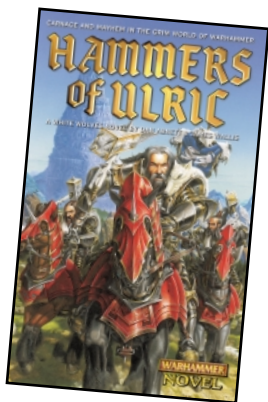


# Hammers of Ulric

by Dan Abnett, Nik Vincent & James Wallis

*GANZ FLEW AT the monstrosity, hammer swinging in a wide, sidelong arc. But the decaying thing was faster – terrifyingly fast. It smashed Ganz aside with a fierce blow of its warhammer. Ganz fell hard, clutching at his dented breastplate and the cracked ribs beneath. ‘You cannot kill what has no life,’ the liche-thing said in a voice as dry as parchment.*

**DARK POWERS** gather around the ancient mountain-top city of Middenheim. Only the noble Templars of Ulric and a few unlikely allies stand to defend her against the insidious servants of Death.



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IT WAS, TO no one's great surprise, raining in Middenheim that day.

Spring rain, fresh as ice needles, spattered down on that vast old city which sat brooding atop its granite crag, gazing down across the dismal forests around it. Another long winter season was slowly thawing, and the city, and everyone in it, was cold and wet and miserable to the bone.

In a puddled yard behind the Spread Eagle tavern, Morgenstern carefully adjusted a line of plump turnips he had arranged along the flagstones, each one sat on an upturned pail. Then he walked to the end of the yard, belched delicately with a hand to his mouth and little finger cocked, then spat on his meaty palms and hefted up the great warhammer leaning against the slimy bricks.

He began to spin it, crossing his grip deftly, looping the mighty head back and forth in a figure of eight around his shoulders. *Whoooff! Whoooff! Whoooff!* it hissed as it circled. But Morgenstern was standing a little too close to the back wall and, after another circuit, the hammerhead struck against the stonework. Several bricks shattered and dropped out, and the warhammer bounced to the ground.

Morgenstern swore colourfully, and wobbled slightly as he stooped to retrieve his weapon, rainwater dripping from his vast shaggy beard. Then he wobbled some more as he stooped to retrieve his tankard. He straightened up and supped from it. Then he tried unsuccessfully to replace the bits of brick, fussing as if somehow no one would notice the dent if he smoothed it over. Several more bricks fell out.

Giving up, Morgenstern turned back to his row of buckets and started to spin the hammer again, this time checking he had swinging room.

'Is this going to take much longer?' Aric asked from the tavern doorway. He stood leaning against the doorjamb: a tall, powerfully built young man not yet twenty-two, with a mane of black hair and bright blue eyes. He carried the gold-edged plate armour and the snowy pelt of the White Wolf Templars well.

'Hush!' said the older knight, concentrating on his swing and not looking round. Morgenstern adjusted the fall of his own wolf-pelt so it did not constrict the movement of his armoured limbs. 'Behold, my young friend, how a master of the warhammer displays his skill. See! Before me, the heads of my foes!'

'The turnips on the buckets?'

'Quite so. That is indeed what they represent.'

'These foes are what? Lying down? Buried up to the neck?'

Morgenstern smiled patiently. 'They are large and able-bodied warriors, Aric. I, however, am on a horse.'

'Of course you are.'

'For the purposes of this demonstration, imagine I am on a horse.'

Still spinning the hammer, Morgenstern began to prance back and forth on the spot like a hobbyhorse mummer in a Mystery Play. He made clip-clop noises with his tongue and occasionally admonished 'Steady there! Whoa, girl!'

Aric closed his eyes.

'Yah-hah!' Morgenstern barked suddenly and lurched forward, head back, as his imaginary horse bolted.

His great, thundering, armoured mass, with the hammer swooping about him in a vast circle, drummed down the yard, spraying up water and dislodging flagstones as he charged the buckets. His initial swing smashed the turnip on the first bucket, then, without breaking stride, he galloped in and out of the remaining buckets, decapitating each turnip in turn, slaloming between the rows, swooping and crossing the hammer with astonishing precision.

Aric by then had reopened his eyes. For all the pantomime idiocy, for all the drunkenness, for all the fact that Morgenstern was at the wrong end of his fifties and two hundred pounds too heavy, Aric was still impressed by the big man's weapon skill.

With a bellowing flourish, Morgenstern elegantly took out the last of his foes, bucket and all, crushing both with a blow that

lofted them over the gable end. Then his boot slipped on the sheened cobbles, he stumbled at full pelt and went headfirst into the stables. Through a door he hadn't opened first.

Aric winced. He turned and went back inside. It was going to be a long day.

INSIDE THE Spread Eagle, he rejoined Anspach, Gruber and von Glick at the small table in the corner.

'Did he do it?' Gruber asked.

Aric nodded. 'All of them.'

Anspach chuckled his dirty, melodic chuckle. He was a handsome man in his late thirties, with devilish eyes and a smile that could charm chastity belts into spontaneous release. 'That's six shillings from each of you, I fancy.'

'By the Wolf, Anspach!' von Glick grunted. 'Is there nothing you won't wager on?'

Anspach accepted his winnings. 'Actually, no. In fact, that reminds me, I have a bag of gold riding on a certain goathed going the distance at the Bernabau this afternoon.'

Von Glick shook his head in dismay. A veteran Wolf of the old school, von Glick was a slender, angular man of sixty years. His grizzled hair was long and straggly, and his chin was shaven to pepper stubble. He was stiff and disapproving about all things. Aric wondered if there was anything von Glick couldn't complain about. He somehow doubted the prim old man had ever had the passion to be a noble warrior.

'So where's Morgenstern now?' Gruber asked, toying with his tankard.

'Having a lie down,' answered Aric. 'You know, I think... he drinks too much.'

The other three snorted.

'Brother Templar,' Anspach said, 'you're too recent an addition to this noble order to have witnessed it, but our Morgenstern is famous for the prodigious scale of his imbibing! Some of his greatest victories on the field of combat... like those orc-scum he took at the Battle of Kern's Gate... such feats have been fired by Ulric, and fuelled by ale!'

'Maybe,' Aric said doubtfully, 'but I think it's getting to him. His reflexes. His co-ordination...'

'He killed the turnips, didn't he?' von Glick asked.

'And the stable door,' Aric said darkly.

They fell silent.

'Still, our Morgenstern...' Anspach began, 'I'll wager he could—'

'Oh, shut up!' growled von Glick.

Aric sat back and gazed around the smoky tavern. He could see Ganz, their new, young company commander, sitting in a booth side, with the hot-blooded Vandam talking eagerly at him.

'What's that about?' he asked Gruber. The white-haired Gruber was deep in thought and snapped up with a start as Aric addressed him.

*He looked almost scared just then, Aric thought. That's not the first time I've caught him lost in thoughts he doesn't like.*

Gruber was the most respected of the Company's men, a veteran like Morgenstern and von Glick, who had served with old Jurgen from the beginning. His hair was thin, his eyes pale, his papery skin almost translucent with age, but Aric knew there was a power, a terrible force inside that warrior.

Except now... now, for the first time since he joined the Company eighteen months before, Aric sensed that Gruber's power was waning. Was it age? Was it... Jurgen? Was it something else?

Aric gestured again over at Vandam and Ganz. 'What's Vandam bending our commander's ear about?'

'I hear Vandam wants to transfer,' von Glick said quietly. 'He's a glory-hound. He wants promotion. Word is, he sees our company as a dead end. He wants to move to another mob. Red Company, maybe.'

The four of them grunted their disapproval and all took a drink.

'Don't think Ganz will let him. Ganz has barely had time to make his mark in command since the... since that business. He won't want to lose a man before he's had a chance to prove something.' Gruber looked thoughtful. 'If they ever let us prove anything again.'

'It's not long till Mitterfruhl,' Anspach said. 'Then the campaign season really starts. We'll get something... a good raid into the Drak. I bet you.'

Aric was silent. Something had to happen soon, or this particular brave company of White Wolves was going to lose its heart entirely.

THE GREAT TEMPLE of Ulric was almost empty. The air was still and cold and smelled of candle smoke.

Ganz walked in, and reverently placed his gloves and warhammer in the reliquary in the entrance hall.

The acoustics in the vast, vaulted chamber were superb, and Ganz could hear the precise intonations of four knights who were whispering prayers on the other side of the high altar, kneeling, heads down. He could also hear the faint squeak of lint as a Temple adept polished the brass finials of the lectern. The great statue of Ulric himself rose up like a thundercloud to block the light from the high windows.

Ganz bowed his head and made his observance, then crossed the chamber and knelt before the Sacred Flame.

He was kneeling there when he felt the hand on his shoulder. Ganz looked up into the face of Ar-Ulric, the High Priest himself, his craggy, bearded features catching the flame light.

'We should talk, Ganz. I'm glad you came by. Walk with me to the Regimental Chapel.'

Ganz got up and fell into step beside the venerable warrior. He saw the four knights were leaving, casting curious glances in his direction.

'I came to seek... guidance, High One,' Ganz began. 'This season will be my first as a commander of men, and already, I—'

'Do you lack confidence, Ganz?'

'No, lord. But I lack experience. And the men are... listless.'

They walked down a short flight of steps and reached an iron cage door where a Templar of Grey Company stood watch. He saluted the High Priest respectfully, and undid the padlock so that the cage door could swing open. Ganz followed Ar-Ulric through and they entered the smaller, warmer interior of the temple's regimental chapel, decorated with standards, banners, trophies and the honour roll of memorial slabs.

Both men bowed briefly to the great wolfskin pelt on the wall, and to the snarling, silver-inlaid treasure on a raised plinth

beneath it. The Jaws of the Wolf, the Temple's most precious icon.

The High Priest bent before it for a moment, murmured a blessing to Ulric and to Artur, then rose and turned to Ganz. His eyes twinkled like the first frost of a hard Jahrdrung. 'Your company is more than listless, Ganz. There was a time when White Company was the finest and best this Temple could field, performing deeds that the riders of other Wolf Companies like Red or Grey could only dream of. But now it is weak – it has lost its way. This whole winter they have idled here in the city, wasting their health and money and time. Several have become noted drunkards. Especially Morgenstern.'

'It is easy to exaggerate—'

'He relieved himself in the font in the Temple of Verena,' the High Priest said with great and sad certainty. 'During High Mass. And then he suggested to the priests that the Goddess herself was a "piece of all right" who could really do with a good... what was it again?'

Ganz sighed. 'Man in her life, High Priest.'

The High Priest nodded. It seemed to Ganz he was almost smiling but that could not be so and his tone confirmed it. 'Morgenstern is a disgrace. And Anspach. You know about his gambling? He owes a large amount to the stadium brokers and to various less-official wager-takers. And I have had audiences with that hotblood Vandam twice now to hear him petition me for a transfer to Red Company. Or Gold. Or anywhere.'

Ganz hung his head.

'There are others with problems too... each to his own. I don't pretend your job is easy, Ganz, taking command of a demoralised mob like this. And I know everything stems from that one incident last summer in the Drakwald. That beastpack got the better of you. They were strong. Sometimes, Ulric save us, the evil ones do win. It was a tragedy White Company lost so many good men. And to lose Jurgen. It can't be easy for you to take his place.'

'What can I do, High Priest? I don't command the respect Jurgen did. How can I rally White Company?'

The High Priest crossed to the far wall and lifted down the standard of Vess. It was old and tattered and stained with

ancient, noble blood. It was one of the oldest and most revered battle standards of the Wolf Companies, carried at some of the Templars' greatest victories.

'You will take your company out, into the forests, beneath this old and venerable standard, and you will destroy the beastpack that broke your honour.'

Ganz took the shaft of the standard with amazement. He looked up and met the steely gaze of his old commander, Jurgen, the newest of the graven memorials on the wall. For a long while, Ganz stared into that marble face, remembering the long white beard, the hawkish look, the famous studded eye-patch. Ganz knew the High Priest was right. It was the only way.

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 Einholt 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 Krieber 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!'

## The campaign continues in Hammers of Ulric

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by Dan Abnett & Nik Vincent

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