

THE KONRAD SAGA

A Warhammer omnibus

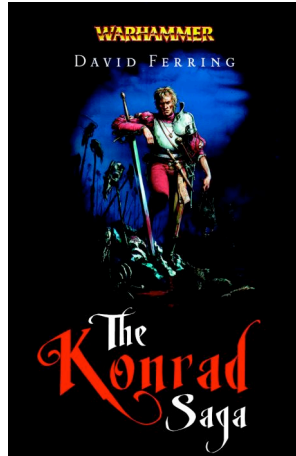
By David Ferring

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The following is an excerpt from *The Konrad Saga* by David Ferring. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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THE DAYS OF summer were longer than those of winter, which meant that Konrad worked more hours at this time of year. In winter, he was usually up before the sun because he needed all the time there was. In summer, he sometimes slept on a few extra minutes.

As ever, he spent his nights in one of the barns behind the inn, lying among the straw which would become the fodder for the livestock. At least he did not have to eat grass and hay; it was about the only thing that he did not share with the animals.

He lay still for a while, staring up through the cracks in the roof, watching as the sky lightened. He was thinking about what Elyssa had told him last year, about her father being worried that the black bow and arrows had gone missing. She had not mentioned this since, and he was unsure what had reminded him of the subject.

He yawned and sat up, gazing over to the far side of the barn, to where he kept the quiver and arrows. It was several weeks since he had checked them. He clambered down from the loft, pulled the ladder away and set it up against the opposite wall. Then he climbed again, up into the rafters, hauled himself onto one of the beams and worked his way along to the strut where the quiver was tied.

It was still in the same piece of linen in which it had been wrapped when Elyssa gave it to him, all those years ago. He sat down, balancing himself on the beam, and loosened the package from its hiding place.

As he untied the final knot, he paused, listening, seeing...

THERE WAS A RIDER approaching.

Elyssa?

He caught a glimpse of her, also, a distant vision. But the first rider was someone else, a stranger. A dangerous stranger...

There had to be great danger for Konrad to have become aware of the newcomer and for him also to have been conscious of Elyssa's whereabouts.

She was about to leave the grounds of the manor house, to head across the bridge to meet up with Konrad. But if she came this way, as she must, she would instead encounter the other rider.

Without needing to think, Konrad had already acted. He was down the ladder, rushing across the barn and out of the side door. He did not need to look around to know that the stranger was less than a hundred yards away, approaching the well in the central square.

Konrad sprinted through the empty village, along the cobbled street which led up to the manor.

He had not seen the horseman intercept Elyssa; it was only an assumption. But he was between them now, he could head off the girl, and the two riders would not meet.

He heard hooves on the cobbles. They were ahead of him. Elyssa's horse. He had not heard the stranger's horse yet, he realized. The newcomer was too far away to be heard, still too far away to be seen with normal vision.

Elyssa was just ahead of him, reaching the first of the cottages at the bend on the incline. He dashed around the corner, seeing her, really seeing her for the first time.

She reined in her mount as soon as she noticed him.

'Back!' he called, trying not to shout too loud in case the intruder should hear.

'What is it?'

He grabbed her horse's bridle with his left hand, and for the first time he noticed that he was still carrying the linen bundle which contained the quiver and five black arrows. He tugged at the animal's head, trying to turn it.

'You've got to get out of sight,' he warned, his breath coming in short bursts. He looked back over his shoulder and saw – nothing.

He saw the curve in the street, the houses on either side. The rider was not in view yet and should not have been for several seconds, but Konrad was unable to tell where the horseman would be when he appeared.

It was as if he had vanished. He had not, that was impossible, but this was further evidence of the extreme danger that the intruder presented – like the time with the beastman, the time with the pack wolves, the two previous occasions when Konrad’s talent had deserted him.

‘Come on!’

Elyssa did not question him or argue. She recognized the look of anxiety in his face. She held out her hand, reaching down to him. Konrad took it, pulling himself up behind her. She spun the horse, kicking her heels into its flanks. They galloped up the hill, towards the walls of the manor. The shod hooves seemed very noisy in the still morning air.

Konrad glanced anxiously back, yet there was still nothing to be seen, nothing to be heard, no sign that there was anything amiss.

He tried to picture what he had seen. A single rider, the dawn sun glinting from the bronze armour which completely covered him.

Even the horse was totally hidden by its own matching armour.

Elyssa’s steed reached the manor. The drawbridge was down, the wooden gates stood open and they rode in. The manor was not designed as a fortress. The bridge was little more than an ornament. Even if it could have been raised, the narrow moat would provide little obstacle to any determined attackers. The gates could easily have been battered down, the walls breached.

Konrad had never been inside the grounds of the residence before. It was forbidden territory to most of the peasants. At the moment, he preferred to be there than to be outside.

He leapt from the back of the horse, then ran behind one of the gates while Elyssa dismounted and tied up her horse out of sight.

The rider was finally in view, unhurriedly coming up the centre of the narrow road towards the manor. His mount’s hooves made not a sound upon the cobbles. He rode closer and closer in total silence. It was as if the whole world had become quiet.

There was nothing to be heard anywhere in the village: no dog barked, no animal in any of the barns made a sound. Beyond the village, there was not even the cry of a bird or a wild beast in the distant forest.

‘Who is he?’ whispered Elyssa, by his side.

‘I don’t know.’ He kept his voice as low as hers. The knight was too far away to hear them, but it would have seemed unnatural to break the eerie silence.

‘He’s like a ghost.’

Konrad shivered. She was exactly right, he realized. It was as if both rider and horse were dead, because surely no living creatures could move with such absolute quiet.

He had five arrows, but no bow. Even with a bow, he would not have been tempted to shoot at the rider. His extra sight had sensed danger, but what use was an arrow against a supernatural entity?

‘Should I call my father? Summon the guards?’

Konrad shook his head. That would be futile.

As the horseman came closer, Konrad could see more detail. Rider and steed were clad in matching plated armour, all of burnished bronze. The armour was elaborately wrought, the helmet patterned with intricate designs. There was the narrowest slit in the visor to give vision for the eyes within – if there were any eyes within.

It seemed that he was mounted upon some fantastic beast, whose carapace was of shining metal. The head of the horse, if such it was – could any horse carry the weight of so much metal as well as its armoured rider? – the animal’s head, was protected by a helmet from which protruded two long spikes, just above the eye slot.

Similarly, a double spike emerged from the crown of the knight’s helmet, making the wearer also resemble some horned beast. There were more spikes at the knuckles and knees, toes and elbows. The armour was damaged in a few places, dented and buckled, showing signs of previous combat.

The rider carried a circular shield, bronzed, with a heavy central spike. A sword hung at his side, bronze handled, scabbarded in

bronze. He also carried a long war lance, also of bronze, held vertically in one gauntleted and spiked fist.

‘What does he want?’ asked Elyssa.

The rider’s head had been slowly turning from side to side as he approached the manor. Not out of caution, because it seemed that he had nothing to fear, but because he appeared to be taking in every detail of his surroundings. He halted on the other side of the drawbridge, and he looked directly at where Konrad and Elyssa were hiding.

He could not possibly see them, but Konrad felt the stranger’s eyes on him – and it seemed as though he had come here for Konrad, that was the sole reason for his incursion.

‘I’m not frightened of him,’ said Elyssa. There was no bravado in her voice. She meant exactly what she said, which made Konrad feel even more nervous.

She stepped forward, and he hurriedly grabbed hold of her, pulling her back behind the ancient wooden door.

‘I want to talk to him!’ she protested.

He put his hand over her mouth to silence her. ‘But he doesn’t want to talk to us. That isn’t why he’s here.’

She shook her head free. ‘How do you know? You don’t know anything! You’re just a stupid peasant!’

He stared at her, not because of what she had said. Her words meant nothing. But for a moment he had caught a distant glimpse within her dark eyes, a glimpse beyond her anger, beyond this moment.

He saw...

He saw death. Real death. Elyssa’s death.

For an instant, less than the blink of an eye, he had witnessed Elyssa totally devoid of life, robbed of the essence of being. It was more than death, it was worse than death, it was a descent into the deepest abyss of ultimate despair and depravity.

Involuntarily, he loosened his grip. It was as though he did not wish to touch Elyssa for fear of contaminating himself, that he might also become a victim.

He closed both his eyes, hoping to erase all memory of the brief but absolutely horrifying image – but knowing even now that he could never succeed. The vision might fade with time, but it would live with him forever. The memory would live on, but Elyssa would not.

She had sprung away and into the open, and he heard her call out: ‘What do you want? Who are you looking for?’

Konrad rushed after Elyssa, drawing his knife to protect her from the rider. It was a futile gesture, he knew. He could not save the girl from the knight as easily as he had rescued her from the beastman so many years ago.

Even as he leapt out, he saw that he was not needed. The stranger had turned and was riding slowly back down the hill. The armour rattled and squeaked, the hooves clattered on the cobbles. Horse and mount were not ghosts, thought Konrad, as he watched them vanish through the deserted village. Then he turned to look at Elyssa.

The stranger was not dead, but Elyssa soon would be.

The Konrad Saga can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £7.99 (UK) / \$9.99 (US) / \$21.99 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978-1 84154 276 8

- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
- UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000 US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME
- Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop’s web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com/store or www.games-workshop.com.