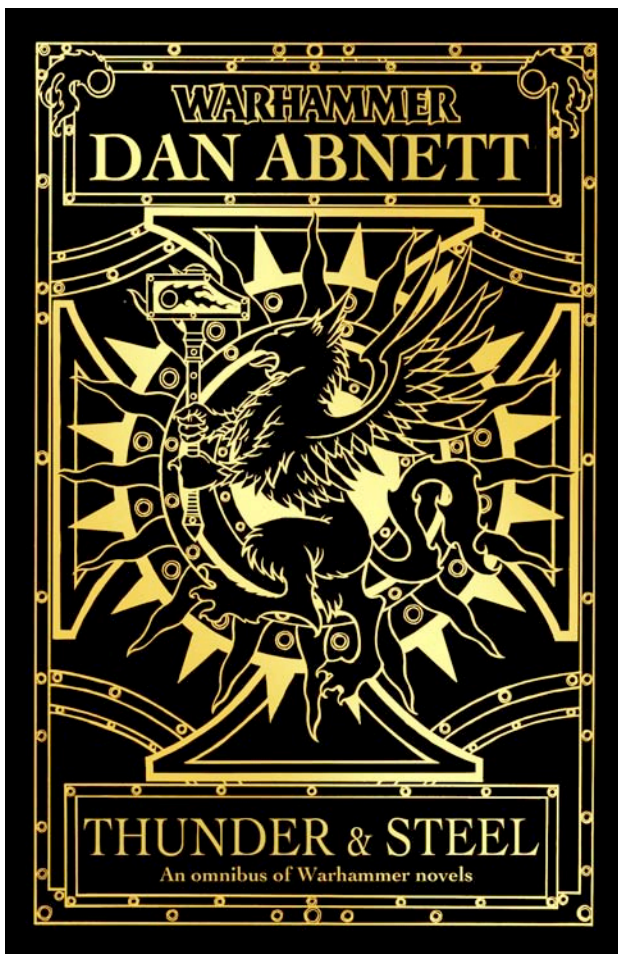




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An omnibus of Warhammer novels

By Dan Abnett

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About the Author

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written over thirty-five novels, including the acclaimed *Gaunt's Ghosts* series, the *Eisenhorn* and *Ravenor* trilogies and, with Mike Lee, the *Darkblade* cycle. His novels *Horus Rising* and *Legion* (both for the Black Library) and his *Torchwood* novel *Border Princes* (for the BBC) were all bestsellers. His novel *Triumph*, for *Angry Robot*, was published in 2009 and nominated for the British Fantasy Society Award for Best Novel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. Dan's blog and website can be found at www.danabnett.com Follow him on Twitter@VincentAbnett

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The following are excerpts from *Thunder & Steel* by Dan Abnett. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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Taken from *Gilead's Blood*:

IN THE DARK trees a hundred yards from the gate, he was waiting, sat astride a slender warhorse. Betsen rode up to him until they met under the limbs of an old elm that sighed in the night breeze.

‘Am I dreaming this?’ she asked.

‘Humans often dream of my kind because they don’t believe we exist. But I do exist. I live. Of that much, at least, I am sure. Let us begin.’

The girl was bright and sharp-witted, and that surprised Gilead, who had never been much impressed with the mental dexterity of humans. Not that he had had much truck with them over the years. When she told him of the crime against her family, of the dreadful murder done, he felt an ache of sympathy that also surprised him. Once she had told of the killings, she was silent for a long while. Gilead found himself watching her. She was fifteen, young even by the miserably short human timescale, but pretty, in that vulgar, human way.

Then she began to tell him what she had found out in the two years since the crime. For the third time he was impressed. It must have taken a great deal of wit and

ingenuity, not to mention courage, to tease out this intelligence. These were the facts as she knew them, and as she had told Fithrael, the facts that had sent him off to his wretched defeat. She repeated them now to Gilead.

There was a merchant lord called Lugos, who dwelt in an old fortified mansion maybe ten miles beyond Munzig. He was old and very rich – as rich as the prince himself, some said; richer still, said others. In fact, no one could account for the way a merchant, even a prosperous, successful man like Lugos, could have amassed quite such a fortune. He had ambitions too, courtly ones. The Border Princes could always stand another count, another duke.

The most whispered rumours said that Lugos had crossed into the Darkness. That he had dabbled in forces he did not understand and should not have unlocked. Even that he was a sorcerer, married to evil. No one had proof. No one, except perhaps Betsen herself, had even dared to find any. Lugos was a respectable man, a powerful man. He had a personal militia that rivalled the standing garrisons of some small towns. His mansion was a fortress. He had the ear of powerful men at Court.

Betsen knew that her father, who had been an up and coming merchant, had entered into business with Lugos in an attempt to increase his trade. Lugos had nurtured him, as all good merchant lords do when they find an eager trade partner. Betsen believed that in the course of this business dealing, her father had learned a little too much about Lugos – and Lugos had decided to silence him. And he had done it in the bestial manner his unholy masters had determined.

The mansion was a stronghold indeed; a great blackstone building with good walls and picket towers along the perimeter.

Gilead watched the place from the cover of the tree line. He did not need solid proof of the evil within, not in the way humans seemed to need. He could feel the vile filth of the place oozing out at him. If he had found this place under other circumstances, he would not have needed the girl's urgings to feel the need to destroy it. It was an affront to the nature of the world.

'Stay here,' he told the human girl, handing her a light crossbow. 'I will send for you when the time comes. This device is loaded. Aim carefully and squeeze this if you need to. But I think you will not be so troubled. I will keep them busy.'

'Alone?' she asked.

'Alone,' the elf agreed, eyes dark in the shadows. 'I will deal with them alone.'

'I meant me,' she returned fiercely.

'You'll be safe,' he repeated, catching her tone in surprise. She was sharp, sharper than he expected of a mere human.

He made to ride on, but she stopped him. 'Your... the other, Fithvael? He told me about you. About your pain and loss and... what you have been through.'

'He shouldn't have done that,' Gilead said, his slanting eyes dark and unfathomable. 'It was not a human concern.'

'He told me so I would understand why he was undertaking my quest and not his master, the great warrior.'

Gilead was silent.

'I understand,' she said hurriedly. 'I understand your pain was so great you had no desire to become involved in another's pain. What... what changed your mind?'

'I was reminded of the old duty my kind chose to take up. That changed my mind.'

‘He said you wanted only to die.’

‘I do.’

‘But he also said he thought you should be using your life to help others until death came.’

‘He said a great deal.’

She smiled. ‘I suppose he did. Are you embarrassed?’

‘No,’ he lied, hiding his feelings in the lumpen human language.

‘I think he was right, anyway. Even a life of pain is not worth wasting. Don’t you think?’

‘Perhaps... I am here, am I not?’ Gilead added after a pause.

‘So what will you do with your life after this is ended?’

Gilead spurred his horse on. ‘First,’ he answered, ‘I will see if there is to be a life after this has ended.’

THE BLADE OF his knife was dulled with ash so that the moonlight would not catch it. It went through four throats and slid in between the back-plates of three cuirasses as his left hand tightly stifled cries. By midnight, he was over the main wall, a shadow running the length of the ditch towards the mansion itself.

There was a high window above the inner dyke. Pausing to hide as another guard went past, Gilead unslung a silken rope and with a deft throw looped its end over a waterchute. The stone of the wall was black and sheer, wet with slime and moss. His feet found every toe-hold as his arms pulled him upwards.

On the ledge of the window, he coiled his rope again and drew his longsword. Below him, in the hall, he could hear singing and merrymaking, the croon of viols and pipes, the clink of glasses.

‘Now,’ he breathed, and dropped inside. He landed in the middle of the main table. The light thump was

enough to bring the merrymaking to a sudden halt. There were thirty in the hall: nobles, women, servants, warriors and musicians. They all stared in dismay at the armed warrior in their midst.

At the head of the table sat Lugos, a withered old human in yellow robes. He smiled.

‘Another elf?’ he chuckled. ‘Two in one week. I am honoured.’ He nodded to his men, who were already scrambling up and drawing weapons. The servants and woman backed away in fear. ‘Let’s see if we can’t kill this one outright. I’d hate for him to get away and bleed to death in the woods like the last one.’

Gilead was transfixed by the cruel glee in Lugos’s face.

They rushed him. But you cannot rush one who is suddenly shadowfast. Gilead was abruptly in a dozen places, his sword whispering as it scythed. Two dropped, then four more. There were screams and cries, the clatter of falling weapons, the patter of blood.

Lugos frowned, observing the slaughter before him. He turned to his aide, who stood quaking at his side. ‘Wake Siddroc.’

‘But master—’

‘Wake him, I say! This one is a devil, much more than the last fool! Wake Siddroc or we are all finished!’

Gilead cut left, thrust right. He severed a sword arm and decapitated another fighter to his rear. Blades flurried around him like grouse beaten from cover. Some broke against his flashing longsword like shattered mirrors. Others rebounded, blocked, before the ancient longsword stabbed in under loosened guards.

Gilead rejoiced. It had been so long, so long since he had felt fire, felt purpose. His sword arm, his warrior soul, had slept. He spun again, cut, thrust, sliced. And they were all done.

Gilead turned, eyes bright and sword red, and faced Lugos down the length of the long table. The only sounds were the spitting of the logs in the fireplace, the moans of the not-quite dead and the drip of a spilled wine flagon as it drained.

‘You are Lugos?’ Gilead said.

‘I do hope so,’ the human said calmly, ‘or else you’ve made a terrible mess in someone else’s hall... elf.’ He pronounced the word as if it were a curse.

Gilead stepped forward. ‘Speak before you die. Confess the nature of your crimes.’

‘Crimes? What proof do you have? Believe me, elf, the very best of the Empire will hound you out for this affront to my estate. The White Wolves, the Knights Panther... you will be hunted and torn apart as a murderer.’

‘Such things do not scare me. I can smell the evil here. I know you are a dabbler in the black ways. I know your crimes. Will you confess them before I make you pay?’

Lugos raised his glass and sipped. To Gilead he seemed almost supernaturally calm for one of his short-lived, frantic race. ‘Hmmm, let’s see... as a young merchant, I travelled far and dealt with many traders, dealing in many fine objects. One day, a necklace came into my possession. It was finely wrought and very old, the crafting of some ancient place. Liking the look of it, I placed it around my neck!’

Lugos’s face grew dark. ‘It was cursed. Cursed by the Dark Gods of Chaos. At once, I was in their thrall.’ He pulled open his tunic and showed Gilead the metal tracteries buried within scar tissue around his throat.

Gilead remained silent.

‘You see, I have no choice. I deserve some sympathy, don’t you think?’

Still Gilead said nothing.

‘There’s more. Since I was cursed I have ordained countless human sacrifices, murdered dozens of innocents, arranged the foul deaths of any who stood in my way—’

‘You are a monster!’ Gilead said plainly.

‘Indeed I am!’ Lugos agreed with a hearty laugh. ‘What’s more, I am a monster who has been keeping you talk—’

The doors at the end of the hall behind the merchant burst open. A snuffling giant shambled in: a huge, inhuman thing clad from head to foot in barbed green armour the colour of a stagnant pool.

Gilead froze. Raw evil emanated from the creature. Its visor was pushed back and it appeared to be eating, its great jaws chewing on bloody gobs of flesh. A rank smell filled the room.

‘This is Siddroc,’ Lugos said. ‘He’s my friend. My guardian. My dark masters provided him to keep me safe.’ He looked round at the vast creature and tutted melodramatically. ‘Oh, Siddroc! Have you eaten another of my aides? I’ve told you about that!’ The creature turned its huge head and snarled. ‘Very well... this intruder has caused me a great deal of trouble. Dispose of him and I’ll give you all the flesh you can eat.’

With a reverberating growl, the creature shambled forward, casting aside the last scraps of the unfortunate aide. In his right hand he whirled a chain attached to a spiked ball the size of Gilead’s head. In his left, he held a curved cutter-blade that surrounded his meaty knuckles with spikes.

Gilead leapt clear as the first blow came down and demolished the table. The elf landed and rolled aside hastily as another shattered the flagstones where he had

sprawled. For all its immense size, the abomination was fast. The elf side-stepped another huge blow and cut in with his own, but the longsword rebounded from the creature's armoured shoulder with a ringing chime.

The thing called Siddroc knocked Gilead off-balance with a sideways chop and the flat of the cutter blade sent him flying, blood spraying from a slice to his jawline. He landed hard in the hearth, crushing two viols that the musicians had left there in their haste to leave. He barely had time to get up and clear before the spiked ball destroyed a bench and the iron fireguard.

Gilead flung himself forward again, trying to find some opening. This time, his beloved blue-steel sword caught against the cutter blade and broke, leaving him with about a foot of jagged blade. The creature started baying – laughing perhaps, it was impossible to tell – and charged the elf.

Gilead thought fast. He faced certain death unless he tried to evade. But death... death was what he wanted! At this moment he could do anything. Even if he failed, he would still be rewarded with the thing he most craved. Calm swept through him.

Gilead did what Siddroc least expected. He met the charge head on. The jagged end of the longsword stabbed into the visor slit of Siddroc's vast helm. There was a pneumatic pop and a crack of bone, and stinking black ichor spurted out of the neck seals. With a monstrous scream, the great creature toppled.

Gilead rose unsteadily from the great, twitching corpse. Once again, he noted darkly, death had chosen to take his side. He looked around. Lugos was gone.

GILEAD CAUGHT UP with him in the main yard of the mansion. The gates were open and the servants were

fleeing, taking whatever they could with them in their panic. Gilead ignored the humans as easily as if they were sheep.

Lugos was face down in the dirt, impaled by a crossbow bolt. Betsen stood over him.

‘That’s him, isn’t it?’ she asked the elf, her whole body shaking.

‘Yes,’ he replied simply. ‘And that is your vengeance served.’

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. ‘Thank you... but it doesn’t feel anything like enough.’

‘It never does,’ said Gilead Lothain.

Taken from *Hammers of Ulric*:

IT WAS A cold dawn, and raining once again. The fourteen brothers of White Company assembled in the stable block behind the Temple, adjusting the harnesses of their warsteeds, grumbling in low voices, their breath steaming the air.

‘A raiding party? Before Mitterfruhl?’ Morgenstern complained, swigging from a flask in his saddlebags as he pretended to check them.

‘A drink? Before breakfast?’ von Glick sneered quietly.

Morgenstern laughed at this, booming and hard, but Aric knew it was sham good-humour. He could see the pale strain in Morgenstern’s pallid face, see the way his great hands shook.

Aric looked about. Vandam was resplendent, his face flushed with determination. His white wolf pelt hung just so across the shoulders of his gold-chased plate armour. Gruber looked far away, distant and preoccupied as he fumbled with the harness straps of his stamping steed. Einholt, the old, bald warrior with the facial scar and the milky eye, looked tired, as if he hadn’t slept well. Aric felt sure some old dream chased the veteran each and every night without fail.

Anspach laughed and joked with his fellows. Von Glick scowled at him. Ganz looked grim and quiet. The others began to mount up, exchanging jokes and slurs – haggard Kriever, stocky Schiffer, the blond giant Bruckner, red-maned Kaspen, the whipcord Schell, and Dorff, whistling another of his tuneless refrains.

‘Aric!’ Ganz called, and Aric crossed the yard. As the youngest of the company, it was his privilege to carry the

standard. He was amazed when Ganz placed the precious Standard of Vess into his mailed hand. Everyone in the yard fell silent.

‘By the decree of the High Priest himself, we ride under the banner of Vess, and we ride for revenge,’ Ganz said simply and swung into the saddle.

He turned his steed about and the company fell into step behind him, riding out of the yard into the streets and the rain beyond.

THEY CAME DOWN the western viaduct out of the city, in the shadow of the great Fauschlag Rock. High above them, the craggy walls and towers of Middenheim pushed their way up into the cold, friendless skies, as they had done for two thousand years.

They left the smoke and stench and clamour of the city behind, moving past trains of laden handcarts bound for the Altmarkt markets: strings of cattle from Salzenmund, the piled wagons of textile merchants from Marienburg. All pulled themselves to the sides of the sixty-foot wide viaduct to let the Wolf Company pass. When a party of Ulric’s best rode out, only a fool got in their way.

White Company left the viaduct and joined the Altdorf road, cantering into the damp woodlands, and followed the forest track for six hours before stopping to water their horses and eat at a village by the way. In the afternoon, the sun came up to glint off their grey and gold plate mail. The heat drew mist out of the wet trees, and they rode as if through smoke. In each village they passed, the locals came out to see a brave and feared band of Templars, singing a low battle hymn as they rode along.

They slept the night in a village longhall above a waterfall, and they rode at dawn into the darker paths,

the long tracks of black mud that ran down into the oily darkness of the Drakwald Forest, a region that lay across the land like the fallen cloak of some black-hearted god.

IT WAS NOON, but a pale, weak noon, and chill rain pattered down through the naked branches of black elms and twisted maple. The ground beneath them was coated in a stinking, matted slime of dead leaves that had fallen the autumn before and now lay rotting back into the dark soil. Spring would be a long time coming here.

There seemed no sign of life except for the fourteen riders. Occasionally a woodpecker would hammer in the distance, or some loon or other bird would whoop. Aric saw cobwebs in low branches hung with rainwater like diamond chokers.

‘Smoke!’ von Glick called suddenly, and they reined up, sniffing the air.

‘He’s right!’ Vandam said eagerly, sliding the long haft of his warhammer out of his saddle loop.

Ganz held up a hand. ‘Steady, Vandam! If we move, we move as a company or not at all. Aric, raise the standard.’

Aric edged alongside the leader and pulled the old banner upright.

With a nod, Ganz led off and the column moved two abreast through the trees in the direction of the smoke, hooves splashing through the leaf slush and rot.

The clearing was wide and open – trees had been cleared for it and now the wood was being burnt on a stone slab set before a crude statue. Five shambling, hairy forms were worshipping at the fire.

‘For Ulric! Wolves! Ride!’ Ganz yelled and they broke into a gallop, tearing down the slope into the clearing

itself, exploding water from the marshy ground with their heavy hooves.

The beastmen at the shrine looked round in horror, baying and breaking for cover.

At the back of the file, Morgenstern turned from the charge and looked to Gruber, who had reached a dead stop.

‘What’s the matter?’ he bellowed. ‘We’re missing the fun!’

‘I think my steed has thrown a shoe,’ growled Gruber. ‘Go on, you old fool! Ride on!’

Morgenstern turned again after the main charge and took a deep pull from his saddle bottle. Then with a huge cry he charged down the slope after the main party.

The low branch took him clean out of his saddle.

The rest thundered out across the clearing, Aric bellowing as he held the banner high. Three of the beastmen broke and fled. Two snatched up pikes and turned to face the charge, shrieking in a deep, inhuman way.

Vandam was by now leading the charge. His swinging mallet-head destroyed the skull of one of the defenders, smacking the goat-headed aberration back into the ground.

Ganz, just behind him, overshot the other and tried to wheel around. His horse lost its footing on the wet leaves and slid over, spilling him off.

The beast turned to capitalise on this but in a moment Aric and Kriever had run it down between their horses, smashing its bones.

Anspach galloped past the shrine after one of the escapees, whirling his hammer. Von Glick was close on his hind.

‘Ten shillings says I make this kill!’ laughed Anspach.

Von Glick cursed and tried to pull level, but Anspach hurled his hammer and it went spinning off after the fleeing creature. It decapitated a sapling and missed the beast by ten yards. Anspach swore and reined in his charge.

‘Gods help you that you ever win a wager!’ von Glick cried as he carried on and caught up with the beast at the tree line. He swung two blows which both missed, but the creature doubled back and was driven into the aim of Dorff, who crushed its brain.

The other two fled into the trees. Vandam, without breaking stride, galloped after them.

‘Back! Vandam! Back here!’ bellowed Ganz as he got up and righted his shaken horse.

Vandam paid no attention. They could hear his whoops echoing into the forest.

‘Schell! Von Glick! Go and round that idiot up!’ Ganz ordered and the two riders obeyed. Everyone else had galloped to a standstill around the shrine. Ganz looked back and saw that Gruber had dismounted at the edge of the clearing and was helping to prop Morgenstern against a tree. Morgenstern’s horse was trotting around, with its reins trailing.

Ganz shook his head and spat an oath.

He strode up to the shrine and gazed for a moment at the crude statue. Then he swung his hammer and smashed it into splinters.

Ganz turned back and looked at his men. ‘Now they know we’re here. Now they will come looking for us and our job will be easier!’

‘VANDAM? WHERE ARE you, you idiot?’ bawled von Glick as he rode slowly through the dark glades beyond the clearing. Dark meres stood stagnant between the

filthy trees, and brackish water trickled down the slate outcrops. Through the trees and the mist, von Glick could make out Schell, riding a parallel course, yelling out ‘Vandam! Come around the back or we’ll leave you out here!’

Von Glick heard movement in the trees nearby and raised his hammer ready. Vandam rode out of the trees.

‘Trust you to come looking for me, von Glick!’ he snorted. ‘You mother-hen the whole company! You’re so stiff you wouldn’t know valour if it came knocking!’

Von Glick shook his head wearily. He knew too well his own reputation with the younger members of White Company: stiff, inflexible, an old bore who nagged and complained. Jurgen had once told him he was the backbone of the company, but von Glick had a suspicion the commander had been trying to make light of von Glick’s attitudes. Von Glick hated himself for it, but he couldn’t help himself. There was no discipline these days. The young Templars were reckless bravos, and Vandam the very worst of them.

‘Ganz ordered me to find you,’ von Glick said sharply, trying to hold his anger. ‘What sense is it to ride off alone like that? There’s no glory in it!’

‘Isn’t there now?’ Vandam smirked. ‘I ran one to ground, broke his back. The other slipped away though.’

That was the worst of it... Vandam’s arrogance was matched only by his skill as a warrior. Damn his eyes! thought von Glick.

‘We’ll ride back. Now!’ he instructed Vandam, who shrugged mildly and turned his horse around. ‘Schell!’ von Glick called. ‘I found him! Schell!’

Von Glick could still make out the other rider, but the mist and trees were deadening his voice.

‘Go on,’ von Glick told Vandam. ‘I’ll fetch him.’

He spurred up along the edge of a mere in the direction of Schell who saw him at last and began to ride over. Von Glick turned his horse back.

The beastman came out of the bushes with a feral scream. Driven, hounded by Vandam, it had hidden, but von Glick had passed close by its hiding place and panic had galvanised it into fierce action. The iron barb of the spear took the old Wolf through the right hip. He bellowed in pain and the horse reared. The beastman clung on, shaking his weapon, which was wedged fast in the bone and meat and armour. Von Glick screamed, hooked like a fish, pushed back in the saddle by the spear so far he couldn't reach his warhammer.

Schell bellowed in dismay and galloped in.

Vandam, hearing the commotion, turned and looked in horror.

'Ulric's bloody fists!' he gasped. 'Oh lord, no!'

The spear broke. Freed, von Glick tumbled from the saddle and landed in the shallows of the mere. The beastman lunged forward.

Schell's horse leapt the mere at the narrowest point and the warrior swung the hammer spike down on the creature, killing it instantly.

He leaped off his horse and ran to von Glick, who lay on his side in the pool, his face pale with pain. It looked like his red and gold armour was leaking into the black water.

Vandam raced up.

Schell looked up at him with fierce, angry eyes that blazed from his lean face. 'He's alive,' he hissed.

GANZ STRODE ACROSS the shrine clearing to where Morgenstern was picking himself up.

‘Let’s talk,’ he said. ‘Away from the others. I’m sure you don’t want them hearing what I’m going to say to you.’

Morgenstern, who had twenty years more service to the Temple than Ganz, looked sour, but he did not disobey. Talking low, they moved away across the clearing.

Aric joined Gruber, who sat to one side on a fallen log. ‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘My horse was wrong-footed. Thrown a shoe, I thought.’

‘Looks fine to me,’ said Aric.

Gruber looked up at the young man, his lean, lined face hard but not angry. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Aric shrugged. With his long dark hair and trimmed black goatee, he reminded Gruber of the young Jurgen himself. ‘Anything you want it to mean,’ he said.

Gruber steepled his hands and thought for a moment. Aric had something, a quality. One day he would be a leader, a lot more effortlessly than poor Ganz, who tried so hard and was liked so little. Aric had natural command. He would be a great warrior for the Temple in time.

‘I...’ Gruber began. ‘I seem to lack the fire I once had. At Jurgen’s side, courage was easy...’

Aric sat next to him. ‘You’re the most respected man in the troop, Gruber. Everyone acknowledges that, even bluff old warhorses like Morgenstern and von Glick. You were Jurgen’s right-hand man. You know, after Jurgen’s death, I’ll never understand why you didn’t take the command when it was offered you. Why did you hand it on to Ganz?’

‘Ganz is a good man... solid, unimaginative, but a good man. He’d paid his dues. I’m just a veteran. I’d be a poor commander.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Aric said with a shake of his head.

Gruber sighed. ‘What if I said it was because Jurgen was dead? How could I take the place of that man, my sworn commander, my friend? The man I failed?’

‘Failed?’ Aric repeated in surprise.

‘That dreadful day last summer, when the beastpack fell on us out of nowhere. We stood together as a company or we fell, each man watching the other’s back.’

‘It was hell, all right.’

‘I was right by Jurgen, fighting at his right hand. I saw the bull-man swing in with the axe. I could have blocked it, taken the blow myself, but I froze.’

‘You weren’t to blame!’

‘I was! I hesitated and Jurgen died. If it hadn’t been for me, he’d be here today.’

‘No,’ Aric said firmly. ‘It was bad luck and Ulric called him to his hall.’

Gruber looked into the younger man’s face. ‘My nerve’s gone, Aric. I can’t tell the others... I certainly can’t tell Ganz... but as we rode in to the charge, I felt my courage melt. What if I freeze again? What if it’s Ganz who pays the price this time? You? I’m a coward and no use to this company.’

‘You are no such thing,’ Aric said. He tried to compose an argument to snap the veteran out of his grim mindset, but they were interrupted by shouting. Morgenstern strode back into the clearing, bellowing, with a stern-faced Ganz in his wake. The big ox reached his horse, pulled three bottles from his saddle bags and hurled them at a nearby tree, smashing them one by one.

‘Satisfied?’ he bawled at Ganz.

‘Not yet,’ Ganz replied stoically.

‘Ganz! Ganz!’ the shout echoed round the clearing. Schell led von Glick’s horse back to them, the old warrior slumped in the saddle with Vandam riding alongside to support him.

‘Oh great God of the Wolf!’ Gruber cried leaping up.

‘Von Glick!’ shouted Morgenstern, pushing past the dismayed Ganz.

They lowered the wounded man down and the company stood around as Kaspén, who had studied with a barber-surgeon and an apothecary, treated the ugly wound.

‘He needs a proper surgeon,’ said the thick-set, flame-haired man, wiping blood from his hands. ‘Wound’s deep and filthy and he’s lost blood.’

Ganz looked up at the sky. Evening was slipping down on them. ‘We’ll return to Middenheim tomorrow. First light. The fastest will ride ahead to fetch a surgeon and a cart. We—’

‘We will not,’ von Glick said, his voice thin and bitter. ‘We will not go back on my account. This mission, this undertaking, is a holy cause to refound the strength of this company and avenge our fallen leader. We will not abandon that task! I will not let you abandon this!’

‘But—’

Von Glick pulled himself up to a sitting position, wincing. ‘Promise me, Ganz! Promise me we’ll go on!’

Ganz faltered. He did not know what to say. He wheeled on Vandam, who stood to one side. ‘You bloody fool! This is your fault! If you hadn’t been so impetuous, you’d never have led von Glick into that!’

‘I—’ Vandam began.

‘Shut up! The company stands together or it falls! You betrayed the very foundation of this brotherhood!’

‘He’s not to blame,’ von Glick said. His eyes were glittering with strength born out of pain. ‘Oh, he shouldn’t have broken from the pack and ridden off alone, but I did this to myself. I should have been wary, I should have been looking. I dropped my guard, like any old fool, and paid the price.’

Silence. Ganz looked from one man to another. Most looked uncomfortable, awkward, disconcerted. The company spirit had never seemed so deflated, not even after Jurgen’s death. At least then there was anger. Now, there was just disillusion, a loss of faith and comradeship.

‘We’ll make camp here,’ Ganz said finally. ‘With luck, the beasts will come for us tonight – and we can finish this.’

Taken from *Riders of the Dead*:

AT THE CANNON-SET, along the north face of the town, a junior artillery observer from Nuln, sitting on picket duty by the earthwork, noticed that the faraway shadows of the forest seemed to be moving and flowing. He hurried to the tent of the master gunner, but the officer was looking for a mislaid love-token that his wife had given him, and made the junior wait.

In the interim, a sentry pike to the east of the gun-set saw the same signs, and immediately rang a handbell. Two more sentries picked up the alarum, and rang their own bells too, drawing the men of their company up out of sleep. In the tented field beyond them, a section of archers were similarly roused. The master of the watch came running at the sound of the bells, and a report was made to him. Runners were sent to the marshal's quarters, to the field commander of horse, and to the horn blowers camped near the town granaries.

Inver Schott, the marshal's aide, informed the runners that came knocking that the marshal was indisposed. When made aware of the urgency of the alert, he went to the horn blowers himself. They flatly refused to take orders without a command from the field marshal in person. The field commander of horse, also uncertain, sent his own runners to the marshal's quarters for confirmation, confident that the horns would sound if danger really was imminent.

No one, it is apparent from the records, believed a surprise attack was coming. Though raids and skirmishes might be staged without warning, battle and surprise were two concepts that simply did not go together, not when large armies were being fielded. Wars were just not fought that way.

Even when fighting the brute savages of the North, there was a protocol, a custom of battle. It was crude, but it was understood by both sides. Armies assembled on the field, faced each other, dug in, bellowed and taunted – sometimes for hours or even days – until a clash became inevitable. Indeed, it was often the case that the taunting and bellowing itself was the very matter of the battle. If an army was bellicose or large enough, the other would withdraw without any actual physical clash.

The root of this custom was the simple truth that armed forces of more than a few hundred men required huge motivation to attack one another. An individual unit might be rallied up to strike suddenly, but a mass of men needed firm coaxing. An army had to be worked up to a frenzy with phlegmatic speeches, insistent drumming and generous drink. It needed to be brought from the simmer to the boil. Then, and only then, would thousands of individuals attack as one mass.

And even if that impossibility could somehow be achieved without long notice, there seemed little advantage in charging, unannounced, out of the tree-line in the cold, grey wet of a spring dawn. Troops would be exhausted by the effort of such a charge, their push wasted, their strength depleted by the exertion.

It simply wasn't how battles were fought.

THE FIRST WAVE of Northers hit the outer line nine minutes after the junior observer had first seen movement in the forest. They came sprinting, though they had already covered a league of rough ground from the forest line. And they were not simply fore-runners or berserks roaming madly ahead of their force. They were the front of it, the crest of a solid wave of horned shadows that flooded out of the woodland. Drum beats

ruptured the daybreak air, their hammers pulsating through the raw din of the charging foe. It was, survivors said, the most awful sight, the most awful sound.

A nightmare, brought to life. An impossibility.

The cannon-sets were overrun before any of the great mortars and bombards of the Nuln Schools could be primed, let alone fired. The wicker breastworks were crushed flat by sheer weight of numbers. The observer who had first seen the rising was also amongst the first to die, hewn into pieces by war-axes and double-edged swords. The master gunner never lived to find his wife's love-token. Tents and wagons were set on fire.

At that time, the Wissenland pike, with their supporting cousins in the archery company, were the only Imperials on the field to have mobilised to any real effect. They staged a desperate defence of the north town line, raising a bristling pike wall. The tide of the enemy broke around them as waves broke around the prow of a galley, and washed in from the sides. Men were systematically beheaded. Their dripping skulls were spiked on the ends of their own pikes and carried forward by the horde as grisly trophies, like flotsam borne along by breakers. The archers, having felled several score with their first volleys, were overrun and maimed, left to die on the mud with their hands purposefully severed.

By then, the horde had swept into Zhedevka itself, and the massacre was under way.

At the west end of the Imperial order, around the cluster of granaries, the master of the watch managed to rally two companies of Nordland pike and halberd, and a fahnlein of arquebusiers clad in the yellow and black surcoats of Averland. They had been awoken by the tumult, but were milling around, confused and disjointed. Many were only partially dressed. The

conscripted levies and the recruited patents had already fled in terror, leaving clothing and possessions scattered in their wake.

The master of the watch, along with a dazed sergeant major, quickly marshalled the Nordland pole-troops into pike blocks along the northern face of the granaries. The shorter, axe-headed halberds were laced between the much longer shafts of the pikes. The arquebusiers were lined up a little to the south. Smoke and mist billowed across the skirts of the town, filling the cold dawn air.

The pole-troops stiffened, tense, clammy hands clenching the hafts of their weapons, as a hellish noise rolled in through the smoke and became a solid line of charging figures. This was the first sight the Imperials had got of the foe. Ragged, hairy men with painted faces, draped in furs, black chainmail and leather armour. Teeth and bones and other trophies were strung in their tallow-stiffened hair, and their bare arms were wrapped in iron trophy rings beaten from the weapons of victims. Most wore horned or spiked helmets, and carried war-axes or thick swords. They came running. All of them were howling. They were terrifying.

Part of the Nordland block broke and scattered. The remainder held around their ensign and took the brunt. Northmen, in row after charging row, died against the pike block, but the weight of the dead bore the long hafts down, shattering many. The arquebusiers fired a crackling series of dull blasts, then reloaded and fired again. Their two volleys accounted for three dozen victims and created a wall of dense, white smoke.

They were reloading for the second time when they were consumed by the ravening force. Some fell back, drawing their S-hilted katzbalger swords and fighting a rearguard towards the edge of the pike block.

The field commander of horse had raised up sixty men, most of them demilancers. This troop, at full charge, came west across the main town highway and drove into the enemy's right hand flank with horse lances, for none had had time to prime their handguns. It was a bravura action that gave the Nordland pike's block a moment's renewed confidence. They pushed forward, pole-shafts dressed and lowered the way the drill repetitions had taught them. Chanting and pushing, they ground the enemy back about twenty paces.

But there was a roaring from the west now. An entirely separate flood of Northers spilled from the lowland mist, axe-heads whirling. They crushed in to meet their comrades like the jaws of a farrier's pincer. The master of the watch managed to sustain his block long enough to form them into a pike square, but they had been eroded by then, and their desperate resistance lasted about four minutes before the square shattered. They were butchered to a man.

The field commander of horse turned his demilance troop in a wide circuit around the stables behind the granaries and ordered them out with sabres raised, for many had lost or broken their lances in the first sortie. Several of the men pleaded with the commander to quit the field, but he kept on with the turn and charged the enemy mass, standing in the stirrups, sword raised crosswise to his face. His men followed, every one. They killed upwards of forty before their charge ran out of momentum and space.

Then they were wrestled over and dragged down, man and horse alike, and hacked to death with sharpened iron blades.

THUNDER & STEEL can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

In the UK: Price £10.99

ISBN: 978-1-84970-022-1

In the US: Price \$15.00 (\$17.50 Canada)

ISBN: 978-1-84970-023-8

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