

# Gilead's Blood

A Gilead novel by DAN ABNETT & NIK VINCENT

**GILEAD GOT TO his feet unsteadily. The dulled blade dropped from his hand with a clatter. 'You dare to speak to me of that?' he hissed. 'Galeth was one with me, my brother, my twin! We were one soul in two bodies! And when he died, I was cut in two! Death entered my soul! Ten years I hunted for the murderer! Hunted for vengeance! And when I found it, even that pleasure did not slake the pain in my heart!'**

**GILEAD'S BLOOD** follows the saga of the doom-laden high elf, Gilead Lothain. Along with his faithful retainer Fithvael, Gilead, shadowfast warrior and the last of the line of Tor Anrok, travels the Warhammer world seeking revenge on the servants of Evil.



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## I

# Gilead's Wake

*I was anything and everything.  
I was a myth.*

I AM A poor nobody, so please you, who has crooked his back against the plough for fifty years, and done nothing more heroic than raise five daughters and a son. My whole world is this unremarkable village, in this undistinguished corner on the edge of the Empire. There is nothing in me worth a bent copper.

Except, perhaps, the stories. At hours such as this, when dusk falls and the winter moon rises, you all come to my hearth: the young, the old, the scornful, the curious. And you ask for my stories again.

You call them myths, and the land is full of those. But my stories are not myths. They are something altogether rarer. How many fireside myth-spinners do you know who can vouch for the truth in their tales? I may be a poor nobody, but I have known great men.

The oldest story that is mine to tell begins close to its end, with a lone warrior sitting with his back against the trunk of a tree, trying to sleep. His name, in the old tongue, was Gilead te tuin Lothain, ut Tor Anrok. Call him Gilead, if you please.

Ten bitter years had brought him to that spot.

He tried to sleep, but sleep did not come easy. For ten winters and ten summers in between, his slumber had been troubled and disturbed, haunted by the memory of hoarse cries and the scent of blood.

He sat back against the tree bole in the darkness, at the edge of a campfire's glow, and looked down a long alpine valley. Down there in the night, the fires of a fortified stockade glimmered. It looked so small and insignificant a place to be the goal of a decade-long quest.

Gilead sighed.

This wild place was lonely and remote. It had been several days since Gilead had last passed a settlement – a human village, whose name he had not bothered to learn as he rode around it. There had been a tavern there, where humans gathered and drank and told each other stories. Gilead wondered what stories they were telling this night.

Perhaps even now, some drunken wretch was slurring out a tale of the House of Lothain, of the deathless warrior and his decade of blood-enmity with the Darkling One. Of course, others at the fireside would mock and scoff and claim this was only a myth, for myths are just myths and the land is full of them. They would sneer that no vengeance was ever so pure, and no pain so bright, not even the particular curse of pain that was Gilead Lothain's.

And they would be wrong.

Gilead's mind filled with darkness, burning darkness that rushed in and ignited the papery memories in his head. He remembered, ten years before, on a night far blacker and deadlier, flamelight that flickered outside a rusty cage door.

TORCHES RAISED IN their fists, two figures shambled back along the stinking passageway towards the cage.

Is this my death? wondered Gilead. If it was, it would be a relief perhaps. Three days, without even water, chained from an iron rung, suspended like a broken puppet in a cold and airless cave deep in the neglected reaches of the Warrens. His pale skin – for his captors had all but stripped him – was blue with bruises from the regular, gleeful beatings. There was a ghostly, hollow ache of pain where the fourth finger of his right hand had been.

The captors were at the cage door, grinning up at him, their brutish human faces split with feral glee and slack with wine.

They had looked that way the first night, when they had come to take his finger.

'A sweetener,' one had called it.

'To jog the memory and open the purses of your kin,' the other had added. Then they had laughed and spat in his face and opened the jaws of the rusty shears.

'They're goin' to pay, elf scum!' one now snarled through the bars of the cage. 'We just had us word. They're goin' to pay handsome for your miserable hide!'

'Your brother himself is bringing the blood money tonight!' chuckled the other.

For the first time in three days, Gilead smiled, even though it hurt to smile. He knew that his brother was doing no such thing. These vermin may have been told a ransom was coming, but a rather different surprise was on its way.

For when they kidnapped Gilead Lothain, this band of carrion had made the last mistake of their lives.

Galeth was coming. Galeth, and five other warriors, the cream of the remaining warriors that the old fastness of Tor Anrok could muster. Even now, they were rappelling down the vent of the brick flues west of the Warrens' main entrance, sooty shafts that had once been the outlet for an old mill forge that some said the rat-kind had built under the earth, ages past. Gilead could smell the air that Galeth and the others breathed, feel the course burn of the rope as they played it out and dropped vertically into the blue dimness.

Galeth Lothain: his brother, his twin. Born a minute after the midnight chime that had marked the first moments of Gilead's life. Born under a pair of crescent moons, within a week of a falling star; born to new snows marked only by a fox's print and the kick of a hare. Good signs, all of them. Good augurs for long, proud, brave lives. Gilead and Galeth, the left and right sides of the mirror, the left and right hands of Cothor Lothain, master of the Tower of Tor Anrok.

Twin siblings are always close; they share so much, not the least being the same face. But Galeth and Gilead were closer still, a fact first noticed by their wet-nurse, and then by the ancient sage summoned by Cothor Lothain to school them in physic and the lore. Their minds worked as one, as if there was a bridge of thought between them. In one room, Gilead could cut his thumb on a flensing knife – and in another part of the Tower, Galeth would

cry out. Abroad riding, Galeth would fall and soak himself to his bones in a frozen stream – and home by the fire, Gilead would shiver. Their spirits were bound, said Cothor's counsellor, Taladryel. They were one son in two bodies.

So it was, twenty seven winters after the midnight that welcomed them to life, that Gilead knew of his brother's approach.

He could smell the mildew stink in the dark, half-flooded cisterns where Galeth and his men now waded, charcoal-darkened blades drawn ready. He could hear the slosh of the thick, stagnant water, the scratchings of the vermin, the gentle rustle of the wick crisping in the hooded lantern.

And in turn, he knew that Galeth was sharing his experience. Galeth could feel the bite of the chains, the ache of bruises, the throb of his finger's stump. It was that sharp beacon of weary pain that led him on.

THE WALLED TOWN of Munzig lies in the patchwork of Border Princes south of the Empire. You may know of it, perhaps. Surrounded by deep forest and shadowed by the jagged profile of the Black Mountains, it is a market town on the River Durich, and a stop-over for travellers climbing the forest ways to Black Fire Pass. For over a century, it had prospered. But at the time of my story, Munzig had become a place of fear.

In the town, the citizenry spoke anxiously of the Carrion Band. No one knew their faces or their strength, or quite what villainy spurred them on except for a craving for gold and pain in equal portions. Tavern rumour said they made their fastness in the Warrens, a crumbling maze of tunnels and subterranean vaults in the foothills of the Black Mountains, a few leagues from the town.

No one knew who had built those tunnels, or how far they ran. Old myths said they were the work of the skaven rat-kin, but myths are just myths, and the land is full of them. There was, for example, a fine fireside tale of how the settlers who founded Munzig had been protected by elves from the forest, elves who had summoned up their war forces to drive the skaven out and make the land safe. Children liked this story especially, squealing with glee as adults imitated the shrill voices of the rat-kin bogeymen. Another story said there were still elves in the forests, living in a beautiful tower that only appeared by full moonlight and could never be found by

humans. Yet another declared that these elves would reappear to protect the land if the rat-kin ever returned. Unless told to wide-eyed children at bedtime, such a tale would usually be greeted by a hearty laughter and a demand for more drinks.

Then the Carrion Band had come, striking for the first time the summer before. Ambushing a wagon on the forest road, they seized the daughter of a local merchant. A ransom was sent and desperately paid. The daughter was returned, dead, by the Durich's autumn flood and the money lost forever. Eight more such crimes followed, gripping the Munzig in a tightening band of fear. Loved ones were taken, monies demanded and blood cruelly spilled. In every case, the families had never dared not pay, even though they knew the odds were slim they would ever see their kin again. In the taverns, estimates had been ventured as to the fortune so far lost.

*Thirty thousand gold, said some.*

*And the rest, said others.*

Prince Horgan, Elector of Munzig, called town meetings and a state of emergency. Trade, the life-blood of the town, had all but dried up. Plans were drawn up by the frightened gentry. Guards were doubled, patrol circuits were widened, gratings were made to block the river sluices under the city wall. By now, the old Warrens seemed the likeliest hideout for the Carrion Band, and popular myth spoke of underground passages riddling the town's drains. No one was safe.

Balthezor Hergmund, a merchant whose wife had been the reavers' third victim, had put up a reward and urged the town council to undertake a purge of the Warrens to drive out and exterminate the killers. But even the most willing had to admit the futility of such an act: the Warrens was vast, unmapped and unknown, and the City Militia numbered only four score of irregular infantry and Horgan's own cavalry, a dress unit more used to displays than combat.

*What about the elves, the forest elves, someone would surely have suggested? What about the old pact, the old myth? Wouldn't they help?*

Laughter – nervous but damning – and another round of drinks.

So the fear grew, the cost in life and gold mounted, and the bloody career of the Carrion Band continued unchecked.

STRANGELY, IRONICALLY as far as any of the human inhabitants of Munzig were concerned, there certainly was a tower out in the forests beyond the town walls, a beautiful tower never glimpsed by human eyes, magically secreted deep in the wilds of the woods.

Called the Tower of Tor Anrok, in memory of the sunken city, it had for the longest time been home to the House of Lothain, a dwindling familial line who traced their blood back to the ancient, distant kingdom of Tiranoc.

There were only a few inhabitants of the hidden tower now: old Cothor, too weak to stand; a handful of loyal warriors, household staff and womenfolk; and Cothor's twin sons, Galeth and Gilead. Their ancestors had indeed driven out the skaven from the catacombs now known as the Warrens. But that had been in older, stronger days.

When word of the Carrion Band's molestation of Munzig reached the tower, it had been Galeth who had wanted to send word to the prince and covertly offer aid. He yearned to begin his warriorhood with a worthy victory, but old Cothor had been unwilling. The patriarch had decreed that there were too few of them left, their blood too rare, to waste it on what was clearly a human dispute. Human raiders, human prey. Elfkind shunned the company of humans, knowing that men regarded them with fear and suspicion. Whatever had happened in the past, the House of Lothain would not rouse itself now.

Galeth had been disappointed but Gilead, sensing his father's anguish, had taken up the argument and eventually dissuaded Galeth from taking it further. As the eldest, Gilead took his responsibilities to the House and the bloodline with solemn gravity.

It had been a crisp, winter afternoon, three days after this debate, that Gilead had ridden out into the forest with just one companion, Nelthion, the tower's elderly horsemaster, who had trained both youths in the art of riding. Gilead had said they were to exercise the horses, but in truth he had wanted to blow the cobwebs from his mind with a hard gallop through the frosty woodland.

Gilead never knew if it was opportunity or plan; whether the Carrion Band had chanced to hear them riding close and fallen into cover, or if they had deliberately stalked the tower and watched its comings and goings. A dozen of them pounced,

dropping from trees or sweeping up from under snow-cloaks, humans and a couple of ugly mixed-blood blasphemies.

A billhook took Nelthion out of the saddle and they fell on him with flails. There was crimson blood in the snow. Gilead turned, his golden-hilted sword loose and scything, but they were many and they were ready. A cudgel smacked him sideways but he stayed up, spurring his mount to bolt clear. Then another of the reavers killed his horse out from under him with a pike and they closed on him with coshes and sacking.

So Gilead Lothain came to be the prisoner of the Carrion Band, chained deep in the Warrens. So, too, did he become their first error, for they had not reckoned with the fact that he, unlike all the others – the humans – they had preyed upon, could lead the wrath of his kinsmen right to their hidden lair.

GALETH AND HIS men skirted the lip of a dirty pool and stepped lightly, like cats, up a buttress twisted by the slow and ancient passage of roots. Gilead smelled the wet soil, felt the weight of Galeth's sword in his hand.

The Carrion Band had not posted sentries. They had every reason to suspect this damp corner of the Warrens would never be located by search parties. Their only concession to chance discovery was a series of tripwires strung out along the slim, natural caves adjoining the vaults they used as a smoke hall and dormitory.

Old Fithvael, Tor Anrok's veteran swordmaster, knelt and cut the trips one by one with his bodkin, slowly releasing the tensions on the severed cords so the bells sagged without ringing.

Seeing this through sibling eyes, Gilead smiled.

Five red-fledged arrows were nocked against five tight strings, the men looking to Galeth for the command. Galeth nodded them in, under a mossy, decorated arch where the features of a bas-relief titan had been all but worn away by seeping surface water. They smelled cook-fires, sweat, blood and swill from where a hog had been butchered, urine from a latrine. They heard laughter and rowdy voices, and a rasping viol heaving out the rough tune of a drinking song.

Galeth stepped into the firelight. Gilead's breath caught in his mouth. They both saw the sweaty, puzzled faces that turned to look. The viol stopped, mid-note.

The killing began.

Like a brief drum roll, five hollow beats in quick series marked the five impacts of elven arrows. Three reavers died on their benches, one toppling into the fire pit. Another was spun round across the table by a shaft in the shoulder, and passed out across the spilled, smashed pitchers of stolen beer. A fifth was pinned to his chair back by an arrow through the gut and began to scream as the pumping blood covered his lap. His screams rose until they and their unnerving echoes filled the vault and the chambers, like a hideous hell-music to accompany the killing.

Across the table in a leap, Galeth met the first two reavers to find their weapons, his scarlet cloak flying. All told there were twelve left alive in the smoke-hall, each scrambling for sidearms and bellowing like stuck pigs. Gilead knew of at least another half-dozen asleep in the cellars behind the hall – and so Galeth knew that too.

The elves put up their bows and surged into close combat behind their young master, who had already sheared one neck with his longsword and was splintering the flail of his second target. Some of the elves had longswords and bucklers, with a knife brandished in the shield-arm's fist. The others swung long-hafted axes. All wore scarlet cloaks and hauberks of glinting, blue-black ithilmar mail. Their hair and their skins were as white as ice. Their eyes were dark with fury. Smoke, and a mist of spittle and blood hung in the damp air. The roar of fighting shook the buried vault.

Fithvael, his axe sweeping, cut through the belly of a visored swordsman and was first into the tunnel to Gilead's cell. As the fighting raged behind him, he pulled the key-ring off a nail and slammed open the cage door. Noble Taladryel, Cothor's counsellor, soaked in the blood of others, was at his side a moment later, and together they eased Gilead down from the chains and swaddled a cloak about him.

'We have him! He lives!' Taladryel bellowed, but Galeth already knew this. He and the other three warriors from Tor Anrok cut down the last of the routed Carrion Band. A few survivors, no more than four or five, had fled into the Warrens.

Fithvael and Taladryel carried Gilead out into the vault to a cheer from the bloodied elf raiders. Galeth knelt by his twin and embraced him, tears streaming from both brothers' eyes. Gilead noticed the red weal that circled the fourth finger of Galeth's

right hand.

Fithvael put the place to the torch, then they formed up to move out the way they had come, wary of any harrying from the reavers who had fled.

No one had noticed that the wretch brought down across the table by the first flight of arrows was still breathing. No one saw him stir in the billowing smoke and flames behind them as they moved out beyond the titan arch.

The crossbow made just a tiny snap as it fired.

Gilead froze the souls of his kin as he screamed.

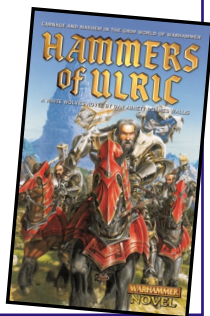
And Galeth fell, a steel bolt transfixing his heart.

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