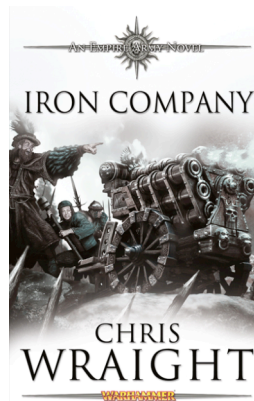


## ***IRON COMPANY***

*An Empire Army novel*

*By Chris Wraight*

When engineer Magnus Ironblood is tempted out of retirement into one final campaign, he finds himself working alongside some unlikely allies. Sent as part of an Imperial force to bring to heel the secessionist forces of Countess von Kleister, this rag-tag army finds themselves outgunned. Digging deep into their reserves of courage and ingenuity they must fight the enemy forces with everything they have, but will it be enough to succeed where everyone else has failed?



### **About the Author**

Chris Wraight is a freelance writer. A long time fan of Games Workshop background art and fiction, Chris is also into the novels of Patrick O'Brian, Philip Pullman and William Golding. His first novel, Masters of Magic, was published in 2008.

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**•BY THE SAME AUTHOR•**

MASTERS OF MAGIC  
DARK STORM GATHERING

**•IN THE SAME SERIES•**

REIKSGUARD  
By Richard Williams

The following is an excerpt from *Iron Company* by Chris Wraight. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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Hergig was poor, and it showed. The thoroughfares were narrow, the buildings old and shabby. Most were made of wood. Aside from the imposing Kristalhof, there were few stone constructions. Even the city walls seemed in poor repair, despite the fact they had been necessary for the city's defence many times in living memory. The skulls of slaughtered beastmen still hung over the main gates, presumably intended as a warning to their kin not to come back. Magnus didn't blame them for staying in the forests.

The morning had dawned cold again. He had a hangover again. It was thirsty work, recruiting. His mood was dark. Why had he come to such a place? What had possibly drawn him to this Sigmar-bereft wasteland? The people were stupid and superstitious. There were more temples to Shallya and Taal than to the divine protector of the Empire. Perhaps it had been the reputation of the gunners. The Hochland long gun was undoubtedly a piece of engineering mastery. Even the gunsmiths of Nuln admired the best examples. But when Magnus had arrived in the city, he had been

disappointed. There were few smiths left. Many had fled south to escape the endless wars. More had been poached by richer employers in the lands to the south, their secrets scattered across the Empire and feverishly copied by less-skilled hands. A genuine Hergig piece was now a rare and precious thing. Magnus wondered if there was anybody left in the city who really knew how to make one.

Even if there had been, there was still more talent in his own bloodstream than in the whole province. The Ironblood pistol was whispered about reverentially in the corridors of the College of Engineers. True flintlock, a rarity in the Empire. Three barrels. Exquisitely bored. The cleanest workings you could imagine. Nearly impossible to fire without igniting truly. And the deadliest aim of any gun he had ever used. The very fact that his name was associated with such a masterpiece occasionally filled him with a terrified awe. Only three had ever been made. Now two were lost, and the third was in a crystal casket deep within the college vaults. He had heard rumours that a second was still in use somewhere in the Empire. A witch hunter. A woman. From time to time, he pondered trying to track her down.

The same thing stopped him every time. Shame. He had not made the guns. His father had, the great Augustus Ironblood. The old White Wolf of Nuln, so-called because of his mane of ivory hair, sweeping down from his severe, lined face. At one time Magnus had

wanted nothing but to follow in the old man's footsteps. And he had started well. Too well, perhaps. And then...

Magnus looked down at his filth-spattered coat. He held his hands up. They were dark with long-ingrained grime. His nails, once worn to the quick by honest work, had grown effeminately long. Frau Ettieg was right. Augustus would have wept.

He took a deep breath. Such thoughts depressed him. There was no use dwelling on them. Nothing could change what he'd become. He was the product of fate, like everyone else.

Magnus stepped around a pool of something foetid and unidentifiable. On the far side of the street, it looked like a fight was breaking out. A man in ragged robes broke from a crowd and tore off towards the poor quarter. He was followed by a scrum of angry townsfolk. Some were newly-arrived mercenaries, by their look. No doubt they'd been trying to buy luck charms or some other nonsense. Paying for a bundle of crow-bones from a street wizard was stupid and dangerous. Trying to cheat your customers was even more stupid. From behind a row of houses, the man's voice rose in panic. It looked like they'd got him. He wouldn't last long.

Magnus sighed, and pressed on. Soon he had reached his destination, a low-beamed house on the fringes of the Hofbahn. The door was open and light streamed from the room within. There was the noise of a man's laughter, and children squealing, and a woman's high voice chiding them all mockingly. Magnus smiled in

spite of himself. There were some things in life he couldn't be cynical about. He smoothed his hair down again and brushed some of the muck from his coat. Knocking on the door frame to announce himself, he ducked under the lintel and entered.

The doorway led straight into a kitchen, warm with the smells of cooking. A vast man sat at a long wooden table. His beard was a fiery red, just like that of a Bright wizard. His girth was enormous, and he seemed to fill half the narrow chamber by himself. When he saw Magnus enter, his smile froze for a second on his lips. Then he recovered himself, and let out a bellow of delight.

'Ironblood!' he roared, and rose from his seat.

Magnus smiled, and stood patiently to embrace the bear hug.

'How are you, Tobias?' Magnus said, feeling his ribs groan under the pressure.

Tobias Hildebrandt stepped back, still grinning.

'As well as ever,' he said. 'Life is good. And you?'

Magnus ducked the question, and turned to the woman.

'Anna-Liese,' he said, bowing his head politely.

Hildebrandt's wife looked back at him guardedly. She was a pretty, brown-haired woman in the prime of life. If she looked a little tired and distracted, then she had every right to be. There were four children clustered around her, staring at Magnus with alarm. They knew who he was, but they had never seen him looking quite

so shabby. He suddenly felt self-conscious. He should have made some effort to scrub the worst off. Perhaps the smell of beer was still on his breath.

Magnus looked at Hildebrandt, not enjoying the awkward silence.

‘Could I speak with you?’ he asked.

Hildebrandt shot his wife a glance. She understood at once.

‘Children, come,’ she said in her gentle, remonstrating tone. ‘Your father has business to discuss.’

Quietly, efficiently, they slipped out of the room. Anna-Liese closed the door behind her. With a pang, Magnus realised he’d broken up a precious family moment. He envied Hildebrandt. The man had achieved everything that Magnus had been unable to. In a dark and brutal world, there was still space for the simple pleasure of hearth and home. That, Magnus thought dryly, was what they were all fighting for, after all.

‘So,’ Hildebrandt said, in his rumbling voice. ‘What’s all this?’

Magnus sat down at the table, and Hildebrandt resumed his seat.

‘A commission,’ said Magnus. ‘I’ve had a look at the documents. It’s worth a lot. It could wipe out our losses. Interested?’

Hildebrandt looked at him warily. Magnus could see the indecision. He understood the man’s doubts. About everything.

‘What kind of commission?’ asked Hildebrandt.

Magnus explained the story of the margravine.

‘We’ll have several companies of gunners,’ he said. ‘There are some big pieces too. Cannons, some mortars. Ludenhof’s been something of a collector. There’s a Helblaster or two, maybe some rocket batteries. They’re serious. They have the ironwork. They just need crew to man them.’

Hildebrandt took a deep breath. As he did so, his massive lungs slowly filled, and took just as long to slowly empty. His face was marked with doubt.

‘I thought you weren’t—’ he began.

‘I don’t have a choice,’ said Magnus, cutting him off.

‘Ludenhof found out I was here. They’re short-handed. And anyway, I need the money. I’m going to do it. Are you with me?’

Hildebrandt sighed again. He was beginning to resemble a bellows, sucking in air and expelling it again.

‘It’s not easy,’ he said, grudgingly. ‘There’s Anna-Liese. She’d hate for me to leave again. We’ve not been in Hochland long. And the children. I don’t know, Magnus.’

Magnus knew his old friend better than that. Anna-Liese would miss him, to be sure. But he would miss her more. Hildebrandt had always been a family man. For him, the fighting had always been about the money. Money to secure their future, to pay for an education at the temple, to lift them out of the gutter.

Unlike Magnus, he hadn't drunk it all away. He could afford a modest house, to keep his children in clothes, to put meat on the board and ale in the cellar. What reason could he have to go back to it all?

'You don't have to decide now,' said Magnus, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. 'I can come back later.'

Hildebrandt looked torn.

'We're getting older, Magnus,' he said. 'There comes a time in a man's life when he's no good on the field any more. We've done our bit for the Emperor. Do you have to take this commission?'

Magnus felt a sour taste form in his mouth. It was all very well for Hildebrandt to talk of picking and choosing commissions. He didn't have Grotius on his shoulder, nor a pile of debt on his back. The man had become comfortable. Soft. Perhaps this had been a bad idea.

Magnus rose.

'Think about it,' he said. 'I've got things to see to. You know where I am.'

Hildebrandt stayed seated. His face creased with concern.

'How much are you drinking, Magnus?' he said. 'You don't look well. Why not come and stay with us for a few days? Just until you get things back in order. I have connections. We could keep it quiet.'

Magnus stopped in his tracks. For a moment, for just a moment, he had a vision of what that might be like. Laundered sheets. Hot water in the copper. A warm hearth. Evenings surrounded by a proper family, rather than the transient scum he associated with. The vision was uncomfortable. Painful, even. He shook it off.

‘I’m expected in the Kristalhof,’ he said, gruffly.

Without waiting for Hildebrandt to reply, he turned and left. From within the house, there came a sound of a long, final sigh.

\* \* \*

The weather lifted slightly, but not enough to drive the chill from the air and the damp from the walls. A steady drizzle had been falling for two days, turning the normally muddy streets into teeming rivulets. The inhabitants of the city went about their business with hoods drawn tightly over their heads. The heavy swell of the Talabec glinted dully under the grey sky, and the ravens stayed gloomily on their branches.

Gradually, painfully, Ludenhof’s army had taken shape. Money had changed hands, and more mercenaries had arrived. The inns and brothels of Hergig found their takings rising sharply, as did the cutpurses. Honest residents of the town stayed behind locked doors after dark, nervously watching the columns of staggering soldiers reel through the streets, carousing as they went. The songs were a weird mix. Reikspiel was blended with Tilean, Estalian,

Bretonnian, even the harsh tongue of Kislev. Wherever there was fighting to be had, the jackals would cluster from all over the Old World. They were never short of work.

Not all the recent arrivals were dogs of war. Outside the city walls, a ramshackle camp had been erected. The sound of tolling bells could be heard emanating from it at all hours of the day and night. A crude representation of the twin-tailed comet, hewn from old, rotten wood, stood lopsidedly in the centre of the settlement. The inhabitants had grown quickly from a few dozen to over a hundred, and still they came. The folk of Hergig shunned these newcomers even more than the mercenaries. They could hear the crack of whipcord and the shrieks of pain. Flagellants were seldom welcomed by the ordinary folk of the Empire. The wretches had come to Hergig to do the only thing they still knew how to do. Labour, fight and die.

Magnus lifted his head from the pitcher of water, feeling its cold touch revive him. From his garret room vantage point, Magnus could just about see the edge of the camp beyond the city perimeter. It had been positioned on a marshy curve by the riverbank. No doubt the mud and mosquitoes would be seen as more blessed penitence from Sigmar. He felt nothing but disdain. However far he fell, he would never be as bad as those foam-mouthed fanatics. Magnus shook his head.

Behind him, the door suddenly slammed open. Magnus's heart sprang up into his throat, and he whirled around. He clutched for a sword at his side, but it wasn't there. He was barely dressed.

In front of him, there was a bearded man. No, too short for a man. A dwarf. He stood with his legs apart, arms by his sides. A huge axe was clenched in his right hand. Magnus's eyes flicked over to the nearest chest. Too far. He'd be dead before he could get halfway.

He looked back at the stranger. With effort, he forced his heart to stop hammering. If the intruder had wanted him dead, he would be so already. He calmed himself down, and waited for what was coming.

'Very wise,' came a low, rumbling voice, seemingly aware of his thoughts.

'Who are you?' said Magnus, struggling to keep his voice steady. His mind was working quickly. He had no weapon to hand, but he was a big man and knew how to use his fists. But a dwarf was something else. They were like a ball of solid granite, bound with iron and crested with something sharp. He'd never seen a man take one on by choice.

'Thorgad Grimgarsson,' came the answer. The voice was harsh, scraped raw by a life spent fighting in the deeps of the earth. 'You, I know. At least by reputation.'

Magnus took a better look at the intruder, feeling his thumping heart begin to return to normal. Thorgad looked like all the other dwarfs he'd known. There was the unnatural stockiness, the exposed arms of pure bunched muscle, the heavily decorated beard with its elaborate plaits and rings of iron. Thorgad's hair was a dark, deep brown, almost black at the lips and eyebrows. His squat nose and cheeks were heavily tanned, and the ink-blue shapes of old tattoos ran across every inch of exposed skin. He wore a heavy leather jerkin and a round iron helmet. His boots had iron tips, and were covered with old, dry mud. He had a bandage around his thigh, and there were other fresh wounds. Like all of his kind, his expression was hard to read, and his origins hard to guess. To the extent he could tell, Magnus thought he looked old. His hands were laced with scars, and his eyes bore the confident glint of a seasoned warrior.

Magnus leaned back against the wall. The dwarf didn't look like he'd come to fight. In his heavily indebted situation, though, you could never be too careful. Bounty hunters were not unknown in Hergig. He kept his fists bunched, and his eyes open.

'Well then, Master Grimgarsson,' said Magnus. 'You've come into my room and given me a scare. Well done. There was a time when that would have been an achievement. Now you're here, you'd better tell me what you want.'

Thorgad fixed his steel-trap gaze on Magnus. He didn't smile.

'You're mixed up in this new army,' he said in his growling voice. 'That's what I heard, at any rate. Ludenhof has got this damn-fool idea into his head, and he's trapped you in it.'

'It's a commission,' said Magnus, guardedly. 'I'm a master engineer. I choose the ones I take and the ones I don't.'

Thorgad raised an eyebrow.

'So you say,' he said. 'Or it might be that you've run out of money and luck, and this is all that's left.'

Magnus felt his temper begin to rise.

'Watch your stunted tongue,' he said, conjuring as much menace as he could, given the situation. 'State your business, or get out.'

Thorgad ran a thick finger along the edge of his axe.

'Get me out?' he said. 'And how would you do that? If you fancy your chances against a dawī, then bring it on. I won't stop you.'

Magnus scowled impotently. The dwarf might have been shorter than him, but Magnus knew from long experience that an experienced warrior like Thorgad was a match for all but the toughest of human fighters. It was not for nothing that the dwarfs looked down on men, despite the height difference. For a moment, Magnus pondered rushing him, trying to knock him off balance

before he could get hold of the axe properly. It was futile, and they both knew it.

Thorgad scowled.

‘Enough of this stupidity,’ he said, hefting the heavy bronze-inlaid axe head as if it were made of straw. ‘I’m not here to kill you. Or even to make your life more difficult than it already is. You haven’t worked it out yet? I want to join you.’

For a moment, Magnus couldn’t believe what he was hearing. A dwarf joining an engineering company wasn’t unprecedented, but it was rare. The stunted folk believed themselves the most accomplished engineers in the Old World. Magnus had known many of them from his long years studying at Nuln and fighting in the Emperor’s armies. If a human created a faster-loading gun, a dwarf would look down the barrel and sniff at its inaccuracy. If a human made a cannon capable of smashing ten-foot-thick walls apart, a dwarf would ask why it couldn’t demolish mountains. For all he respected their achievements, Magnus mostly found dwarfs insufferable. They were arrogant, prickly and far too easily angered. Having one along with him on the campaign, all things being equal, would not be a good idea.

‘You’ve a strange way of asking for a favour,’ Magnus said.

Thorgad frowned. Or, at least it looked like frowning.

‘A favour?’ he said. ‘If you think going on this journey will be a favour, you can’t know the land around Morgramgar.’

He leaned forward. Under his bushy eyebrows, his deep-set eyes glinted brightly.

‘I guess you haven’t been told much about this campaign yet,’ Thorgad said. ‘That’s no surprise. The count doesn’t know what he’s doing. No one here does. I’ve seen cack-handed umgi campaigns before, but even by your standards this is bad. You’ve already had one army destroyed. Sending another one into the mountains before finding out what happened is stupid. Really stupid.’

Magnus tried to interrupt, but was halted by Thorgad’s stare.

‘Let me tell you about Morgramgar,’ said the dwarf. ‘It is old. Very old. The battlements may be the creation of your Empire, but the foundations are not. It has been built to survive, carved from the living rock by folk who knew what they were doing. It stands on a spur of solid stone, and its dark walls rise a hundred feet from the plains below. Water bubbles from the deeps beneath, shielded by solid stone, impervious to spoiling. There are storehouses hewn from the earth within capable of holding months’ worth of food. An unprepared army would break against those walls like the tide while the defenders drank and ate their fill within.’

Magnus looked doubtful.

‘I’ve seen some drawings,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t look that big. I’ve run sieges before.’

Thorgad shook his head.

‘Size is not the issue, manling,’ he said, scornfully. ‘You’re twice my height, but I could stand you on your head before you could reach for your sword. The point is this. Morgramgar is nigh-on impregnable. You won’t break it without help. You need me. I can deliver the citadel to you.’

Magnus saw that the dwarfish sense of modesty was still much as it had ever been.

‘Oh yes?’ he said, unconvinced. ‘And you’re prepared to prove it, I suppose. Talk is common, particularly from your kind.’

Thorgad’s eyes darkened at the insult, and Magnus saw his hand grip the axe more tightly.

‘Don’t mock me, manling,’ he growled. ‘I travelled far to find you. You should listen to wisdom when you have the chance. Don’t become more of a fool than you already are.’

Magnus sighed inwardly. This was why dwarfs were so wearisome. They handed out insults like cheap coins, but could never take one back. He’d never met a stunted one who didn’t have a rampaging sense of personal pride. Perhaps it was a height thing.

‘I’ve worked in the mines under the Worlds Edge Mountains since before your esteemed father was alive. I’ve marched in more armies in the dark places of the world than your

race will ever know. I have hewn stone apart like flesh, tunnelled under sheer mountainsides, brought down centuries of labour with a single blow of an axe. It's in my blood. If you want to take this citadel, then I'll say it again. You need me. Take me with you. You need not pay me a florin. I scorn your gold. I just need to be there.'

Magnus raised an eyebrow.

'You scorn my gold?' he said, genuinely amazed.

Thorgad shook his head disgustedly, and said no more.

Magnus looked at him intently. This was an unexpected development, albeit one with possibilities.

'Suppose you tell me why you're so keen to come along?' he said. 'I can believe you know what you are doing. I've never met a dwarf yet who didn't know the right way to point a cannon. But you're not in it for the money? That I find hard to believe.'

Thorgad still didn't reply at once.

'My reasons needn't concern you,' he said at last, the words dragged from his lips. 'My task in Morgramgar is my own. But I will swear loyalty to you and your company. If you know anything of the dawi, then you'll know what that means. My oath will bind me until the task is accomplished and the citadel is broken. Then I will go my own way. All debts paid. That's the offer. You would do well to accept it.'

Magnus silently weighed up the options. Although the dwarf wasn't to know it, the company at present still consisted

solely of himself and the Tilean. Hildebrandt might waver, but Magnus hadn't found any other engineers of adequate quality. To turn down a concrete offer would be difficult. The fact that Thorgad would work for free was incredible, if troubling. But he knew the value of a dwarf oath. Whatever reason Thorgad had for wanting to get inside Morgramgar, it was clearly powerful.

Magnus ran a weary hand through his unkempt hair.

Thorgad waited patiently.

'Very well,' said Magnus at length. 'I'll take you on. But if you're going to do this, then be aware that I command this company. I don't care how things are done in Karaz-a-Kazoo, or wherever you're from, but we do it my way in my command. That goes for you as much as the other lads. Can you do that?'

Thorgad looked sourly back at Magnus, clearly not relishing that prospect.

'You have my oath, manling,' he said, grudgingly.

Magnus spat on his hand, and held it out.

'Then we'll seal it,' he said.

Thorgad spat a thick gobbet of phlegm onto his own palm, and walked towards Magnus. The two clasped hands tightly. Magnus felt the iron-hard grip of the dwarf fingers, and spasms shot through his arm. Taking on the dwarf in combat would have been madness. It was lucky Thorgad had intended him no harm.

‘When do we leave?’ said Thorgad, releasing Magnus’s hand and wiping his own on his jerkin.

‘There are a few things still to do,’ said Magnus, truthfully enough. ‘Scharnhorst aims to leave tomorrow. The muster will be at dawn, in the shadow of the Kristalhof.’

‘I will see you then,’ said Thorgad, and started to walk from the room.

‘Wait!’ said Magnus. ‘There is work for us to do. I know nothing of what your skills are.’

Thorgad shrugged, and kept walking.

‘That can wait,’ he said, flatly. ‘I have business elsewhere. I’ll see you at dawn. Look for me at the castle.’

With that, he was gone, clumping down the stairs in his heavy iron-shod boots. Magnus stood for a moment, unsure of what to do with himself. From downstairs, he heard Frau Ettieg’s squeal of alarm, followed by a door slamming.

Eventually, Magnus walked over to the bed and sat down heavily. That had been unusual. The disturbance had upset his rhythm. Normally, he might have had a drink to calm his nerves. But he was trying to cut down. Scharnhorst’s words had hurt him more than he liked to admit. He needed to clean himself up. Perhaps this was a chance to turn things around. Or get killed. One of the two, certainly.

Magnus sighed. He'd rather have had Tobias beside him.  
But Hildebrandt would have to make up his own mind.

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