbous head and its sloped shoulders. The head, still mouthing now-silent curses, tumbled forward, striking Goetz's shield and springing away into the depths of the melee.

The body, its neck-stump spurting blood, was carried in the opposite direction by the snorting, kicking boar its legs were still clamped around. Goetz hauled on his horse's reins, forcing the trained destrier to sidestep the grunting beast. The horse bucked and kicked at the fleeing pig and then swung around at Goetz's signal, lunging towards the next opponent with a savage whinny.

Goetz's sword chopped down left and right until his arm began to ache from the strain. The orcs kept coming, treading on the bodies of their dead or dying fellows in their excitement as they fought to get to grips with the men who had crashed into their flank.

It had been a bold move, and a necessary one, but Goetz wasn't so sure that it had been a *smart* one. Fifty men, even fifty fully-armoured knights of the Order of the Blazing Sun, could not stand against the full weight of an orc horde, no matter how righteous their cause or how strong their sword-arms. Now, with their task accomplished, they found themselves surrounded by an army of angry berserkers as the rest of the elector's forces attempted to reach them. It was not a position that Goetz enjoyed being in.

A crude spear crashed against his thigh and skittered off his armour, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. Goetz swung his horse around and iron-shod hooves snapped out, pulping a malformed green skull with deadly efficiency. He brought his shield up instinctively as a swift movement caught his eye. Arrows sprouted from the already battered face of the shield and Goetz chopped his sword down, slicing through the hafts as he whispered a quiet prayer to Myrmidia.

'Hear me, Lady of Battle; keep me from harm and kill my enemy, if you please,' he said as he took a moment to catch his breath. He looked around. The battle had devolved into a chaotic melee, with ranks and order forgotten in the heat of battle. A volley of handguns barked nearby; men screamed and died, their cries barely audible above the cacophony of the orcish battle-cries. He caught sight of Hertwig's standard, waving above the battle.

'Ware!' someone yelled. Another knight, his armour flecked with gore, gestured wildly and Goetz twisted in his saddle, catching a gnaw-toothed axe on the edge of his sword. His arm went numb from the force of the blow and he was forced to bring his shield around to catch a second blow.

The shield crumpled inward as the axe crashed against it. The orc who wielded it was as large a monster as Goetz had ever seen. It had a dull, dark hue to its thick hide and heavy armour decorating its muscular limbs. The beast was large enough to attack a mounted man without difficulty and as Goetz's horse shied away, the brute roared out a challenge in its own barbarous tongue.

'Come on then!' Goetz shouted back. He kneed his mount and the warhorse reared, lashing out. The orc howled as a knife-edged hoof plucked one of its bat-like ears from its head. It drove one massive shoulder into the horse's belly, toppling it onto its side. Goetz rolled from the saddle as his horse fell, losing hold of his shield. He retained his sword however and managed to block a blow that would have taken his head from his shoulders.

The orc loomed over him, its teeth bared in a grin. The edge of the axe inched downwards towards Goetz's face, despite the interposed sword blade. Muscles screaming, he drove a fist into the orc's jaw, surprising it as well as numbing his hand in the process. It had been like punching a sack of granite.

The beast stepped aside, more from shock than pain, but the hesitation was enough. Goetz swung around, chopping his sword into the orc's side. It roared and backhanded him, denting his helm and sending it flying. He fell onto his back, skull ringing.

Bellowing in agony, the orc jerked at the sword, trying to pull it free. It gave up after a moment and, bloody froth decorating its jaws, swung its axe up for a killing blow despite the presence of Goetz's sword still buried hilt-deep in its side. Before the blow could land a lance point burst through the

orc's throat. It dropped its axe and grabbed at the jagged mass of wood, bending double and nearly yanking its wielder from his saddle.

'Are you just going to sit there all day, brother, or are you going to help me?' the knight cried out as Goetz looked up at him. Goetz's reply was to throw himself towards the hilt of his sword. The orc arched its back, gagging as it tried to remove the obstruction in its throat. Even now, nearly chopped in two and with a lance through the neck it was still fighting... and still more than capable of killing.

Goetz caught the hilt with his palms and shoulder and thrust forward with all of his weight. The orc's roar turned shrill as the sword resumed its path through the beast's midsection. Goetz stumbled as dark blood sprayed him. The orc fell in two directions, fists and heels thumping the ground spasmodically.

Rising, Goetz caught his horse's bridle. 'Easy, Kaspar, easy,' he murmured, knuckling the horse at the base of its jaw as it nuzzled him. He hauled himself awkwardly up into the saddle. Muscles aching, he turned to his rescuer.

'My thanks, brother,' he said, jerking on his mount's reins and turning it. The other man raised his visor and snorted. Goetz recognised the fine-boned features as those of the man who had taken offence at Berlich's comments earlier. Velk, he thought the man was called.

'Save your thanks, Talabeclander,' Velk said. 'If I'd known it was one of you lot, I might have let the brute finish you off.'

Goetz spat out a mouthful of dust and shook his head. 'I see the hospitality of the Mark is as generous as ever.'