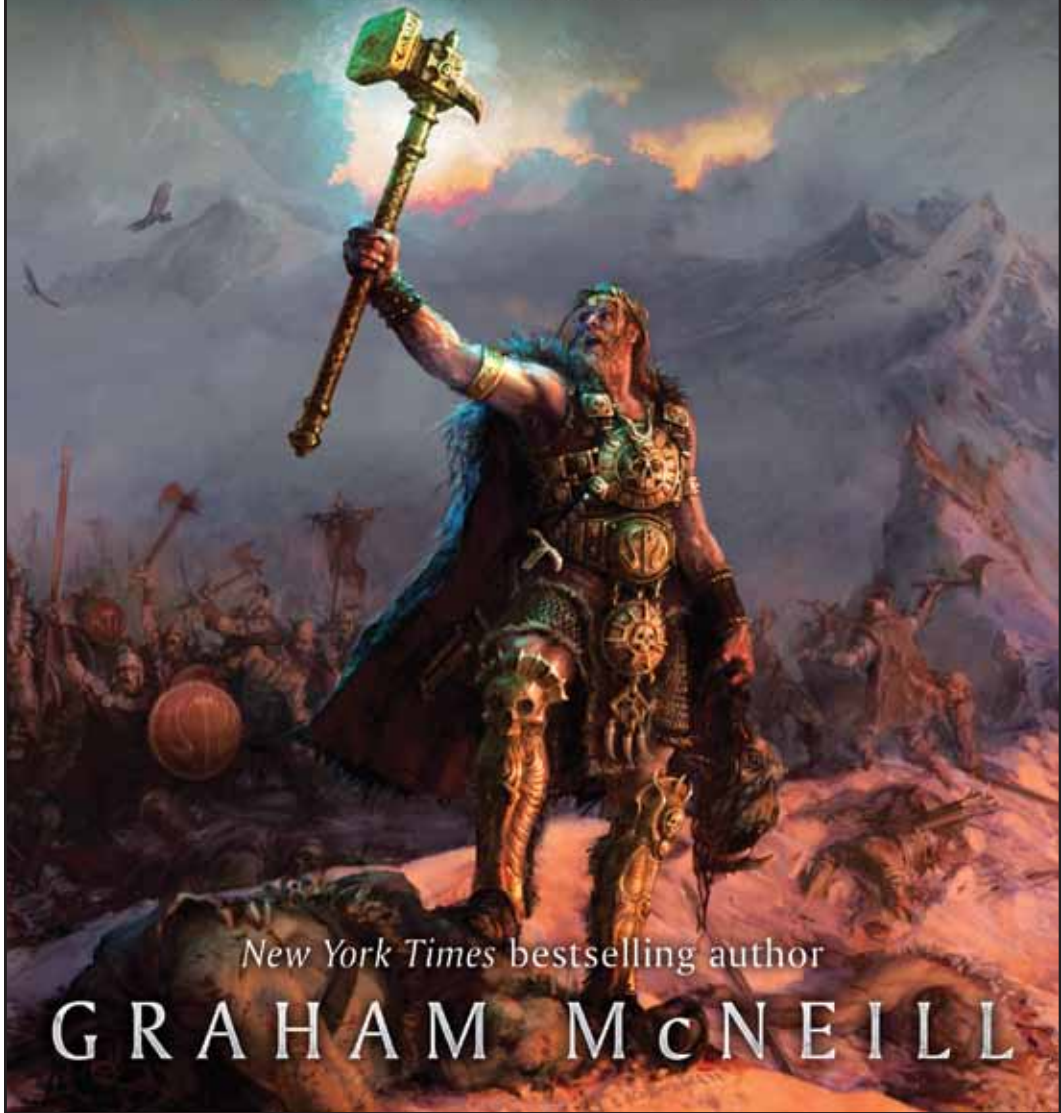


— TIME OF LEGENDS —

THE LEGEND OF

SIGMAR

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This is his story.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, **Graham McNeill** worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written more than twenty and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

Join the ranks of the 4th Company at www.graham-mcneill.com

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Booming war drums beat the air with the raucous tattoo of the orc horde as they hurled their bodies at the log walls of Astofen. A seething green mass of armoured bodies surrounded the river settlement, the reek of their unwashed flesh and the primal ferocity of their battle-cries filling the air with a terrifying sense of impending doom.

'They can't hold much longer,' said Wolfgart, lying on his front beside Sigmar in the long grass of the gently sloping hill, a league to the east of the besieged town. 'The gate's already buckling.'

Sigmar nodded and said, 'We have to wait for Trinovantes.'

'If we wait much longer there will be no town to save,' said Pendrag, all but invisible, swathed in his scaled green cloak.

'If we attack before he is in position then we are lost,' said Sigmar. 'The orcs are too many for us to fight head on.'

'There's no such thing as too many orcs,' snarled Wolfgart, his hands balled into angry fists. 'We've ridden for days without sign of the greenskins, now here they are before us. I say we sound the war horns and Morr take the hindmost!'

'No,' said Sigmar. 'To fight such a host on equal terms is to die, and I have no intention of returning to Reikdorf upon my shield.'

Despite his words to Wolfgart, Sigmar longed to ride with his banner unfurled, the wind in his hair and the clarion call of war horns in his ears, but he knew he must restrain his urge to slay greenskins for now.

Concealed behind the ridge of the eastern hills, the Unberogen horsemen had the element of surprise, for the orcs' attention was firmly fixed on the embattled settlement before them, but surprise would not be enough to defeat this horde, for surely a thousand or more greenskins surrounded the town.

Astofen sat among a series of low, rocky hills on the banks of a fast-flowing river of the plains that poured from the towering peaks of the Grey Mountains to the south. To see such an open landscape had come as a shock to the young men raised in the forests, when they had ridden from the trees only a day previously, and Sigmar had not dreamed that the land in which he lived was so vast.

The town's palisade walls were formed from thick logs, the ends of which were sharpened into points, and which boasted defensive towers at each corner. Hoardings formed from planks and wetted hides protected a walkway that ran around the edge of the ramparts, and from here the men and women of Astofen shouted their defiance as they hurled heavy spears into the heaving mass of green bodies.

Sigmar watched with fierce pride as each missile felled an orc, but saw that such deaths were making no difference to the ferocity of the attack. The greenskins were an undisciplined rabble, fighting without apparent cohesion or plan, but

one look told Sigmar that simple brutality and numbers would carry the day without difficulty.

Scores of spindle-limbed goblins sent flaming arrows over the timber walls of the town, and many of the closely huddled buildings within were ablaze.

Hulking orcs with green skin so dark that it was practically black waited beside a ramshackle battering ram that sat on splayed wheels, and looked as though a blind man had constructed it. Beside the battering ram, heavy wooden catapults lobbed a variety of missiles at the town: rocks, flaming pitch or even howling orcs with cleavers.

Thin lines of black smoke were etched against the sky from hundreds of fires, and grisly totems had been driven into the hard earth with crude fetishes and bloody trophies dangling from great, horned skulls. The orc horde was easily the largest force of greenskins any of them had ever seen. Each creature was heavily muscled, armoured, and armed with huge blades and a ferocious thirst for battle that was unmatched in all but the most frenzied berserker.

At the centre of the horde, an enormous orc in dark armour waved a monstrous axe, and even from this distance it was clear that the creature must surely be the host's master.

'Come on, Sigmar,' hissed Wolfgart. 'Unleash us!'

'Do you want to die?' asked Pendrag. 'We have to wait. Trinovantes will not fail us.'

Sigmar fervently hoped that Pendrag was right as he looked along the rutted earth road that led from Astofen's gate and followed the course of the river as it bent southwards towards a sturdy stone bridge a league away. Beyond the bridge, the road petered out past a line of trees, and the landscape opened into plains of hard, scrubby grass and scattered copses.

He shielded his eyes from the sun, and ignored Wolfgart's impatient bristling, hoping to see a waving banner, but there was nothing, and he silently willed his friend to hurry.

'As Ulric wills it,' whispered Sigmar, chewing his bottom lip as he watched the fighting unfold below, knowing that if they did not attack soon, Astofen would be lost.

Sigmar returned his attention to the town below as the orc leader hurled his great axe at the gate, and a roaring bellow of unleashed fury rose from the green-skin horde. The booming of the drums rose in tempo, and the armoured tide of orcs surged towards Astofen.

Grunting, sweating orcs pushed the wobbling battering ram forwards, its carved head wrought in the form of a giant fist. More flaming arrows arced over the horde, and the clash of iron blades against one another rang like a war cry to the brazen gods of battle.

'There!' cried Pendrag. 'Look! By the bridge!'

Sigmar's heart leapt as he followed Pendrag's shout and saw a green banner fluttering in the wind before a stand of trees to the east of the bridge.

'I told you!' laughed Pendrag, leaping to his feet, and sprinting back to his horse.

Sigmar pushed to his feet with a wild war cry, and followed Pendrag, with Wolfgart right on his heels. Two hundred Unberogen horsemen waited out of sight of Astofen, their mounts whinnying impatiently, and their faces alive with the prospect of battle. Spear tips gleamed in the noonday sun, and the bronze rims of wooden shields shone like gold. Pendrag vaulted onto the back of his horse, and swept up Sigmar's banner, a streaming triangle of crimson cloth with the device of a great boar emblazoned upon it in black.

The sunlight caught the richness of the colour, and to Sigmar's eyes it seemed as though the banner was a sheet of blood, bound to a spear. He gripped his dapple grey stallion's mane and swung himself onto its back.

Sigmar's heart beat wildly, and he laughed with the sheer joy of the waiting being over. The agony of watching his people suffer and die was at an end, and the orcs would pay for their ill-advised aggression. Sigmar slid a long spear with a heavy iron point from the quiver slung around his horse's neck, and accepted his shield from a nearby warrior.

He lifted shield and spear high as Wolfgart began chanting his name.

'Unberogens!' roared Sigmar. 'We ride!'

Sigmar dug his heels into his mount's flanks, and the beast surged forwards as eager for the fight as he. With a howling war cry, his warriors followed him, and lifted their own spears high as Wolfgart blew a soaring, ululating blast of the war horn.

His horse crested the rise before him, and he leaned forward over its neck as it thundered downhill. He threw a glance over his shoulder as his warriors came on in two ragged lines, one after the other. Their armour gleamed, and brightly coloured cloaks were streaming out behind them like the wings of mighty dragons.

The ground shook with the hammer blows of their hoof beats, and Wolfgart blew the war horn again and again, its valiant note easily carrying through the air. Sigmar rode hard and fast, urging his mount to greater speed as the tempo of the battle ahead paused and both orc and man turned to see what fate rode towards them.

Cheers erupted from the timber walls of Astofen as its defenders saw the hundreds of riders galloping to their rescue. Sigmar gripped the flanks of his horse with his knees, lifting his shield and spear high for his following warriors to see.

In disdain for the foe before him, Sigmar had eschewed armour, and rode without mail or plate to protect him. Like a savage warrior of a forgotten age, Sigmar rode tall in the wind, his hair a golden stream behind him, and the muscles of his chest pumped for battle.

The roaring of the orcs grew louder with every passing heartbeat. The wall of hard, green flesh and armour drew closer. Shields were turned to face them, each one decorated with leering faces, fanged maws or crude tribal symbols, and long spears were thrust towards the riders. Arrows and javelins flew from Astofen with renewed hope as the warriors rode onwards, and the giant orc at the centre of the horde belled and roared, his orders accompanied by sweeps of a great spear with a haft the thickness of Sigmar's arm.

The orcs were so close that Sigmar could smell the rank odour of their unclean bodies, and see the terrible scars of tribal markings worked into the flesh of their arms and faces. The eyes of the orcs were a hot red, deep-set in blunt, porcine faces with enormous fangs jutting from their lower jaws.

Just as it seemed that the thundering line of horsemen must surely crash into the jagged wall of iron, Sigmar hurled his spear with all his might. His throw was true, and the heavy iron tip smashed through an orc shield to impale its bearer. The sharpened tip exploded from the orc's back and plunged into the greenskin standing behind it. Both fell to the ground as a hundred more spears slashed through the air, and orcs fell by the dozen. Sigmar gripped his horse's mane, and pulled hard to the side while pressing his knees against its flanks.

The stallion gave a snort of protest at this harsh treatment, but wheeled immediately, and galloped along the length of the orc line, less than a spear's length from the enemy blades. Sigmar howled in triumph as black-shafted arrows leapt from goblin bows, but flew wide or over his head.

He heard a whooping yell, and saw Pendrag behind him, a trio of arrows wedged in the timbers of his shield, yet Sigmar's crimson and black banner was still held proudly aloft. His friend's face was alight with savage joy, and Sigmar gave thanks to Ulric that neither Pendrag nor the banner had fallen.

The orc line was still a solid wall of shields and blades, but already Sigmar saw that it was beginning to buckle as orcs sought to get to grips with the horsemen.

Another thunder of hooves announced the arrival of the second line of Unberogen horsemen, and Sigmar saw Wolfgart charging at their head. Each horseman carried a short, recurved bow, the strings pulled taut and arrows nocked as they controlled their wild ride with pressure from their thighs.

Wolfgart blew a strident note on the war horn, and a hundred goose feather fletched arrows flew straight and true into the orc line. All found homes in green flesh, but not all were fatal. As Sigmar wheeled his stallion once more, and drew another spear, he saw many of the orcs simply snap the shafts from their bodies, and hurl them aside with bestial roars of challenge. Another volley of arrows followed the first, before Wolfgart's warriors wheeled their mounts around violently and rode away.

This time the greenskins could not restrain themselves, and the line of shields broke apart as orcs charged wildly from their battle line in pursuit of Wolfgart's riders. Spears and arrows gave chase, and Sigmar yelled in anger as he saw wounded warriors fall from their mounts.

Wolfgart's horse pulled to a halt beside Sigmar, and his sword-brother put up his war horn to draw his greatsword from the sheath across his back. Wolfgart's face was a mirror of his own, with a sheen of sweat and teeth bared in ferocious battle fury.

Pendrag rode alongside, his war axe unsheathed, and said, 'Time to get bloody!'

Sigmar raked back his heels and said, 'Remember, two blasts of the horn and we ride for the bridge!'

'It's not me you need worry about!' laughed Pendrag as Wolfgart urged his mount

forward, his huge sword swinging around his head in wide decapitating arcs.

Sigmar and Pendrag thundered after their friend as the pursuing mob of orcs drew near. The re-formed Unberogen horsemen followed their leaders, charging with all the fury and power they were famed for, a howling war cry taken up by every warrior as they hurled their spears, before drawing swords or hefting axes.

More orcs fell, and Sigmar skewered a thick-bodied orc, who wore a great, antlered helmet, the spear punching down through the creature's breastplate and pinning it to the ground. Even as the spear quivered in the orc's chest, Sigmar reached down and swept up his hammer, Ghal-maraz, the mighty gift presented to him by Kurgan Ironbeard earlier that spring.

Then the two ancestral enemies slammed together in a thunderclap of iron and rage.

The charging horsemen hit the orc line like the fist of Ulric that had flattened the top of the Fauschlag rock of the Teutogens in the north. Shields splintered, and swords cleaved orc flesh as the bonecrushing force of the charge crashed through the scattered greenskins.

Sigmar swung his hammer, and smashed an orc skull to shards, the thick iron of its helmet no defence against the ancient runic power bound to the weapon. He smote left and right, each blow crushing heads, and splintering bone and armour. Blood sprayed his naked flesh, his hair thick with gobbets of orc blood, and the head of his hammer dripping with the gruel of their brain matter.

Axes and notched swords rang from his shield, and his horse snorted and stamped with its hooves, kicking with its back legs to stove in the ribs and skulls of goblins that sought to hamstring it with cruel knives.

'In the name of Ulric!' shouted Sigmar, urging his mount deeper into the disorganised mass of orcs, and laying about himself with mighty sweeps of his hammer.

At the centre of the horde, Sigmar could see the enormous orc that led this furious horde, the warlord known as Bonecrusher. Its massive bulk was clad head to foot in armour forged from sheets of dark iron, fastened to its flesh with great spikes. A horned helmet covered its thick skull, and bloodied, yellowed fangs jutted from its oversized, pugnacious jaw.

It seemed that the beast was aware of him too, for it jabbed its thick spear towards him, and the press of orc warriors around the Unberogens grew thicker and more vicious. With every stroke of his hammer, Sigmar knew their time was running out, and he risked diverting his attention from immediate threats to see how his sword-brothers fared.

Over to his right, Wolfgart's greatsword swept left and right, hewing half a dozen orcs to ruin with every blow. Behind him, Pendrag's mane of hair was as red as the banner he carried, the curved blades of his axe cleaving through armour and flesh with deafening clangs and thuds. That Pendrag also carried Sigmar's banner seemed not to hamper him at all, and it too was a weapon, the iron point at its base smashing through helmet visors or punching through the tops of unprotected skulls.

Sigmar wheeled his horse, sending one orc sailing backwards with a mighty underarm swing of Ghal-maraz, and crushing another's chest with the return stroke.

All around him, Unberogen warriors were cutting a bloody path through the orcs, but for all the carnage they caused, the orcs had the numbers to soak up such death without flinching.

Hundreds more were pushing forwards, and as the furious impetus of the charge began to diminish, Sigmar could see that the orcs were massing for a devastating counter-attack. Packed in like this, with their backs to the walls of Astofen, the orcs would eventually overwhelm them.

Unberogen warriors were being dragged from their mounts one by one, and horses fell screaming as goblins opened their guts with quick slashes. The noose was closing in, and it was time to make their escape.

‘Wolfgart!’ shouted Sigmar. ‘Now!’

But a knot of howling orcs, their axes and swords tearing at his armour, surrounded Sigmar’s sword-brother. Without a shield, Wolfgart’s hauberk was battered, and links of chainmail hung dripping from his body in weeping sheets of iron rings. His sword hacked and cut, but for every orc that died, another two stepped in to fight.

‘Pendrag!’ cried Sigmar, lifting his bloody hammer.

‘I’m with you!’ answered Pendrag, urging his mount onwards with the banner held high.

Together, Sigmar and Pendrag charged into the creatures attacking their sword-brother, hammer and axe forging a gory path through the orcs. Sigmar’s hammer smashed the head from an orc’s shoulders, and he shouted, ‘Wolfgart, blow the horn!’

‘Aye, I know!’ replied Wolfgart breathlessly, putting his sword through the chest of the last of his attackers. ‘What’s the rush? I would have killed them all in time.’

‘We don’t have time,’ said Sigmar. ‘Blow the damned horn!’

Wolfgart nodded, and switched to a one-handed grip on his sword, before lifting the curling ram’s horn from the loop of chain around his waist and giving voice to two sharp blasts.

‘Come on!’ bellowed Sigmar. ‘Ride for the open ground across the bridge!’

Barely had the echoes of the war horn faded when the Unberogen had turned their horses and were riding hard for the south with practiced skill. Sigmar waved his hammer, and shouted, ‘For Ulric’s sake ride hard, my brothers!’

The horsemen needed no encouragement, leaning low over their mounts’ necks as the orcs howled in triumph at their enemy’s flight. Sigmar held his horse from riding alongside its fellows as he scanned the battlefield to make sure that he left none of his warriors behind.

The ground before Astofen was littered with the detritus of battle: bodies and blood, screaming horses and shattered shields. The vast majority of the dead were orcs and goblins, but too many were armoured men, their bodies already being sliced apart by knife-wielding goblins, or bludgeoned unrecognisable by roaring orcs.

‘Are we waiting for something in particular?’ asked Pendrag, his horse nervously flicking its head, as the orcs gathered for the pursuit. Orc captains bellowed orders at their warriors, and lumbering mobs of greenskins with axes held in each fist set

off towards the retreating Unberogen horsemen.

'So many dead,' said Sigmar.

'Two more if we don't move now!' shouted Pendrag over the roar of charging orcs.

Sigmar nodded, turned his horse to the south, and let loose a mighty curse on the heads of greenskins everywhere as a spiteful volley of arrows sliced through the air. He heard the despairing cry of the folk of Astofen as he rode south, their hopes of salvation dashed as cruelly as if they had never come.

'Have hope, my people,' said Sigmar. 'You are not abandoned.'