

— TIME OF LEGENDS —



GOD KING

The Legend of Sigmar

GRAHAM McNEILL

New York Times bestselling author

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[This is a dark age...](#)

[Map](#)

[BOOK ONE](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[BOOK TWO](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[BOOK THREE](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

— TIME OF LEGENDS —

Book Three of the Sigmar Trilogy

GOD KING

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Graham McNeill



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This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World lie the lands of men, ruled over by bickering tribal chieftains.

It is a land divided. In the north, King Artur of the Teutogens surveys his rivals atop the mighty Fauschlag Rock, whilst the berserker kings of the Thuringians know only war and bloodshed. It is to the south that men must look for succour. At Reikdorf dwell the Unberogens, led by the mighty King Björn and his fated son, Sigmar. The Unbergens seek a vision, a vision of unity. The enemies of man are many and if men cannot overcome their differences and rally together, their demise is assured.

To the frozen north, Norsii raiders, barbarians and worshippers of Dark Gods, burn, slay and pillage. Grim spectres haunt the marshlands and beasts gather in the forests. But it is in the east where dark forces are moving, and the greatest threat lies. Greenskins have ever plagued the land and now they march upon the race of man in their numberless hordes with a single purpose – to eradicate their foes forever.

The human kings are not alone in their plight. The dwarfs of the mountains, great forge smiths and engineers, are allies in the fight. All must stand together, dwarf and man for their mutual survival depends on it.

Danse Macabre

Thus Sigmar wept not for Middenheim

Nor did he weep for his burned lands.

But he wept on seeing his brother lie dead

While all his people wept for themselves.

From that day upon the Fauschlag Rock

We did not speak boldly;

And we passed not either night or day

That we did not breathe heavy sighs.

Thus it was that Death carried off

Pendrag, whose strength and vigours had been mighty

As it will every warrior

Who shall come after him upon the earth.

Fire and Retribution

Lord Aetulff was dead, and they carried the body from his village in a long procession through the snow towards the surf-pounded shoreline. Those that had served under him, those despised few who had survived the long flight from the vengeful blades of their enemies, followed the solemn bier with their broken swords carried before them. Their lives were forfeit, but there were few enough men remaining along the coastline to put them to death for their cowardice.

The chieftain's favoured huscarls carried the body on a palanquin of broken shields, the body wrapped in a tattered flag brought from the south. The body was light; a wasting sickness had eaten the flesh from his bones upon his return from the disastrous war. Zhek Askah had said it was punishment from the gods, and none dared gainsay him.

Broken in spirit, Aetulff's wounded body had lingered six seasons after the defeat before finally succumbing. He had been strong and he took a long, painful time to die.

His sons were all dead, slain in battle as the gods decreed, and none now remained to preserve his line. He had died in the knowledge that no living creature would carry his name into the future. He would die unremembered and his bloody deeds would be forgotten in a generation.

The womenfolk did not follow the body, and his shame was complete.

The shield bearers followed a path to the water, where a fire burned in a pit hacked into the frozen ground. The waters of the ocean were dark, cold and unforgiving, and a storm-battered ship rose and fell with the surge and retreat of the tide. Sturdily built from overlapping timbers and tar, a rearing wolf's head was carved at its prow. It was a proud vessel and had carried them through the worst storms the gods could hurl from the skies. It deserved better, but if the last year and a half had taught the people of the settlement anything, it was that this world cared nothing for what was deserved.

The warriors following the body climbed aboard and turned to help lift the dead chieftain onto his ship. They were strong men and it took no effort to manoeuvre him onto a tiered pile of precious timbers and kindling. One by one, the warriors slashed their forearms with the broken blades of their swords. They spilled their blood over their dead war chief and dropped their useless weapons to the deck. Blood shed and swords surrendered, they climbed over the gunwale, which looked bare without lines of ranked-up kite shields and banks of fighting men hauling at the oars.

One warrior with a winged helm of raven's feathers waited until the others had splashed down into the sea before upending a flask of oil over the body. He doused the ship's timbers with what remained and tossed the flask to the deck. The raven-helmed warrior tugged a tied rope at the mainmast, and the black sail unfurled with a boom of hide.

He turned and dropped over the side of the ship, wading ashore to take his place with the rest of his forsaken band. Their war chief had died, yet they had lived. Their shame would be never-ending. Women would shun them, children would spit on them and they would be right to do so. The gods would curse them for all eternity until they made good on their debt.

The freezing wind caught the sail, and the ship eased away from the shore, wallowing without a steersman to guide it or rowers to power it. The tide and wind quickly dragged the ship away from the land, twisting it around like a leaf in a millpond. The treacherous currents and riptides around this region of the coast had dashed many an unwary vessel against the cliffs, yet they bore Lord Aetulff's ship out to sea with gentle swells. Gulls wheeled above its mast, adding their throaty caws to the chief's lament.

The raven-helmed warrior lifted a bow from the shingle and nocked an arrow to the string. He held the cloth-wrapped tip in the fire until it caught light and hauled back on the string. The wind dropped and he loosed the shaft, the fiery missile describing a graceful arc through the greying sky until it hammered home in the ship's mast.

Slowly, then with greater ferocity as the oil caught light, the ship burned. Flames roared to life, hungrily devouring the rotten meat of the dead man and setting to work on the oily timbers. Within moments, the ship was ablaze from bow to stern, black smoke trailing a mournful line towards the sky.

The warriors watched it until it split apart with a sound like a heart breaking. It slid over onto its side and with a final slurp of water vanished beneath the surface.

Lord Aetulff was dead and no one mourned him.

From a cave mouth high on the cliffs above the village, a man in tattered furs and a cloak of feathers watched the last voyage of the doomed wolfship. His face was bearded and long hair hung in matted ropes from his head. Once it had been jet black, but it was now so wadded with mud and dirt that its true colour had long since been obscured. The filth of living in a cave encrusted his skin and his arms were rank with sores and rashes that burned and tingled pleasurably in equal measure.

The villagers called him Wyrtegeorn, though he could make little sense of the word. What he had bothered to learn of their language allowed him only the most basic understanding. A fetish-draped shaman had spat it at him a year and a half ago when he and the wizened immortal stepped from the wolfship that now burned to ashes. Though he did not know its meaning, it was a name to hide behind, a shield to hold before the deeds of his true name.

The immortal had left the village, imploring him to travel onwards into the northern wastes, but he had refused, climbing the cliff and making this cave his home. He knew he should have gone; his presence here would draw the hunters, but something had kept him from leaving, as though invisible shackles held him here.

He shook off such gloomy thoughts, and watched the wolfship slide beneath the waves. A rolling fogbank crept in from the south, obscuring the horizon and making the air taste of wet cloth. He watched the warriors as they trudged through the snow to the village, all too familiar with the shame they bore for their survival.

He threw a guilty look over his shoulder, wincing as the wound that would never heal flared with old pain. The immortal had given him a cloth-wrapped bundle as they fled across the ocean, and even without unwrapping it, he knew what lay within. How such a thing was possible was a mystery. He had thrown it away in the wake of defeat, yet there it was.

He kept it wedged in a cleft at the back of the cave. He knew he should hurl it into the sea, but also knew he would not.

Something moved in the fog, and he lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the winter sun.

A phantom of the mist, or something darker?

His right hand twitched with the memory of slaughter, and his gaze slid towards the settlement as old instincts and new senses prickled with danger.

From out of the fog, a dozen ships cut through the water towards village.

Powerful sweeps of oars drove the ships onward, and their decks were crammed with armed men in gleaming iron breastplates and full-face helms of bronze. They clutched axes and swords and spears, and he sensed their anger, even from high on the cliff. He looked back into his cave, but closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had feared this moment ever since he stepped onto the shore, but now that it was here, he found himself utterly calm.

The same calm he felt before a duel. The same calm he felt before he killed.

He watched the ships surge through the crashing breakers and slide up the shingle beach. The village's few warriors ran to meet them with axes held high over their shoulders, old men and youngsters mainly. Fifty men of sword-bearing age were all that were left to defend the village.

Nowhere near enough.

Whooping war shouts echoed from the stony beach as women and children ran towards the cliffs. There was no escape there, just a postponement of the inevitable. These warriors would leave no survivors. They never did.

Even isolated in his cave, he had heard the recent scare stories of the seaborne raiders, the killers from across the ocean who wiped out entire tribes in their vengeful slaughters. Their crimson and white sails were the terror of the coastline, a sight to drive fear into the hearts of those that had once been masters of the ocean.

A score of armed men dropped from the lead ship, led by a warrior in gleaming silver armour and a gold-crowned helm. He bore a mighty warhammer and smashed one of the village warriors from his feet with a single blow. More ships beached, and in moments a hundred warriors were ashore. Arrows leapt from the decks of the ships, serrated tips slicing into proud flesh, and flame-wrapped barbs landing amid the tinder-dry homes of the villagers.

A dozen warriors were dropping into the surf with every passing second. Though the defenders of the settlement were hopelessly outnumbered, they fought with the fury of warriors given one last chance to reclaim their honour in death.

Lightly armoured men with bows fanned out onto the beach, taking aim at the fleeing villagers and cutting them down with lethally accurate shafts. Iron clashed with iron on the shore as the last of the defenders were overwhelmed. He watched the raven-helmed warrior hurl himself at the leader of these reavers from the sea with his axe slashing down over his head. The warhammer swept up, and the blade slammed down on its haft. Such a blow should have shattered any normal weapon and split the enemy's skull, but he knew that this was no ordinary warhammer. Nor was the warrior who bore it any ordinary foe.

The warhammer spun in the warrior's hand, faster than any weapon of such weight and power should move. Its head slammed into raven-helm's face, caving his skull to shards and knocking him to the red snow.

'No pyre for you,' he said as the warriors from the sea advanced into the settlement.

Its buildings were burning and its people dead, yet the raiders kicked them down, leaving nothing standing to indicate that anyone had once called this bay home. This was no raid for gold or slaves or plunder. This was an attack of destruction.

The raiders hauled the bodies of the defenders from the sea and began stripping their helmets. One by one, the warrior with the warhammer bent to look at their faces, but each time he would shake his head in disappointment.

Wyrtegeorn chuckled as the warrior shook his head and hissed, 'You won't find what you're looking for among the dead.'

He heard a noise from further down the cliff and pulled back into the shadow of the cave mouth. A slender, hard-faced woman carried a pair of children up the icy cliff paths towards the cave. Her steps were faltering, and he saw a pair of arrows jutting from her back. She saw him and tried to speak, but no words came, only a froth of bubbling blood.

She reached the ledge before his cave and collapsed onto her knees. Her eyes were frantic. Only seconds of life remained to her, and she knew it.

'Wyrtegeorn,' she said in a language not her own. 'Save... my... children.'

He backed away from her, shaking his head.

‘You must!’ she said, thrusting the youngsters toward him. He saw they were twins, one a boy, the other a girl. Both howled with uncontrollable sobs. The woman’s eyes closed and she swayed as death reached up to claim her. The woman’s daughter threw her arms around her mother’s neck and the pair of them fell from the cliff, falling a hundred yards into the sea.

The warriors on the shoreline saw them fall, their eyes drawn up to the cave on the cliff. He knew he was invisible in the shadow but the boy stood on the ledge as plain as day. Four warriors ran from the beach towards the cliff paths, and the man cursed. He felt tugging at his fur jerkin and looked down into the coldest blue eyes he had ever seen. The boy stood with his fists bunched at his sides, and there was pleading desperation in the way he met the man’s gaze.

‘You are Wyrteorm,’ said the boy in the man’s own tongue. ‘Why did you not come down and fight them?’

‘Because I have no wish to commit suicide,’ he replied.

‘They have killed my tribe,’ wept the boy. ‘Why won’t you kill them?’

‘I will kill anyone who tries to kill me,’ said the man.

‘Good,’ said the boy. ‘Zhek Askah said you were a great warrior.’

‘I don’t know who that is.’

‘The shaman who named you Wyrteorm. Lord Aetulff wanted you and your friend slain, but Zhek Askah said you were a killer of men and that we should let you live in the cave.’

‘Did he now?’ replied the man. ‘I wonder why. Perhaps it was to save your life.’

Four warriors were climbing towards them, carefully picking their way along the treacherous path. They carried long knives, eschewing axes on so narrow a ledge. The man watched them come: confident, arrogant and with a swagger that didn’t match their abilities. He’d watched them fight on the shore. They were competent warriors, but no more than that.

‘There is a passage at the back of the cave,’ said the man. ‘It leads through the rock and comes out a few miles north of the village. Wait for me there. I will join you shortly.’

‘I don’t want to run,’ said the boy, and the man saw fierce determination behind his fear.

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘You don’t, but sometimes that’s all you can do.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing,’ said the man. ‘It doesn’t matter. But I know now why I did not leave this cave.’

Before the boy could ask any more, the light at the mouth of the cave was blocked as two of the warriors reached his squalid dwelling place.

‘Get behind me,’ said the man, pushing the boy away.

The first warrior stepped cautiously into the cave, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. A second followed close behind. The blades of their knives glittered in the dim light.

‘What do we have here?’ he said, his voice heavily accented. ‘A hermit and a shit-scared boy. Should be nice and easy, lads.’

‘You should go and never come back,’ said the man, his voice calm and even.

‘You know that’s not going to happen,’ said the warrior.

‘I know,’ agreed the man, leaping forwards with dazzling speed. Before the warrior was even aware he was under attack, the man slammed the heel of his hand against his throat. Windpipe crushed, the warrior dropped to his knees, already choking to death.

The man caught the falling dagger and plunged it into the throat of the second warrior. The blade sliced into the gap between his iron torque and the visor of his helmet. He gave a strangled gurgle and toppled to the ground as his lifeblood squirted over his killer and the walls of the cave.

Lethal instincts returned with a vengeance as the hot stink of blood filled the man’s nostrils. He leapt, feet first, towards the remaining two warriors. His booted feet slammed into a chest encased in a heavy hauberk of linked iron rings, and the warrior was pitched from the ledge, arms flailing as he fell to his death. The man landed lightly as the last warrior thrust a dagger towards his gut. He swayed aside, locking the warrior’s arm beneath his own, and sent two lightning-quick stabs of his purloined dagger through the visor of his victim’s helmet.

‘No glorious sights in the Halls of Ulric for you,’ hissed the man, letting the body fall from the ledge to dash itself on the rocks far below. He stood on the edge of the rocky spit of stone before his cave, his arms and upper body drenched in blood. His heart should be racing, yet it beat with a casual rhythm, as though he rested in a peaceful meadow beneath the clearest sky.

Looking down at the beach, he saw the raiders staring up in horror. Alone of the raiders, the warrior in the gold-crowned helm met his gaze. A dozen men ran for the cliff path with murder in their hearts. The man threw the dagger away and returned to the cave, moving with grim inevitability to the cleft in the rock.

Quickly he pulled out a pitch-blackened bundle of cloth and carefully undid the rotted length of twine that secured it. The boy looked on in wonder as he revealed a glittering sword with an ivory handle and gold-inlaid hilt. The blade was slightly curved, in the manner of the Taleuten horsemen, and it shone like fresh-minted silver.

His hands closed around the hilt like a long lost friend, and he sighed as though welcoming a midnight lover.

‘Zhek Askah was right,’ said the boy. ‘You *are* a great warrior, Wyrteorm.’

‘I am the *greatest* warrior,’ said the man, stripping the sword belt from the first man he had killed. He slid his own blade home. It was a loose fit, the scabbard designed for an Unberogen stabbing sword. ‘And do not call me Wyrteorm. It is not my name.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘No. My name is Azazel,’ he said, letting the name settle in his mouth, as though he hadn’t really earned it until now. The boy looked up at him with a mixture of awe and wariness.

Azazel smiled and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, leading him towards the hidden passageway through the rocks. The

warriors pursuing them would find the entrance, but they would never find them in the warren of tunnels that lay beyond.

The boy looked back at the slice of light at the cave mouth and hesitated.

‘There is no going back,’ said Azazel. ‘There never is.’

The bodies were taken from the cave and carried down the narrow cliff path to the waiting ships. None of their number would be left behind on this cold land, they would be taken back to their homelands for the proper funerary rites to be observed. Their souls demanded no less. Wolfgart studied the ground and splashes of blood on the walls with eyes of cold anger, tracing the course of the fight, though it could hardly be called a fight such was the speed with which his comrades had been killed.

He ran a gloved hand through his long red hair, pushing the woven braids from his face as he shook his head. Wolfgart was no youngster, but his body had lost only a little of its youthful power since he had first swung a sword in battle.

His body was a warrior’s, yet his face was that of a rogue.

‘It was him, wasn’t it?’ said a voice behind him.

‘Aye,’ agreed Wolfgart. ‘But then you knew that, didn’t you?’

‘As soon as I saw him on the ledge,’ said the warrior with the gold-crowned helm.

Wolfgart gestured to the tracks and scrapes on the cave floor. ‘It happened so damn quick, the poor buggers didn’t have a chance. He killed Caeadda first and took his weapon. Then he cut Radulf’s throat with it. You saw what he did to Paega and Earic.’

The warrior removed his helm and handed it to another behind him. His golden hair was bound in a short scalp-lock and his face was handsome with a rugged edge that made him a leader to follow in war and an Emperor to obey in peace.

Sigmar, ruler of the lands of men and Emperor of the twelve tribes.

‘Only Gerreon could have killed them so quickly,’ said Sigmar, his differently coloured eyes tracing the course of the fight and reaching the same conclusion as Wolfgart. ‘I should have known he would be here.’

Wolfgart turned to look up at his friend and Emperor. ‘Why? How could you know he would be here?’

‘The burning ship,’ said Sigmar. ‘It is how the Norsii send their dead to the gods. To fight in the shadow of unquiet souls is an omen of ill-fortune.’

‘Aye, well we’ve had enough of them over the last year,’ grumbled Wolfgart.

Sigmar nodded and moved to the back of the cave, peering into the darkness of a rough passageway. Wolfgart’s eyes were drawn to the mighty warhammer hung on Sigmar’s wide leather belt. The hammer’s rune-encrusted haft glittered with pale winter’s light and its heavy head was unblemished by so much as a single drop of blood. This was Ghal-maraz, ancient weapon of dwarfcraft that had been gifted to Sigmar by King Kurgan of the mountain folk.

Sigmar turned and Wolfgart was struck by the change that had come upon him in this last year. Though he had just entered his fortieth summer, Sigmar carried himself with the poise and strength of a man half his age, yet it was his eyes where he bore the weight of years. The rise of his Empire had been hard won, built upon foundations of blood and sacrifice. Friends and loved ones had been lost along the way, and enemies old and new tore at the newly-birthing Empire with avaricious claws.

A full year had passed since the defeat of the Norsii invasion at the foot of the Fauschlag Rock; a year that had seen Sigmar’s raiding fleets scouring the icy coastlines of the north. Village after village was burned to the ground and its people put to the sword. Wolfgart had been as vocal in his support as any when Sigmar had announced his plan to take the fight to the lands of the Norsii, believing that such vengeance would safeguard the Empire for decades to come.

Now he wasn’t so sure, for these raids were building hatred for the lands of the south that would only fester and grow stronger with every passing year. With every bloody slaughter, Wolfgart understood that Sigmar’s reason for these attacks was more personal. In every ruined village, he sought signs of the swordsman Gerreon, the traitor who had killed the woman he loved and plunged a broken sword into the heart of his dearest friend.

Wolfgart rose to his feet, his height a match for Sigmar’s. The wan light entering the cave only served to highlight the frustration he saw in his friend’s face.

Sigmar slammed a gauntleted fist into the rock of the cave.

‘He was here,’ snapped Sigmar. ‘He was here and we missed him. We were so close.’

‘Aye, we got close, but he’s gone now,’ said Wolfgart.

‘Gather the men,’ ordered Sigmar. ‘That passageway likely opens out somewhere north of the village. If we hurry we can mount pursuit.’

Sigmar made to pass him, but Wolfgart laid a hand on the centre of the Emperor’s breastplate. Though the air in the cave was cold, the ancient metal was warm to the touch, the magic bound to it sending a threatening vibration through Wolfgart’s fingertips.

‘He’s gone,’ said Wolfgart. ‘You know it too. Who knows where these tunnels lead, and do you really want to go haring off into the darkness after someone like Gerreon? It’s time to go home, Sigmar.’

‘Really? I seem to remember you were the one who called me a fool for not going after him the last time.’

‘Aye, that was me, but I was young and foolish then. I’m older now. Can’t say as I’m much wiser, but I know when a quest is hopeless. The Empire needs you, my friend. It’s been the hardest year for our people, and they need their Emperor to guide them. The suffering doesn’t end just because the fighting stops.’

Sigmar looked set to argue, but the light of anger went out of his eyes. Wolfgart hated to be the one to tell him these truths, but there was no one else. Not any more.

‘Pendrag was better at this sort of thing than me,’ said Wolfgart, feeling the ache of loss once again. ‘But he’s not here, and I’m all you’ve got. Like I told you in the Brackenwalsch, you’re stuck with me.’

‘Aye, Pendrag was the wisest of us,’ agreed Sigmar, looking over his shoulder at the darkened passageway. Wolfgang saw him accept the truth of his words and his shoulders slumped just a little.

‘The Empire needs us,’ said Wolfgang. ‘But more to the point, it needs you.’

‘You are wiser than you know,’ said Sigmar. ‘It’s starting to worry me.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t let it go to my head,’ said Wolfgang. ‘I live in a house of women who keep telling me how much cleverer than me they are.’

‘Then let’s get you back to them,’ said Sigmar. ‘They must be missing that.’

‘Aye,’ said Wolfgang with a broad smile. ‘Let’s do that.’

They watched from a concealed ledge further along the cliffs. A rutted track twisted through the rocks and defiles behind them, leading down towards the bleak landscape of the north. Beyond the cliffs, the achingly wide vista became ever more irregular, a harsh mix of tundra, ice shelf and blasted wilderness. The horizon shimmered, and the boundary between earth and sky blurred as though the difference between them was maddeningly inconstant.

Beyond the horizon, Azazel knew the world grew stranger still, the land no longer bound by the laws of nature and man. It was a shifting realm of nightmares and Chaos, its character broken and bitter, like a land shaped by spiteful gods.

Azazel smiled, knowing that was exactly true. He could feel the breath of northern powers sweeping down from the realm of the gods, laden with ruin and aeons-old malice. He and Kar Odacen had ventured far into that forsaken wilderness, travelling paths known only to madmen or those whose lungs drew breath of the air touched by the great gods of the north.

It had changed them both, though Azazel remembered little of the journey save the monumental tomb of an ancient warrior and duel with its guardian. The quest into the north had reshaped him in ways beyond his comprehension. His body was faster and stronger than was humanly possible, and his senses were honed to preternatural levels.

Those senses now told him he would venture into that wilderness again.

They were silent as to whether he would ever return.

He and the boy had threaded their way through the tunnels of the cliffs, finally emerging in a sheltered defile high on the flanks of the mountain. They lay in a concealed ravine high above the soaring white cliffs that marked the boundary of this icy realm, watching as black smoke from the burning settlement pressed down on the bay like a mourning shroud. A hundred and thirty-four people had lived there, mostly women and children, with fifty men to bear swords. All were now dead, slain by a man he had once called friend.

Azazel hadn’t known any of the villagers and felt nothing at their deaths. Everyone had been slain, but this one boy had survived. That had to mean something, didn’t it?

Azazel looked down at the young boy. He was clean limbed and looked strong for his age, with a shock of hair so blond it was almost white. His high cheekbones were characteristic of the Norsii tribes, and Azazel saw he would grow into a strikingly handsome man.

Tears cut through the grime on his young face, his body wracked with sobs now that the adrenaline of fear had worn off. Azazel sensed a confluence of fates in their meeting, the twisted schemes of higher powers at work. Kar Odacen would have said it was the will of the gods that had brought them together, but the shaman had been raving and delusional when Azazel had seen him last.

Perhaps it was the will of the gods, but who could tell? Anything could be interpreted as a sign from the gods, and it was no use trying to guess their intent. All he could do was follow his instincts, and his instincts were telling him that this boy was special in ways he couldn’t even begin to imagine.

He returned his attention to the south, watching as the crimson sails of the raiders from the Empire pushed out to sea, past where Lord Aetulff’s wolfship had sunk beneath the waves. The ships cleared the headland, but instead of turning along the coastline to seek fresh slaughter they kept going, aiming their tapered prows to the south.

‘Are they going home?’ asked the boy.

Azazel nodded. ‘It looks like it, yes.’

‘Good,’ sobbed the boy.

Azazel slapped him hard, knocking him back onto his haunches. Instantly, the boy was on his feet, his grief swamped by anger. He reached for a sword that wasn’t there, and hurled himself at Azazel.

‘I’ll kill you!’ he screamed.

Azazel sidestepped his rush and pushed the boy to the ground. Before the boy could rise, he planted a booted foot in his chest.

‘Anger is not your friend, boy,’ said Azazel. ‘Learn to control it or I will throw you from these cliffs. Listen to me, and listen well. You are the last of your tribe. No other will take you in except as a slave, and the land will kill you if you do not start using your head. We are going to travel into the north and you will do exactly as I say or it will be the death of us both. I will teach you what you need to survive, but if you ever disobey me, even once, I will kill you. Do you understand me?’

The boy nodded. His grief and anger were gone, replaced by smouldering resentment.

That was good. It was a beginning.

He held his hand out to the boy, hauling him to his feet. An angry red welt burned on his cheek where Azazel had struck him.

‘That is the first lesson I will teach you,’ said Azazel. ‘It won’t be the last, but it will be the least painful.’

The boy regarded him coldly, rubbing his cheek and holding himself straighter.

‘Look out there,’ said Azazel, pointing out to the ocean. ‘What do you see?’

‘The raiders’ ships,’ said the boy.

‘Yes, and they are going home to a land that hates you.’

‘Will they be back?’

‘I doubt it. Southerners don’t do well with this cold. Even the Udose don’t get winters like we do up here.’

The boy looked at him with a sneer curling his lip. ‘You say “we” like you are one of us.’

‘I am more part of this land than you will ever be,’ Azazel promised him. He turned from the diminishing ships, setting a brisk pace along the path over the cliffs. This was the first day of their journey, and who knew how long it would last.

The boy trotted after him, throwing careful glances towards the smoke rising from the ruin of his home.

‘Will we ever come back here?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes,’ promised Azazel. ‘One day we will. I promise. It will be many years from now, but we will return and we will avenge that has befallen us.’

‘Good,’ said the boy, his jaw clenched and his blue eyes cold and dead.

Azazel paused in his march as a thought occurred to him.

‘What is your name, boy?’ he asked. ‘What do they call you?’

The boy drew his shoulders back, and said, ‘I am called Morkar.’

Young Minds and Old Men

Eoforth tried to keep his frustration in check, but it was hard in the face of such thick-headedness. Teon wouldn't listen; he had no interest in listening, and stared defiantly at Eoforth, daring him to press on. Eoforth perched on the edge of his desk, a finely made piece of furniture crafted by Holtwine himself, and folded his arms across his chest.

'I ask you again, Teon,' he said, pointing to the tally marks chalked on the slate. 'If you multiply the first number by the second, what do you end up with?'

Teon looked over at Gorseth, his best friend and companion in troublemaking. He winked and said, 'A sore head. It's all nonsense anyway. Who needs numbers when you can swing a sword as well as I can?'

He flexed his arm and Gorseth laughed on cue. The rest of the class nervously followed.

'Enough!' said Eoforth, lifting the birch cane from beside his desk.

'Go ahead,' said Teon, 'I dare you. My father will kill you, old man or not.'

For all his bluster, Teon was popular with the other boys. Powerfully built for his age and blessed with handsome features and an easy manner beyond the classroom. Close to his fifteenth birthday, he would soon ride out on his first war hunt. His father was Orvin, one of Alfgeir's captains of battle, and the boy saw little need to spend his days cooped up in a classroom when there were fights to be gotten into and maidens to pursue.

Eoforth stood and limped towards Teon's desk, the cane swishing the air before him like a threshing scythe.

'Every day you cheek me, Master Teon,' said Eoforth. 'Every day you test my patience, but I counselled King Björn in the time of our woes when all around us threatened to destroy the Unberogen. I stood at his side when the Cherusens and Taleutens raided our lands. I brokered the peace that first united those tribes as allies, and I have spoken with the kings and queens of all the great tribes. I have done all this, and you think you can intimidate me? You are a foolish young boy with a head as thick as a greenskin skull and the manners of a forest beast.'

Teon frowned, unused to being spoken to like this. He was off balance and Eoforth smiled as he stopped by the boy's desk.

Eoforth tapped the cane on the arithmetical problem chalked on the slate surface of the desk. 'Now I am asking you again. What is the answer to the problem?'

Teon looked up at him defiantly before spitting on the slate and smearing the chalk illegible with his sleeve. 'A pox on you, old man. I spit on your sums and letters!'

'Wrong answer,' said Eoforth, slashing his birch cane down on Teon's fingers.

The youngster snatched his hand back with a howl of pain. Tears brimmed on the curve of his eyes and Eoforth wasn't proud that he hoped they would spill out. Some shame and humility would do the boy a world of good. Teon's face flushed with anger and he rose to his full height, clutching his hand to his chest.

'My father will hear of this,' he spat, heading for the classroom door.

'Indeed he shall,' said Eoforth. 'For I will tell him, and he will give you a sound beating for disrespecting your elders. Your father knows the value of discipline, and he would thrash you within an inch of your life were he to see you behave like this.'

Eoforth wished that were true. Orvin was as brash and quick to anger as his son, yet he was a fierce warrior and had ridden with Alfgeir's knights for ten years. Though Eoforth did not like the man, he knew of his respect for the proper order of things. He just hoped his son saw that.

Teon paused and Eoforth saw the battle raging within him. To lose face by complying with Eoforth's demand or to risk a beating from his father. The lad returned to his seat, though he continued to glare fiercely at Eoforth.

'Thank you,' said Eoforth, moving between the lines of desks. A dozen boys and girls filled his classroom, a dusty room within a timber-built schoolhouse on the southern bank of the River Reik. A hundred children of Reikdorf learned their numbers and letters here, taught by women he himself had instructed. No men taught at the school, for the youngsters tended to rebel more against male teachers, and seemed more reluctant to pick fights with the matronly women Eoforth had chosen.

'I know what you are thinking,' he said. 'You are thinking that this is a waste of time, that you would much rather be practising the Field of Swords, learning how to fight. The skills of a warrior are important, and every Unberogen needs to know them. But consider this, without your numbers how will you know how much beef to carry in your wagons when you go to war? How much grain and fodder for the horses, and how much extra for the beasts of burden who pull those wagons? How many swords will you need? How many arrows and what size of war chest should you bring to pay your soldiers?'

Eoforth paced the length of his classroom, his limp forgotten as he warmed to his theme.

‘And what of your orders? How will you read the map to deploy your warriors, or read the names of the towns your captain has sent you to? Will you be able to work out how far you must travel or where your evening campsites must be? How will you send word to your fellow warriors without knowledge of your letters?’

He paused by Teon’s desk and fished a lump of chalk from the pockets of his grey scholar’s robes. He scratched the problem on the slate once more.

‘Now let’s try again,’ he said.

The lesson continued for another twenty frustrating minutes, with the youngsters seemingly incapable of grasping the concept of numbers and solutions that couldn’t be calculated on their fingers. Eoforth pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingertips and took a deep breath. Everything was easy when you knew how it was done, and it was hard to remember what it was like not to know these things.

He was in the process of chalking a simpler problem on the board when an excited shout went up from one of the boys seated by the window. Eoforth heard the sound of metal and the whinny of horses from beyond the walls of the schoolhouse.

‘Look!’ shouted a girl with corn-coloured hair and petite features, pointing at something beyond the window. She bounced on her stool with excitement, clapping her hands together.

‘Erline!’ snapped Eoforth. ‘Your attention please.’

‘Sorry,’ said Erline. ‘But look!’

The rest of the class hurried over to the windows and an excited babble broke out as the boys cheered and the girls blushed and scolded one another at their whispered suggestions. Eoforth stooped to look through the window and knew there would be no more lessons today.

While part of him was angered at that fact, he could not deny his Unberogen heart was stirred by so formidable a display of martial power.

Fifty horsemen rode down the thoroughfare, each armoured in a heavy shirt of mail and gleaming iron breastplate. They bore crimson and white shields bearing the hammer of Sigmar, and each carried a lance supported in a Taleuten-style stirrup cup. Spitted upon each lance tip was a rotting greenskin head. A glorious banner of white silk emblazoned with a black cross and wreathed skulls flew over these warriors, and Eoforth smiled as he recognised the bronze-armoured warrior who rode at the head of these horsemen.

Alfgeir, Grand Knight of the Empire.

Sunlight filtered through the forest canopy in thin bars, leaving much of the silent spaces beneath cloaked in shadows. Cuthwin slid through the trees towards the road, a seldom-used track that ran south from Reikdorf all the way to the Grey Mountains. Hardly anyone used these roads any more; the settlements at the foot of the mountains had been destroyed by greenskins ten years ago, and the wilderness had risen up to claim them back.

But someone was using them now, someone who was in trouble.

He moved with an arrow nocked to his bow, a magnificent weapon of yew and ash inlaid with lacquered strips of rowan. Blessed by a priest of Taal, the weapon had never once let him down and had saved his life more times than he could count. The string was loose, but could be drawn in an instant. Sounds of battle were coming from the road, the clash of iron weapons and the screams of wounded souls. Normally Cuthwin would give such sounds a wide berth, for the monstrous denizens of the deep forests were as fond of making war amongst themselves as they were on humanity.

He’d been about to carry onwards to Reikdorf when a loud bang echoed through the forest. Birds fled the treetops and he darted into hiding to string his bow. Another booming echo rolled through the forest. Cuthwin knew that sound, it was a dwarf weapon; one of their thunder bows. He’d seen the mountain folk use them at Black Fire Pass and knew how lethal they could be. His mind made up, he swiftly followed the sounds to their source.

Clad in hard-wearing leather and fur, Cuthwin was the colour of the forest, a ghost moving from shadow to shadow with careful weighted footfalls. Dead leaves pressed softly into the dark earth without sound and twigs were pushed aside by his buckskin boots. His long hunting knife was sheathed in a leather scabbard, and his pack was hung from a high tree branch a hundred yards behind him. He kept his hair long, though it was pulled back over his ears and held by a leather cord around his temples. He scanned the forest to either side, his peripheral vision alert to anything moving on his flanks.

He heard the clang of swords, the howls of wounded creatures and more of the banging reports of thunder bows. The wind carried their smoke to his nostrils, acrid and reeking of hot metal, like Govannon’s forge on a hot day. Beneath that there was a familiar smell of rank, unwashed bodies and rotten food.

Cuthwin knew that smell. He remembered it from the days before Black Fire Pass, when he and Svein had scouted the mountain and discovered the vast host only days from descending into the Empire.

Greenskins.

He heard malicious, squealing voices, squawking war cries and vicious wolf barks, answered by deep, rumbling voices that sounded like they came from the deepest pits of the earth. Cuthwin eased through the forest, keeping his back to the trees and altering his approach every time the wind changed.

Cuthwin was travelling alone, a dangerous pastime in the forests of the Empire, for all manner of peril lurked within their shadowed depths. He knew the risks he took, but was confident enough in his skills to see such dangers as a challenge. To Cuthwin there was nothing as liberating as spending time alone in the deep forests. To survive by his skill with a bow and an innate empathy with the seasonal lore of the wilds was what made him feel alive.

The sounds of battle were growing louder, and Cuthwin pressed himself to the thick bole of a larch, easing his head around it and peering through its branches to the clearing below.

The ground sloped down to the road, a rutted track almost obscured by high grass and gorse. Bodies lay strewn around four wagons arranged in a loose circle on the road. Six dwarfs in long mail shirts fought from the backs of the wagons, armed with a mix of hammers and short-hafted axes. The mules hauling the wagons were dead, and a dozen wiry creatures with pallid green flesh wrapped in filth-encrusted rags surrounded them.

Smaller and weaker than orcs, goblins were cunning little runts that had learned to strike from ambush and kill with the backstab and the low blow. A man or a dwarf was more than a match for a goblin in a straight contest of arms, but that wasn't how these vicious creatures fought. Half bore compact bows of horn and bone, while others swung curved blades with rusted and serrated edges. They rode emaciated wolves that howled with bloodlust, their fur matted and their jaws dripping with saliva.

Two dwarfs emptied fine black powder into the barrels of their thunder bows, while the others slashed at any goblins that came too close. As things stood, the dwarfs would be overrun, but like Sigmar before him, Cuthwin would aid the beleaguered mountain folk.

He hauled back on the string of his bow and sighted on a goblin with a skullcap of bright red leather.

Eoforth dismissed his class, knowing there would be no more work done today. He was disappointed, but remembered the excitement he had felt when the royal brothers, Björn and Berongunden, had ridden through his village behind their father, Redmar Dregor. The king had been magnificent that day, clad in his burnished bronze armour and leading a host of Unberogen horsemen from the back of a tall dappled stallion of grey and white. His white bearskin cloak fell like a mantle of snow from his armoured shoulders and his hair was the colour of fire.

Powerful and elemental, Dregor had stopped beside him.

'You are Eoforth?' asked the king.

'I am, my lord,' he said, surprised the king knew his name.

'And this is your village?'

'I am the elder of Ingaevon, yes.'

'I have heard of you, Eoforth of Ingaevon. The other village elders say you have no taste for war. Is that true?'

'It's true I have no love of killing, but I know it is sometimes necessary. That is why I have trained men under arms quartered here. It is also why I had our carpenters construct a high palisade wall and the village's stockade. I may not carry a sword in this world, but I know how to stay alive in it.'

'Aye, they said you were a sly fox,' said the king, surveying the lines of the hilltop fort and the well-built and nigh-impregnable walls of the settlement. 'You may not swing a sword, but you wield that mind of yours like a weapon.'

The king sighed, looking him in the eye, and Eoforth had been surprised at the marrow-deep weariness he saw in his gaze. The king leaned down and lowered his voice so that only Eoforth could hear his words.

'This world is changing, but the Hag-Mother of the Brackenwalsch tells me I will not live to change with it. That will be for those that come after me. I have need of men like you, men who know that not all battles are fought by warriors, that men of peace will one day be as important as men of war.'

'I would hope that such a day is already here,' Eoforth had replied.

Dregor laughed, a rich, wholesome sound that lifted the hearts of all who heard it.

'For a clever man you are naïve, Eoforth, but I like your optimism.'

'What is it you want of me, my lord?'

'I want you to come to Reikdorf,' said the king in a tone that suggested this was not a request that could be ignored. 'My boys are good lads, but like their father, they are headstrong; all too eager to rush into battle without considering what other options may be open to them. When Berongunden is king, he will have need of a wise man at his side. I want you to be that wise man.'

'I am flattered, my lord,' said Eoforth, genuinely taken aback.

'Then you'll do it?'

'Of course. It would be an honour.'

Thus had begun his long years of service to the kings of the Unberogen. A life that had seen the Unberogen grow in strength and prominence with every passing year. Björn had readily accepted Eoforth's counsel, but Berongunden was a warrior cast too closely in his father's image to listen to anyone's voice but his own. Proud, reckless and full of Unberogen fire, Berongunden had died in the mountains to the north of the Fauschlag Rock, torn to pieces by a winged beast that haunted the highest crags. A year later King Dregor followed his son into the depths of Warrior Hill, his chest pierced by a dozen greenskin arrows, and Björn had taken the crown.

The power and influence of the Unberogen had steadily increased under Björn's leadership, with many sword oaths and trade pacts sworn with neighbouring tribes. Gold and goods from all across the land flowed into Reikdorf, and as the fame of Björn's farsightedness spread, many tribal kings came to his settlement to meet this wise ruler.

Björn honoured Eoforth for his wisdom and when Sigmar eventually took the crown after his father's death fighting the Norsii, he had continued to advise the Unberogen king. Sigmar was now Emperor and Eoforth knew his own span was coming to an end. Sigmar had proven to be a greater king than any of his ancestors, bringing all the tribes of men together under his rule, forging the Empire of men and holding it firm in the face of all enemies.

A mix of his father's keen mind and his grandfather's hot temper, Sigmar was a ruler fit for the Empire: warlike when roused to

fight, diplomatic and persuasive when called to pass judgement. Of course there had been times when Eoforth's steadying hand had been required, such as the incident with Krugar and Aloysius and the dread crown of Morath.

Thankfully, Sigmar had learned valuable lessons from those moments of weakness, a strength born from understanding that no man was infallible, that such perfection was best left to the gods. Since then Eoforth had quietly faded into the background, content to pass his teachings onto the next generation of Unberogen.

He sighed, thinking back to his treatment of Teon. The lad had been rude and arrogant, but Eoforth should have been above such retaliation. In striking the young boy, he had already lost.

'I may not be a warrior, but I am Unberogen,' he said, smiling as his good humour was restored at the recognition that no matter how cultured a man could become, there was no escaping his heritage. He gathered his books and writing tools from the desk, running a gnarled finger over the carvings around its lip.

Master Holtwine was a master craftsman and many of the pieces in the Emperor's longhouse had come from his workshop. His work was truly extraordinary, and was in demand by patrons as diverse as Count Otwin and Count Adelhard. Marius of the Jutones had several pieces, including a great bed frame carved with his heroic deeds during the battle for the Fauschlag Rock.

Eoforth made his way from the classroom and stepped out into the warm spring sunlight. Winter had broken early and the farmsteads around Reikdorf were being prepared for the sowing. The warm smell of freshly turned earth filled the air, even in the heart of the city, reminding Eoforth that it was not by swords that empires endured, but by keeping food plentiful.

He made his way along the street, meandering between the streams of youngsters as they gawped at the armoured horsemen. He saw Teon speaking to his father. Eoforth wondered if he was recounting his punishment in class. He decided that was unlikely; he knew the boy and his father were not close. Orvin was of typical Unberogen stock, broad-shouldered and powerfully built with a shock of dark hair. His bearing was confident to the point of arrogant, but unlike his son he had earned the right to walk with a swagger.

Eoforth waved as he saw Alfgeir walking his horse along the cobbled street towards him.

'Welcome home, Grand Knight of the Empire,' said Eoforth. 'I take it you were successful? The orcs are defeated?'

Alfgeir lifted his helmet's visor and scowled at Eoforth's use of his formal title. Alfgeir had many titles, Grand Knight of the Empire being but his most recently acquired. Marshal of the Reik was another, but to Eoforth he would always simply be his friend.

'That we were, High Scholar of the Empire,' replied Alfgeir, returning the favour. 'We caught them at Astofen and trapped them against the river.'

'Astofen?' said Eoforth as Alfgeir walked his horse towards a water trough. 'Strange how the greenskins always find their way back to Astofen. I wonder what draws them there?'

'Does it matter? They come and we kill them.'

'And the following year they will need killing again.'

Alfgeir nodded and looked over towards the flag flying over the longhouse to the north of the city. 'Any news of the Emperor?' he asked.

It had been nearly nine months since Sigmar had set off to the north. With ships requisitioned from Count Marius's fleet at Jutonsryk, he'd taken the swords of the Empire across the frozen seas to the lands many were already calling Norsca. The Norsii were going to learn that there were consequences to attacking Sigmar's realm.

'There is indeed,' said Eoforth. 'Redwane sends word from the Fauschlag that Sigmar's ships have put ashore in Udose lands at a place called Haugrvik.'

'Do you think they found him?'

'Gerreon? I doubt it,' said Eoforth. 'We would have heard.'

Alfgeir nodded, having already suspected that would be the answer.

'So when is Sigmar coming back to Reikdorf?'

'Soon, I expect. If they're done with the war across the sea, then they're probably on their way now.'

'Good,' said Alfgeir. 'It's time he was back. We're not an Empire without an Emperor.'

Alfgeir had a point. In the year following the great victory against the Norsii, the Empire had weathered the storm of war in consolidation. Each of the counts had returned to their lands to regroup and refortify, but instead of returning to Reikdorf, Sigmar had gathered a force of warriors and crossed the sea to make war on the Norsii. No more would the banished tribes of the north dwell with impunity in their frozen homelands, believing themselves safe from attack. Yet without the Emperor, the people of the Unberogen grew restive, withdrawing behind their palisade walls and spears. Many traders now carried on up the coast to Marburg and Jutonsryk or headed east to Three Hills or south to Siggurdheim.

The Unberogen needed their Emperor back.

The horse lowered its head and Alfgeir patted its flanks as squires arrived from the stables to care for the knights' mounts. These were beasts bred from Wolfgart's stock, wide-chested, powerful and trained to fight. Bred for strength and musculature, not speed and height, the knights' horses were squat and pugnacious beasts. Iron plates riveted to a boiled leather harness protected the horse's flank, while segmented bands of iron and mail sheathed its neck and head.

'Maybe the greenskins keep attacking Astofen due to its historical significance?' suggested Eoforth, returning to their earlier discussion.

'I still don't see why it matters,' said Alfgeir.

'Perhaps if we knew why they came, we could do something about it,' said Eoforth as Alfgeir's squire led the horse away to be stripped of its armour, rubbed down, fed and watered. The care of a good warhorse was a thorough and expensive business.

Alfgeir sat on a stone bench at the side of the street, and Eoforth saw how tired he was. It was a long ride from Astofen and as much as the Empire was far safer than it had been in Björn's time, it still did not do to be away from the scattered pockets of civilisation for too long. Orcs were not the only dangers that lurked in the depths of the Empire's forests.

'Very well, I will indulge you, scholar, but what is there to do?' said Alfgeir, tilting his head back to allow the breeze to cool his skin. 'Orcs are savages, they are driven by their lust for blood. There is no force in this world that can change that.'

'You may be right,' said Eoforth, sitting next to him. 'It is a depressing thought.'

'That I am right or that the orcs will never change?'

Eoforth smiled. 'I was referring to the orcs, my friend. Tell me, does the dwarf bridge still stand to the south of Astofen?'

'It does,' said Alfgeir. 'And someone has erected a shrine on the north bank.'

'Oh? Dedicated to which god?'

'To no god. It is dedicated to Sigmar.'

'To Sigmar?' chuckled Eoforth. 'An understandable gesture, but let us hope it is too small for the gods to notice and take offence.'

'Indeed,' said Alfgeir, removing his helmet and pulling back the coif. He set the helmet next to him and ran a hand through his sweat-streaked hair. Eoforth noticed it was thinning at the crown, and there was more than a hint of grey to its hue.

Alfgeir saw the look and said, 'None of us are getting any younger, scholar.'

He smiled as he said it, but Eoforth saw the horror of aging in the warrior's eyes.

He forced a smile. 'There's truth in that, my friend. Even I am starting to feel old.'

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching the youngsters fussing around the knights, offering to carry their lances, lead their horses or polish their armour. The knights shooed them away with smiles or pantomime growls, and Eoforth watched the boys following behind them, wielding sticks like swords and miming the slaying of their enemies.

'How goes the teaching?' asked Alfgeir, nodding towards the books in Eoforth's lap.

'Slowly,' admitted Eoforth. 'As you see, the boys are more interested in learning to kill than to read poetry or count.'

'We will always need warriors to defend us,' pointed out Alfgeir.

'And we will also need poets to inspire them, artists to commemorate them and tallymen to organise their armies.'

'Young men don't care for that,' said Alfgeir. 'They hunger for glory, not numbers and letters. Unberogen boys weren't made for study. I mean no offence by that, the pursuit of wisdom is an honourable one.'

'No offence taken,' said Eoforth, 'but it saddens me that we still need warriors at all. Wasn't the foundation of the Empire supposed to be an end to wars?'

'Even a rose needs thorns to defend it,' said Alfgeir.

Eoforth gave Alfgeir a sidelong look. 'Poetry?'

Alfgeir looked embarrassed. 'I read that book you loaned me. The writings of the Brigundian saga poet, what was his name...?'

'Sigenert,' said Eoforth. 'I wasn't sure you'd read it.'

'I read it,' replied Alfgeir. 'It just took me a while.'

'What did you think of it?'

Alfgeir shrugged. 'A lot of it went over my head, but I liked his words.'

Eoforth laughed and pushed himself to his feet. 'That's about all a poet can hope for, I suppose.'

Flight and Fight

Cuthwin loosed between breaths, his goose-feathered shaft thudding home at the base of the goblin's skull. It toppled from the back of the wolf with a surprised squeal. He drew another arrow from the quiver at his shoulder and sent it through the throat of a wolf-riding goblin. One of the riderless beasts leapt onto the wagons, bloody saliva dripping from its jaws.

It pounced onto one of the dwarfs armed with a thunder bow and bore him to the ground. Yellowed fangs fastened on the dwarf's neck and blood fountained as the beast bit through his throat. Cuthwin's next arrow punched through its eye socket, and the beast dropped next to its victim with a howl of agony.

The goblins either didn't realise they were under attack from a different direction or didn't care. A flurry of ragged arrows flew from the goblin bows. Most thudded harmlessly into the timber sides of the wagons, but a dwarf fell with two shafts buried in his chest. The wolf-riding goblins were quick to take advantage of the situation, two of their number goading their mounts to leap onto the wagons.

Swinging his bow around, Cuthwin's arrow slashed into the flank of the first wolf, his next into the hindquarters of the other. The dwarfs fell upon the downed goblins and slew them with quick, economical blows from their axes. A shot rang out from the dwarf with the thunder bow and another goblin was punched from the saddle.

Cuthwin exhausted his quiver, emptying another four saddles and killing three wolves. He set his bow upright against the tree next to him and drew his hunting knife, a foot of cold steel that had shed more than its fair share of greenskin blood. Two more dwarfs were down, one with an arrow protruding from his neck, another with a goblin blade buried in his guts. The thunder bow spoke again and a goblin died with half its head blown off.

Cuthwin ran down to the road and leapt on the back of a wolf, plunging his blade into the goblin rider's side. The creature shrieked in agony and he hurled its corpse to the ground. He rammed his bloody blade into the wolf's back. It howled and rolled, trying to dislodge him. He landed lightly beside it and stabbed its throat as it scrambled to get upright.

Another wolf landed on him, the claws of its front paws scoring his thigh and barrelling him to the ground. Cuthwin rolled as its fangs snapped for his throat. He threw up his knife arm and hammered its jaw with the pommel. Yellow teeth snapped beneath the Empire-forged iron and the stinking beast threw back its head and roared. One of the dwarfs dropped to the road and ran towards him, but a goblin with better aim or luck than most loosed a shaft that sliced home into his rescuer's neck.

The dwarf sank to his knees, blood pumping in a flood down his mail shirt. He pitched forward as the goblin turned its bow on Cuthwin. A thunderous boom echoed across the clearing and the last goblin fell from the back of its wolf with what passed for its brains mushrooming from its skull.

Cuthwin rolled to his feet as the wolves, free of their cruel masters' spurs and goads, fled into the forest, leaving the clearing silent save for the laboured wheezes of wounded beasts. Cuthwin's leg ached, but the cuts were not deep. He scrambled over to the wagons, checking each of the dwarfs in turn. Only one still lived, the dwarf who'd fired the shot that had saved his life. An arrow was lodged in his chest, its shaft warped and crudely fletched with what looked like raven feathers.

The dwarf's beard was twisted into three heavy braids, each bound with an iron band at the end, and his cheeks were black with powder burns. The dwarf was bald, his heavy brow pulled down in pain. Blood flecked his spittle and his eyes were glassy and unfocused.

'You're hurt,' said Cuthwin. 'Pretty badly, but if I can get you to Reikdorf you might live.'

The dwarf looked at him in pained confusion and murmured something in a strange, angular language of harshly edged words. Cuthwin didn't understand and shook his head.

'I don't know what you're saying. Do you understand me?'

The dwarf nodded slowly, grim faced and belligerent.

'My fellows?' he said.

'They're all dead.'

The dwarf nodded and Cuthwin saw a depth of pain and anger that frightened him with its intensity. He had felt sorrow at the death of friends, but this was a different order of feeling entirely.

'Were they your kin?' he asked, helping the dwarf to sit upright.

'All dwarfs are kin,' hissed the dwarf, as though he was being wilfully dense.

'Sorry I asked,' replied Cuthwin. 'Now hold still. I need to get that arrow out, and it's going to hurt.'

The dwarf looked down at the jutting shaft and said, 'Don't tell me it will hurt, manling, just do it before I die of old age.'

‘Suit yourself,’ said Cuthwin. ‘I’m going to count to three, and then—’

He jerked the arrow out in one swift motion. The dwarf roared in agony and swung his fist at Cuthwin’s head. He’d been expecting that and swayed back from the blow. Blood pumped from the wound and the dwarf’s eyes rolled back as the pain threatened to overwhelm him.

‘Stay with me, mountain man!’ said Cuthwin, holding the dwarf upright. ‘Come on, look at me! Listen to me, you have to stay awake or you’re as good as dead. There’s likely more of those goblins out there, and it won’t take them long to get here on those wolves. So you need to come with me if you want to get back beneath the mountains.’

The dwarf gripped the edge of the wagon and it seemed as though his anger alone was sustaining him. Cuthwin turned to cut strips of cloth from one of the dead dwarfs’ cloaks to bind the wounds. The dwarf watched him and said, ‘What is your name, manling?’

‘I’m Cuthwin of the Unberogen,’ he said.

‘The Heldenhammer’s tribe...’ said the dwarf, the hard edges of his voice softening with blood loss and fatigue.

‘The very same,’ said Cuthwin, binding the dwarf’s wound as best he could. He would have preferred to lace the wound with healing poultices, but they were in his pack.

‘And you? What’s your name, mountain man?’

‘Deeplock,’ said the dwarf, his voice already sounding distant and faint. ‘Grindan Deeplock of Zhufbar, Engineer to the Guildmasters of Varn Drazh, Keeper of the—’

The dwarf’s voice faded and the ragged howling of wolves from further south told Cuthwin it was time to move on. Slinging the dwarf’s arm over his shoulder, he set off towards where he’d set his bow and hoped he could put enough distance between him and the goblins before they were able to pick up his tracks.

‘Wait...’ said Deeplock. ‘Must bring...’

‘No time, mountain man,’ said Cuthwin, half carrying, half dragging the wounded dwarf into the shadows of the forest. Were it only the larger greenskins behind them, Cuthwin wouldn’t have been worried, they were strong but not too clever.

But goblins were cunning and would find their tracks swiftly. On his own he could evade them without trouble, but with a wounded dwarf in tow...

That was going to be a challenge.

‘Hand me the tongs, son,’ said Govannon, squinting in the smouldering orange light of the forge. His hand grasped air until Bysen placed the warm metal in his hands. The furnace was a blaze of light before him, the roar of its heat and the hiss of water droplets from the powered wheel that worked the bellows acting as a sounding guide for him as he thrust the tongs into the hot coals.

Govannon felt the metal and clamped it hard, drawing it out and placing it upon the anvil.

The stink of hot iron burned the air and its orange-yellow colour told him it was just right. His sight was all but destroyed, but his sense for the metal was just as strong.

‘Looks good, da,’ said Bysen. ‘Forging heat right enough.’

‘Aye, I can tell, lad,’ nodded Govannon, handing his son the tongs and feeling on the workbench for his fuller. Its curved, walnut grip slipped into his hand and he hefted it to get the weight right before bringing it down in a short, powerful arc onto the iron bar. It struck several blows, swiftly establishing a working rhythm as Bysen turned the bar and drew it out, gradually lengthening the metal. They’d done the hard work earlier, working with strikers and other apprentices to work the cold lump of iron into a long bar from which to shape the blade.

It was to be the sword of the Empire’s Grand Knight, for Alfgeir had earned great accolades in his defence of the realm in the Emperor’s absence.

‘Turn it again,’ said Govannon. ‘Once with each strike.’

‘Aye, da,’ said Bysen. ‘Once each, aye, da. Like you say.’

Govannon worked the fuller along the length of the iron, working by instinct and earned skill. The bar was a blurred outline of yellow gold before him, and he could only tell Bysen was turning the bar by the sound of the hot metal scraping on the anvil. Counting his strokes, he adjudged the iron to be the right length. He had taken Alfgeir’s measurements and tested the weight and balance of his currently favoured blade before laying a hammer to the metal. The Grand Knight of the Empire preferred a weapon with the weight slightly towards the tip, requiring a stronger arm to wield it, but delivering a more powerful blow when it landed. The ore that formed this sword had come from the mines of the Howling Hills, Cherusen land, which meant it was freer from impurities and should produce a blade of great brilliance.

‘Look long enough?’ he asked.

‘Aye, da,’ said Bysen. ‘Just right, da.’

Govannon wiped a meaty forearm across his brow, blinking away salty beads of sweat as they dripped into his eye. Just for a second, he could see the outline of his son clearly, a giant of a boy, nineteen summers old, but with the mind of a child.

Grief and guilt welled in the smith’s heart.

It had been at Black Fire when everything had changed.

Govannon and Bysen had been fighting in the heart of the Unberogen lines, smashing greenskins down with powerful strokes of their iron-headed forge hammers. After hours of fighting, the day was almost won, and the warriors of the Emperor’s army were hot and close to exhaustion. Victory was so close, they could almost touch it, and that alone kept them fighting beyond the limits of endurance.

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