

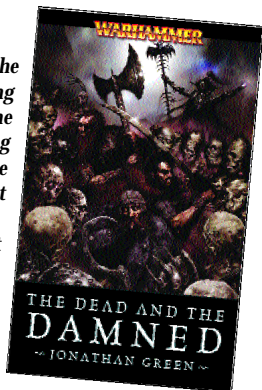
THE DEAD AND THE DAMNED

A Warhammer novel by Jonathan Green

TORBEN SUDDENLY FOUND himself hurled to the ground with the hissing nobleman furiously tearing at his mail armour with its talons. Twisting to one side, the warrior used his bulk to throw the clawing vampire from him. Quickly getting to his feet, he watched open-mouthed as the wound he had dealt the man closed bloodlessly before his very eyes.

'By Queen Katarin's sword!' he exclaimed. 'What does it take to stop these things?'

BADENOV'S MERCENARIES are a group of hard-bitten fighting men. Drawn from the length and breadth of the Empire, they are held together by a lust for gold and a thirst for glory. Vampires, ghouls, rat-men and the Dark Knights of Chaos all abound in this land, but Badenov and his men will battle on until the last of them joins the dead or the damned!



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from THE DEAD AND THE DAMNED

BURGOMEISTER AUDRIC OF Nagenhof knelt in the middle of the road quaking before the Beast of Bruckenbach. His gaudy clothes were torn and bloodstained and his jowls wobbled as he pleaded for his life. 'I-I'll g-give you anything! Anything you want! Just don't kill me.'

'You really don't remember me, do you?' growled the beast.

The outlaw was an imposing figure. Over seven feet tall and almost as broad, his legs were thick trunks of muscle. From the waist up his body swelled to a barrel chest and he had huge shoulders from which bulged massive, club-like arms. His neck was as thick as an ox's and his shaven head seemed to bulge as a result of a distorted skull beneath. A white knot of scar tissue described an arc on his left cheek. With his knuckles barely clear of the ground like an ape, he looked more like an ogre than a man.

The beast was dressed much like the rest of his outlaw band: dark, leather boots; brown, patched trousers, belted at the waist. But where his men wore coats of chainmail or jerkins of studded leather armour, their leader wore only a sleeveless shirt, stained ochre with blood, sweat and grime. It was stretched taut over his swollen muscles and open down the front. Audric could quite clearly see the amulet that he wore on an iron chain around his neck: a polished cerulean stone that gleamed dully in its black metal setting.

Behind him was the splintered wreckage of the burgomeister's carriage. The horses had fled as soon as they were free of their traces. The men of Audric's entourage lay all around him, dead. The bandits looted their bodies for money, weapons or anything else of use that they might find. These criminals really

were the lowest of the low. There was now no one left to protect him, not that the presence of an armed escort had made any difference when the blackguards had attacked.

Overhead circled a ragged flock of crows. Every so often one of the birds swooped down towards the road, as if to see better what transpired there.

'R-Remember you?' Audric stammered, perplexed.

'Yes. Remember me.' The beast's voice was deep and gravelly, as if it was only one cadence away from an animalistic roar.

'L-Look, you can have anything,' the desperate man implored. 'I promise you. I am a man of substance. Wh-Whatever you want, I can get it for you.'

'The only thing I ever wanted from you,' the beast snarled, leaning closer, 'I could never have. You would never have allowed it. So I'll have to settle for something else instead.'

The bandit looked up at the circling birds, no more than black smudges against the pale, late autumn sky.

'Yes,' he said smiling, carnivorously. 'Instead I'll have your money *and* your life.'

Hearing a strident, malevolent cawing, heavy with the prophecy of death, Audric tore his gaze from the brute standing in front of him and saw the crows above him. They peeled off from the spiralling flock one by one, descending on him in a vortex of rending beaks and claws. The burgomeister began to scream, but his cries were soon drowned out by the noise of tearing flesh and the screeching of frenzied birds.

The beast watched in delight, gaining savage pleasure from the birds' murderous attack. Finally the flapping wings parted to reveal what remained of the burgomeister: a bloodied skeleton, the crows having literally stripped the flesh from the man's bones.

The bandit leader suddenly caught his breath, an eldritch wind rippling across his body.

'Lord Tzeentch, accept this sacrifice,' the beast growled, luxuriating in the power released by the burgomeister's death. His amulet pulsed with a cold, blue light...

ONCE HE HAD simply been a man and not the beast. Then he had gone by the name of Gregor, and he had been an ostler, working in the stables of the Burgomeister of Nagenhof. One of his daily duties had been to tend to the horse of Audric's

innocently beautiful daughter, Camellia. Seeing her almost daily, but never being able to approach her, he had loved her from afar. But the day came when unrequited passion had made him forgetful of his place and he had declared his undying love for her. Horrified at being approached by the underling who worked in the stables mucking out her father's beasts, she had spurned him and the burgomeister himself had come to hear of Gregor's reproachful behaviour. Without a second thought, his master had Gregor beaten within an inch of his life. Then, bruised, bloodied and broken, he had been banished from the town, into the wilds of the forests beyond.

For a man in his condition, and with nothing about him except the clothes he stood in, exile from the town was as good as a death-sentence. The woods were full of hidden dangers, ravenous wild beasts, lawless rogues, Chaos-warped beastmen, and other darker things. And they all preyed on merchants and other travellers.

Stumbling through the woods as night fell, mad with unrequited love, Gregor thought nothing of any of these potential hazards. Only one thought occupied his mind; a burning desire for revenge. Gregor cursed Audric, praying to any entity that might be listening in the dark, witching hours of the night, or in the even darker, knotted depths of the primeval forest. He prayed that he might hear the rash, impassioned promise of a man with nothing left to lose.

He pledged them his service if, in return, they allowed him his revenge.

And something had indeed heard him. As he staggered over the rocky, broken ground, the injuries received at his beating wracking his body, supporting himself against sickly, misshapen trees it answered his blasphemous prayer in its own inimitable way.

The clouds parted and a single shaft of moonlight illuminated a gaping hole, half-observed by the roots of a tree, twisted as though in tormented agony. Gregor was drawn to the hole, it was just wide enough for a man to squeeze through. He slipped down the oesophageal tunnel beyond, slick with rotting leaves, into the dank, musty darkness. Without any means of creating light Gregor blundered about in the darkness until, from nowhere, a pulsing blue glow had swelled to illuminate the burial chamber he found himself in.

It was not large, but high enough to stand up in, its roof laced with the roots of the contorted tree above. He was surprised to find the walls faced with stone, but what intrigued him most was the effigy-like body.

It was laid out on a stone bier inscribed with strange runes and glyphs that made Gregor's eyes water. The body was clothed from head to foot in a dark robe, the hem embroidered with more esoteric symbols, and over that a breastplate fashioned from some strange metal was beaten to look like dragon scales. A bizarre horned helmet covered the head entirely, replacing the corpse's true face with that of a leering, iron daemon. Gauntlets of brass, like eagle's talons, hid the hands.

Most striking of all, however, was the dark stone amulet around its neck, resting on the front of the scaled breastplate. Its unnatural lustre drew Gregor closer, and made him take the talisman and place it around his own neck. The instant he did so, the body, and all its trappings, crumbled to fine, grey dust, leaving nothing.

Then it was that the amulet spoke to him. It told him of the sorcerer who had created it and his evil life. It told him that some of the sorcerer's power lived on inside it, granting whoever possessed the talisman dominion over the flock of crows he had bound to him, as his agents. They had been his ears and eyes, wherever he wished to send them, and they had been his murdering talons too. Those killed by the birds were sacrifices to the one whom he served, the Great Sorcerer himself, the Changer of the Ways. The souls of those sacrifices were absorbed by the amulet, and the talisman's owner gained strength in return for each soul claimed.

So it was that Lord Tzeentch saved Gregor that he might continue the sorcerer's work. He was to collect souls for the Changer of the Ways to increase his power in the world and bring about the end times.

Gregor was changed irrevocably. Gradually the amulet had wrought its changes on him. The more souls he sacrificed to Tzeentch the stronger he became. But no mere mortal body could contain the Chaos-strength that now imbued Gregor, so his body was adapted by the malignant energy it contained.

Hence, over the last three years, he had been transformed by the amulet's baleful influence into something less than, and yet also more than, human. Gregor and the bandit gang he

commanded had devotedly preyed on the travellers who journeyed through the Bruckenbach Woods.

It had not been long before the tales told by survivors – those he intentionally allowed to get away – spread around Nagenhof and beyond. They told of a heartless band of cut-throats, who gave no quarter and showed no mercy, led by a creature to which frightened men had given the name the Beast...

AT A SIGNAL from the mercenary band's leader, the noblewoman's entourage came to a halt. Torben Badenov scanned the trees and undergrowth on either side of the road. He had an uneasy feeling that their progress through the Bruckenbach Woods was being observed. He looked and listened, straining eyes and ears to catch the briefest glimpse or quietest sound that might give their observers away. He saw nothing but the occasional dark shape of a bird huddled at the top of a leafless tree. He heard nothing but the whine of the wind in the skeletal branches or the distant croak of a carrion crow.

The day was cold and mist still clung to the root-boles of trees, tendrils of fog snaking out over the road. With the coming of day, the night's chill had remained, making the travellers stamp their feet and flap their arms in an attempt to rid themselves of the marrow-numbing autumn cold in their bones. It was a typical turn-of-the-seasons day. The best thing that could be said about it was that it wasn't raining – or snowing.

Torben walked at the head of the cavalcade with Yuri and Pieter only a few paces behind him, one on either side of the road. Their feet crunched and rustled through the orange-brown carpet of leaves that covered the pitted and rutted earth.

Behind them came the first of the horse-drawn wagons, carrying their employer, the Lady Isadora, and her niece, the now-orphaned Camellia, with two maidservants in attendance. Between the two carriages rode Lady Isadora's two personal bodyguards, mounted, well-armed men by the names of Weber and Kruger. After them came the wagon that bore the rest of the noblewomen's attendants – four in all. Stanislav and Oran trudged along at the back bringing up the rear.

As the party trudged on along the road, Torben recalled how they had come to be hired to accompany the young noblewoman and her dowager aunt. One of the maidservants, a sweet

girl with a freckled nose and curly black locks by the name of Lisbet, had informed Torben that the Burgomeister of Nagenhof had abused his position of power and frittered away his wealth on costly gambling and even more costly women.

'During that incident with the Nagenhof Bell, Burgomeister Audric wasn't even in town,' Lisbet had said, as the maidservants and mercenaries made their final preparations before leaving the disgraced family's home. 'Rumour has it he'd had a thing going with Abbess Rilka, and he'd been up to the Priory of Saint Ephrael to ask for absolution, if you know what I mean.'

With her father dead, the family fortune practically all gone, and still unmarried, the nineteen year-old Camellia had been left destitute. That was until her maternal aunt and self-appointed guardian, the Lady Isadora, had stepped in to arrange a good match for her. She was to marry one Count Reinhardt of Wollustig, a minor noble, as far as Torben could work out, whose estates lay four days' ride away to the west, at the edge of the Bruckenbach Woods.

Isadora, a woman entering her middle years of life but who had retained the finely defined features of comely youth, had assured Torben on handing him the mercenaries' first instalment of their fee that it was the count who would pay the bulk of the cost of hiring Badenov's band. Torben just hoped Count Reinhardt knew about the arrangement, but he had no reason not to trust the dowager. Besides, the Wollustig estate lay equidistant from Ostermark and Nagenhof and the escort job would provide an interesting, not to say profitable, diversion on the mercenaries' way back to the Slaughtered Troll, where they would wait out the winter. Torben had agreed to take on the job, determined they wouldn't get stuck out in the frozen wilds again this year.

Torben still forgot at times that Alexi wasn't amongst the party. Sometimes he asked the old soldier's advice, before he remembered he wasn't there, although it didn't stop him hearing how his old friend might have replied, from time to time, either.

Following their companion's death at the tentacles of the awakening daemon on the moors east of Ostermark, the mercenaries had mourned Alexi by getting uproariously drunk, recalling the soldier's heroic deeds and embarrassing incidents,

until they were so intoxicated that they couldn't even remember why they were drinking. Torben had insisted they make their way to Nagenhof, where a friend from their soldiering days, one Dietrich Hassner, was now an innkeeper. Torben had hoped to persuade his old friend to join them.

There were only five of them now and Torben had begun to develop a niggling feeling that perhaps the end was nigh for Badenov's band. Not that that was what he wanted but, as Torben knew to his cost, you didn't always get what you wanted in this world.

It so happened that while they toasting Alexi in Dietrich's inn, the Hand of Glory, the vile skaven had returned to the market town at the same time. A decade after besieging it for the first time, they were back to have their revenge on the townsfolk of Nagenhof. It had been up to Badenov's band to stop the ratmen, and they had. But in the process Dietrich had been killed and the Church of Morr had been burnt down, on Torben's orders. He had been eager for the band to be on its way as soon as possible after that.

However, it transpired that Badenov's band had acquired something of a folk-hero status in Nagenhof, having driven off the skaven. So when the Lady Isadora came to look for hired swords to bolster the family's ailing retinue of bodyguards she had sent word to the Hand of Glory. Considering how her brother-in-law had met his end, Isadora had been keen to ensure that her entourage had the best protection she could afford.

Torben had been surprised to discover that Isadora was Camellia's aunt when he first met her and it wasn't long before he found himself thinking that ten years ago she would have made quite a catch. She had to be at least forty but she still had the looks and figure of a woman ten years younger and, if the cut of her clothes and the way she swung her hips were anything to go by.

Despite the risks presented by travelling in such a lawless territory, Camellia's dowager aunt had been most insistent that they not postpone their journey for any reason. The Lady Isadora had explained that Count Reinhardt had himself put it in no uncertain terms that his marriage to her niece had to occur at the appointed time or Camellia's family would lose his patronage and support. Such was the way of political alliances,

Torben mused, and he was happy not to have anything to do with such arrangements himself.

THE GIBBET CREAKED rustily as the corroded iron cage swung in the chill late autumnal breeze. Held upright by the confining, body-shaped bars was a decomposing corpse, black with rot. Patches of hair still clung to its scalp, as did irregular furred growths of mould. Its limbs hung at unnatural angles as the tendons and joints holding them in place had withered away. One bloodshot ball of jelly still lolled in its socket in the mottled brown skull. A weather-faded piece of yellowing parchment had been nailed to the post of the gibbet.

Not yet a day out of Nagenhof they had already reached the limit of the market town's jurisdiction. The gibbet told outlaws and rogues coming from the woods to the west that beyond this point they were not welcome and would be dealt with harshly. It also told travellers entering the woods that they were leaving the protection of Nagenhof behind, and that they were entering lawless lands, the preserve of bandits, wolves and worse.

'Why was he executed?' Yuri asked, approaching Torben where he stood looking up at the grisly warning. The wagons were creaking to a halt at the junction behind them.

'There's a whole list of crimes here,' Torben said, unrolling the curled parchment.

'Well the worst one was getting caught,' Oran joked morbidly, joining his fellows beneath the gibbet.

'Robbery, horse stealing, banditry, murder. The list goes on. Any one of them could carry a hanging sentence.'

'Not the sort of person you'd want to take home to meet your grey-haired old mother then,' Yuri concluded.

'The blaggard doubtless got everything he deserved,' Pieter added darkly.

'Let's keep moving,' Torben said, turning away from the morbid marker and its gruesome occupant with a sickened expression on his face, 'we don't want the ladies seeing this any longer than they have to.'

The cavalcade moved on, past the creaking scaffold. As he looked back to see that everyone had returned to their place in the line, Torben spotted a ragged-winged carrion crow fly down from the surrounding trees and alight on the cage. Clawing its way around the rusted bars it began pecking at the corpse,

plucking the remaining eyeball from the ruined head. Before it passed from sight, Torben was convinced that the bird was watching them leave, the eyeball hanging from its beak by a thread of rubbery tissue.

THE REST OF the day passed as uneventfully as it had begun, with no sign of bandits or any other predators. That night they made camp by the side of the road. The mercenaries and bodyguards, under Torben Badenov's command, shared watch duties.

It was when Pieter was on first watch, along with the reticent Weber, that Camellia came to him. The setting sun stained the sky scarlet and lilac.

'My-My lady,' he stammered, startled from his reverie by her sudden appearance.

'Hello,' she said, looking at him with piercing azure eyes from beneath a fringe of blonde hair like spun gold. 'It's Pieter, isn't it?' she asked.

'Yes, my lady. Pieter Valburg.'

He could feel his cheeks reddening to glowing hot coals. To Pieter's eyes the young noblewoman was simply yet stunningly beautiful. She was almost like a blonde twin of his dead sweetheart, Rosamund.

'You should return to your carriage, madam,' Pieter said, hardly daring look Camellia in the eyes. 'The nights are getting colder. I'm sure you'd be comfortable inside.'

'But then I wouldn't be able to talk to you,' she said, blushing herself.

And the two of them talked past sunset, into the night and to the end of Pieter's watch.

WITHIN AN HOUR of sun-up, as dank autumn night-mist curled off the trees and a pale sun rose ponderously through a dove-grey sky, the party was on the move again. The only sound to break the stillness of the morning, beyond the quiet crackling of the wet undergrowth drying in the wan sunlight, was the grating cry of a crow. It was like the death-knell of a cracked bell.

Above the road rose the rocky scarp of a granite crag, stubborn shrubs clinging to fissures in the rock. From his vantage point at its summit the Beast of Bruckenbach watched the entourage set off, following the road west as it twisted and

turned through the wooded gorge. He resembled a hungry bear watching a lamb stray from the protection of the flock.

The bandit chief smiled, anticipating the kill, and offered up a dark prayer of thanks to his lord and master. The Changer of the Ways had seen fit to bring about a chain of events that had delivered the one thing he had wanted from the blubbering burgomeister; the thing he wanted more than any other was now within his reach. Unconsciously he clenched his fists, crushing the rocks beneath his hands.

As the party of noblewomen, maidservants, mercenaries, bodyguards and attendants resumed their journey through the Bruckenbach Woods, the beast had caught a glimpse of the object of his warped, lascivious desires, and had been almost overwhelmed by lustful feelings. He struggled to believe his good fortune. Truly Lord Tzeentch favoured him, rewarding him for all the souls he had collected for the Architect of Fate.

'Ranulf,' he growled, turning to the outlaw crouched next to him, who was dwarfed by his boss, despite being a good six feet tall himself. 'Return to the camp. Summon the men. This is what we're going to do...'

'MY LADY WISHES to know what you are going to do about this problem,' Weber, the bodyguard said in a clipped tone.

The man had made it no secret that he was not unhappy having a sell-sword like Torben in command over him but, as that was the case he was not going to suggest any course of action himself. If the Kislevite got them all into a difficult situation then he would have to be the one to get them out. Then, when the Lady Isadora saw the error of her ways in hiring Badenov's band, he would resume control, save the day and re-establish his position.

Torben looked from the fallen trees, to the disgruntled bodyguard, and back again. Since the party had passed the last junction the road had steadily narrowed as it climbed upwards through the craggy, wooded hills. Then, as the sun had begun its descent and afternoon had drawn in, they had rounded a bend only to find the track blocked by two large, fallen trees.

There was no way round them with the wagons in tow, so the obstruction either had to be moved or the party would have to

turn back and take the other road at the previous junction. They had intentionally avoided that road because it was narrow, riven with potholes, and apparently less well-maintained.

'I don't like it,' Oran scowled. 'Someone did this on purpose.'

'Why do you say that?' Yuri asked uncertainly.

'You forget what I did before I found myself in the army of the old tzar,' Oran reminded him. 'When I was running with outlaws we'd use all sorts of tricks to get the unwary to go just where we wanted.'

'He's right,' called Stanislav, emerging from the undergrowth. 'There are axe marks at the base of the trunks. Those trees didn't come down in some Kaldezeit storm. They were felled deliberately.'

'Bandits,' muttered Yuri.

'The beast,' proclaimed Pieter.

'So,' Weber's flinty tones cut in, 'what do I tell the Lady Isadora?'

'We go back,' Torben declared decisively. 'It's not far. We shouldn't lose too much time.'

'I tell you, I don't like it,' Oran repeated.

'Well, if we wait around here trying to move the trees, we'll make easy pickings for anyone with a bow and half a mind to relieve us of our possessions. If we untethered the horses we could do it but it would take a while and leave us stranded while we did so. If we're about to be ambushed by bandits, I think I'd rather keep moving. We're going back.'

WITHIN AN HOUR the wagons were rumbling and bumping along the rutted, pot-holed track of the other road. Skeletal branches reached out over them, swaying in the steady breeze, like the clutching talons of carrion birds.

'I don't like this at all,' Oran continued complaining.

'Look, will you shut up?' Torben jogged back down the line to where the whinging mercenary was trudging along disconsolately.

'I just can't help feeling that we're heading into a trap, that's all.'

'All your talk of bandits and ambushes is going to have our employers on a nervous knife edge. If they hear you, they'll become hysterical. Then, if we are attacked, they're going to be no use whatsoever.'

Hearing a distant croaking call, the erstwhile thief looked up, through the leafless canopy of the trees, at the black specks circling far overhead. He grimaced, the expression making him appear even more ugly than he already was.

'Can you hear that?' Yuri called to the others abruptly. 'We're approaching water, a river I expect.'

It was then a quarter of an hour before the entourage rounded another bend, entered a limestone gully, and saw the raging torrent ahead of them. By that point they had all been able to hear the roar of the water from a good half-mile back.

The fast-flowing river was spanned by a rather rickety-looking bridge, only wide enough for the wagons to cross in single file. The railings were green with moss and slick with the river's spray. The water rushed past several feet below, foaming white as it surged between the rocky banks and over water-polished boulders in its path. To the left the river continued its sharp descent over more rapids while, further up the river's course, to their right, Torben could see the white screen of a waterfall through the trees.

Before Oran could say any more, Torben directed the entourage across the semi-derelict bridge. The two carriages rattled onto the bridge, the horses' hooves clapping on the uneven planks, the joists supporting the bridge creaking ominously.

It wasn't until both wagons were on the bridge, the entire entourage in tow, that the attack came. Later Torben couldn't clearly recall what had happened – whether he heard Weber cry out behind him first and then saw the hooded figure drop into the road in front of him, or vice versa.

Even to an experienced soldier like Torben, who was used to setting ambushes as well as facing them, their attackers seemed to come out of nowhere. The bandits wore face-covering hoods, armoured leather jerkins or chainmail shirts and were armed with a variety of weapons, including cudgels, short swords and crossbows. They burst from the undergrowth, dropped from branches and slipped from behind boulders in the pass so that in moments the entire entourage was surrounded. Outlaws blocked either end of the bridge and the raging river blocked left and right.

Torben darted a glance behind him. Weber slumped forward, falling from his horse, the tip of the crossbow bolt that had entered his heart visible through the front of his surcoat. His

body hit the floor of the bridge with a crash and lay there motionless.

Torben saw that Yuri had unshouldered his bow and was preparing to use it. A gesture from Torben made the impetuous young man lower the tip of his arrow from its target and hold fire. It was only then that Torben noticed that another quarrel had struck the bridge only a foot to the left of the other bodyguard's horse.

Then the mercenary captain saw the massive figure striding towards the bridge, between the masked brigands. Torben turned in horrified disbelief at what he saw. The brigand's leader's proportions were more like that of an ogre than a man. His upper body seemed swollen out of all proportion compared to his body below the waist. One white healed wound mark on his cheek stood out in particular. The grimacing face reminded Torben of the leering gargoyles he had seen adorning temples and tombs, their features exaggerated to convey the greatest horror for dramatic impact. Straps of leather and chains were wrapped around his wrists. In one hand, twice the size of a normal man's, was gripped what looked like a butcher's cleaver, only several times larger. Even so, in the outlaw leader's grasp it looked small.

Torben was in no doubt whatsoever that he was now facing the brigand known as the Beast of Bruckenbach Woods: the bandit chief who had wrested control of this territory from rival outlaws and highwaymen, not to mention the road wardens. Neither were there any questions as to how he had acquired his position and come to lead this gang of robbers and cutthroats.

Whichever way Torben looked at it, they were trapped.

'I hate to say, "I told you so",' Oran said with a sour smile.

'Then don't,' snarled Torben. 'Just don't.'

The bandit lord advanced to the end of the bridge. 'I am the Beast of Bruckenbach!' he bellowed. 'Everything you have is now mine to do with as I please, including your immortal souls. But I give all trespassers into my realm the same choice. Either you die easy or you die hard; it makes no difference to me.'

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