

WARHAMMER

ΒΡΟΚΕΠ  
Η ΟΠΟΥΡ

*Robert Earl*

*A condemned man has nothing to lose*

**A WARHAMMER NOVEL**

# **Broken Honour**

**Robert Earl**

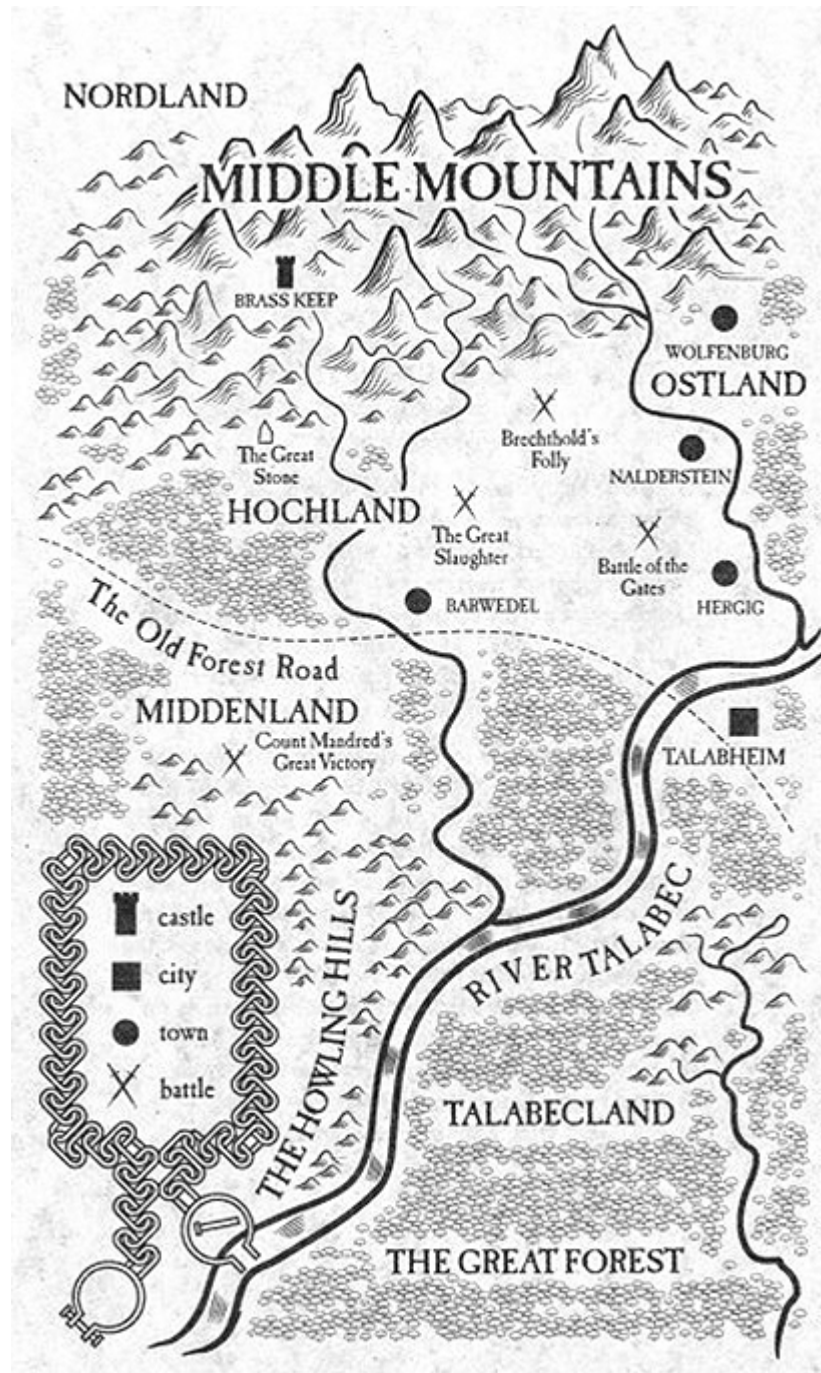
**(An Undead Scan v1.0)**



*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 sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Aلدorf reigns the Emperor Karl Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.*

*But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering Worlds Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.*



## Prologue

It had only ever been a matter of time.

It had almost happened in the winter, when their bones had shown through their hides and their joints had ached and all there had been to eat were the lice they had harvested from their pelts. In such times his folk had no scruples about cannibalism. Meat, after all, was meat.

But although he was the smallest of the herd, Gulkroth had remained alert enough to dissuade his fellows from devouring him. His teeth had remained sharp in his maw even when scurvy had peeled back his gums, and although his muscles were withered by the long, lean hungry months so were all of the herd's.

Then came the thaw. The ice which had marbled the forest into a chill mausoleum melted. Vegetation grew and animals emerged to feed upon it. The herd, in turn, fed upon them.

It was thus drunk with the sweet intoxication of living flesh that the herd found a small woodcutters' village in the forest. It was a new settlement, containing half a dozen human families. Perhaps they had thought that they were safe behind their stockade. Perhaps they had thought that the axes of their men or the jaws of their hounds would protect them.

That was the trouble with humans. They thought too much.

The attack had been sudden and ferocious. The herd waited until a party of woodcutters returned to the stockade, and charged through the opened gates. Once inside they slaughtered with joyful abandon, their bellows echoing within the stockade as they painted the walls red.

It was here, surrounded by the maddening brightness and smell and taste of human blood, that it finally happened.

Gulkroth had been feasting on the succulent remains of a child when, with a roar of murderous joy, Hosse had turned on him. Hosse, dull-witted and stupid. Hosse, strong and vicious. Hosse, who stood a head taller than any of the herd and who carried an axe as heavy as a man.

Gulkroth had turned in time to see the promise of death in his fellow's eyes. Urine spurted down his legs as he leapt away from the blur of the first murderous lunge. Hosse reversed his grip and followed him, rolling his shoulders and chopping down like a woodsman splitting a log. Gulkroth tried to block the blow with his own weapon, but the smile of sharpened rust was no match for the power of the blow. Hosse's axe shattered through the steel and bit deep into the packed earth where Gulkroth had been standing.

Unarmed, Gulkroth looked around for a means of escape. There was none. The herd, their bellies bulging and their blood-sodden fur swarming with flies, had encircled the two fighters. They howled and shrieked with delight, stamping their hooves and clashing their weapons in their eagerness to see him slaughtered.

The sight of their glee filled Gulkroth with a sharp spike of pure, red hatred. He was suddenly no longer thinking of fleeing. Instead he turned to his opponent. Hosse had just freed his axe and was swinging it back for another guillotine blow.

It was then that the voice spoke to him. It was small and still and quiet, and it was irresistible.

Gulkroth listened to the voice and understood. He turned to Hosse and, kneeling in front of him, lowered his head so that his horns were down and the nape of his neck was exposed.

The herd jeered at this attempt at submission. Hosse didn't jeer. He just snarled with a deep satisfaction, and swung his axe up to make the killing blow.

Gulkroth waited until the blade was plunging down towards the brittle snap of his spine before he lunged forwards, lifting his head so that his horns jabbed upwards into the matted fur of Hosse's groin. He felt the jarring impact as his horns bit deep into hard flesh, and heard the grating as the tips scraped through gristle and then against bone.

Hosse screamed, his voice piercing the roars of the herd and echoing off the blood-soaked stockade. Gulkroth snarled with a savage joy and rolled his shoulders as he corkscrewed his horns even deeper into his foe's flesh, tearing them up through the groin and into the stomach. He was rewarded with a sudden spill of entrails, hot and steaming against the back of his neck, then his horns tore loose and he fell back.

He began feasting upon Hosse even as the beast's still-beating heart sent arterial blood spurting into the air. The flesh tasted sweet although the respect all around him was even sweeter. When Gulkroth had finished gorging himself the voice which had spoken to him sounded once more within the confines of his skull. This time it was summoning him.

Without a moment's hesitation he picked up Hosse's axe and padded out of the abattoir of the ruined stockade. The rest of the herd turned and followed him as he made his way towards the voice.

The stone stood in the midst of a drained lake, a desert of slime and mud and the last dying movements of fish drowning in air.

There was no telling why the waters had vanished, although the land around here often shivered and groaned. Gulkroth wondered if that might have been because of the stone itself. It clawed up from the still-sodden mud of the lake bed, twenty feet of towering stone thrust up towards the sky.

As Gulkroth approached, the voice whispered even more urgently in his head. It spoke of things both terrible and wonderful, but even when Gulkroth felt that he must die with revulsion he didn't slacken his pace. He couldn't. Beneath it all, beneath the fear and the horror and the certainty of death, there was the single burning promise of something he could not refuse.

A promise of power.

His hide began to crawl. At first he thought that it was no more than the cancerous aura of the stone at work upon him. It wasn't until he glanced down that he saw that his fur had come alive. Ticks and fleas and other parasites were burrowing their way out of his body and falling dead into the mud beneath him.

The fish that flapped here were larger than any he had seen before, and he wondered at their mutations. Some had tusks. Others had feathers and fur and the same yellow, slit-pupilled eyes as he had himself.

When he looked up from the abominations his breath caught in his throat.

Somehow he had come to within touching distance of the stone. It loomed over him, and as its voice echoed within his skull he felt his mind tear. Beneath the drying silt and mouldering weed it glowed with a sickening green light.

Gulkroth, not knowing what he was doing, smeared the filth away. The luminosity lit his muzzle and fangs as he bent forwards and started licking the tears of light away from the stone as easily as lichen from a tomb.

Soon he felt the light glowing within him, coursing through his blood and muscle and bones and oh, oh the pain. It tore at every part of him, a screaming agony as his body melted and re-knitted itself.

The sun and the moon chased each other around the world. The fish around him died and rotted and stank. Gulkroth noticed none of it. His world had become one of endless, unendurable agony.

Then, on the third day, it stopped and he climbed to his feet, reborn. When he did so he knew two things.

The first was that the voice was his, and had been all along.

The second was that he was going to destroy the world.

As the green orb of Chaos waxed overhead Gulkroth returned to the herd that had been waiting on the shores of the dead lake and led them back to the world below.

## Chapter One

General Count von Brechthold regarded the land below with the same steady gaze as the raptors which circled overhead. These pastures comprised the last few undisputed miles of Hochland before the border was lost to the wilderness. Several barons had laid claim to those wilds, but none had tried to collect taxes there. None had been foolish enough.

“Damn fine day for it, isn’t it, Viksberg?” the general asked. His blue eyes twinkled within the weathered crumple of his face and the tips of his moustache twitched like the whiskers of a terrier who can smell a rat.

“Yes, count,” Viksberg replied, and tried to look equally enthusiastic. He had been given a command in the count’s force as a favour to his deceased father and he didn’t want to appear ungrateful. Even so, he found enthusiasm hard to muster as he examined the bright blue sky through bloodshot eyes. The hoch had been flowing last night, and he was still feeling delicate.

“A damn fine day for it,” he said.

What he didn’t say was that it would be an even finer day for being somewhere else. Somewhere a long, long way away. The annual cull was all very well, but there were always casualties. Always horrific casualties.

Viksberg swallowed then lifted his telescope to examine the ground below them. It had been used before, and with good reason. The gods who had made the Empire had crafted it into a perfect killing field. From the crest of this hill a mile of gradually sloping pasture rolled down to the sudden dark line of the forest. It was one of the Empire’s primal forests, ancient and inviolate. The spaces between its gnarled trunks were choked with thorns, and even in the clear morning light a permanent gloom reigned beneath its canopy.

Viksberg peered nervously through the lens into that darkness. It was incredible that anything could move amongst such tangled snares of vegetation, let alone things as big as the creatures they were hunting. They would be in there now, merged invisibly into the decay of their domain.

In fact, Viksberg thought, they were probably watching him. Watching and hungering.

He suppressed a shudder and switched his gaze to the rows of feeding posts that stood half a mile down the slope between him and the forest. They had been hewn from massive tree trunks and each had been buried up to half its length in the ground.

Flies swarmed around them, feasting on the rotting blood that stained the gnawed wood. For the past two days these posts had been used to hold a pitiable variety of animals. Lamé horses, old mules and spavined sheep, anything that could be bought cheaply but which still had a pulse.



Viksberg grimaced as he thought about what had befallen the poor creatures. Even half a mile away their screams had lifted the hairs on the back of his neck. Some of them had sounded almost human in the extremity of their terror.

And the way that they had been killed. It had been like nothing he had ever seen before.

Viksberg closed his telescope and took the stopper out of his flask. He tried to conceal the trembling in his hands as he raised it to his lips and took a long, gurgling swig. The fire of the liquid helped to dispel the memory, and he forced a good-natured grin as he replaced the stopper.

“Bit early for that, isn’t it?” one of his brother officers asked.

“Isn’t that what the midwife said to your sister?” Viksberg snapped back. Somebody snorted with laughter and the man he had insulted turned red.

“Apologise for that comment,” he said, his hand already on the hilt of his sabre.

“I apologise,” Viksberg muttered, and cursed himself for a fool. The last thing he wanted was a duel with some meat-headed soldier. He had enough to—Why oh why had he volunteered to lead one of the state regiments? Why couldn’t he have kept his mouth shut and stayed safely back in Hergig?

It was the drink that had got him into this mess, he decided. It always was. As usual on such occasions he swore that he would never touch the stuff again.

“Ah, here comes breakfast!” Count von Brechthold guffawed. The assembled officers laughed dutifully as the livestock detail dragged their victims towards the feeding posts. It had been an easy enough task at first but now, with the smell of the previous day’s massacre in their nostrils, the animals fought with dumb terror. The men whispered and soothed, kicked and dragged. Some had tears in their eyes as they led their charges to the feeding posts. The fattened flies rose in expectant clouds before them.

“Glad that this is the last time I’ll have to watch this,” one of the officers muttered.

“Don’t be so bloody sentimental,” von Brechthold scolded him. “They’re dying for a good cause.”

“They certainly are, general,” Viksberg loudly agreed, and turned a haughty eye on the man who had spoken.

When he turned back it was to see that one of the horses had slipped its bonds. It was a bony old thing with a sway back, but as soon as it was free it ran like a thoroughbred.

Viksberg wished that he could follow it.

Barely half the animals had been properly tethered when, with a sudden, ravenous roar, the forest vomited out the ragged horde of its vile spawn.

They spilled from its depths like maggots from the belly of a corpse, and although all were horned and hooped and shaggy with verminous fur no two were exactly alike. Some stood barely as tall as a man, their twisted forms lean and skinny. Others loomed far above them, their muscles bulging with terrible power. Beneath the filth that matted their fur the creatures were striped and piebald, grey and brown. One was albino, its pink eyes making it seem even more inhuman than its fellows. Another, hunchbacked, scuttled forwards on all fours.

And they stank. Even a mile away the sour, ammonia stench of the horde drifted along the warm spring breeze, and Viksberg had to fight down a roll of nausea.

It was all too much for the men who had been struggling to bind the animals. They gave up and, suddenly united with their charges, they flew in blind panic.

“Bad show,” von Brechthold muttered.

“I’ll see that they’re flogged, general,” Viksberg offered, and was horrified by the way his voice squeaked.

“Never mind that now,” the count said. “Just get back to your men. All of you now. Quick!”

The assembled officers scattered like a flock of chickens. Leaving the general with his personal guard they galloped back to where their regiments waited behind the hill. They had been formed up there since before dawn, and Viksberg took comfort from their massed ranks as he rode to his own unit.

These were the state regiments, the best trained and the best armed in the whole of the Empire. They stood in neat, perfectly dressed ranks. The armour they wore over their red and green uniforms gleamed with captured sunlight and their eyes were hard with arrogant courage.

Like all state regiments, iron discipline was the source of their strength. Years of training had seasoned each man, binding him into a unified whole that was so much mightier than the sum of its parts.

Three regiments of knights stood in the front rank. Behind them six more regiments of foot soldiers waited. These were the spearmen and the halberdiers, the solid core of the army. Their formations were laid out with the geometrical precision of some vast, mechanical device. Of the two thousand men, not a single one stood out of place.

Viksberg felt his fear beginning to abate as he rode to where his own regiment stood. They were halberdiers, the paragons of their profession. Each barrel-chested man carried the murderous weight of his pole arm as lightly as a broom, and they stood to attention as perfectly as toy soldiers. Usually Viksberg had little but contempt for his inferiors, but here and now he felt a sudden affection for them.

“Are the men ready?” he asked the captain, a scarred veteran who had spent a lifetime clawing his way up from the ranks.

“Yes, sir,” the captain bellowed. “Siggi will take your horse if you are ready to join us.”

Viksberg hesitated. He could see other infantry officers dismounting, ready to join their men for the fight to come. He knew that this was normal during drills, but surely nobody could expect him to give up his mount during a real battle? He was an aristocrat, Sigmar damn it! His blood was valuable. Priceless. It would be madness to give up the means of escape if things became... difficult.

“Don’t worry, sir,” the captain said. “Siggi will take good care of it.”

Viksberg could have cursed the thug. Instead, aware that every other officer had done so, and aware that the entire regiment was watching him, he dismounted.

“We’ll keep it with us,” he decided defiantly. “Captain, see that it is kept safe in the back rank.”

“That’s not usual, sir,” the captain responded. “It may hinder our formation.”

“Sigmar rot you, man, do as you’re told!”

“As you say,” the captain agreed stiffly. “Sir.”

No sooner had the horse been led to the back ranks than the trumpeters signalled the advance, and the signal flags started fluttering from the hilltop. With an explosion of noise the regimental drums started to beat, throbbing with a hypnotic pulse as the army began to move.

Viksberg thought back to the council of war he had attended last night. As always when facing this old foe, von Brechthold’s plan was a simple hammer and anvil. The knights would lead the charge. Packed together as tightly as the fingers in a mailed fist, they would smash through the seething horde of the enemy, and then expand out behind them to cut off their escape.

Meanwhile the infantry would be advancing on a wide front, a solid phalanx of well-drilled steel. Invincible within the armour of their disciplined ranks they would grind through the encircled beasts like a butcher’s saw through a joint of venison.

Every year the plan was the same, and every year it worked. The beasts would die like the vermin they were. Their slaughtered bodies would be left for the carrion, and the farms and villages of Hochland would be safe for another year.

Nothing to it really, Viksberg told himself as he marched forwards with his men. It’s a cull, not a battle. There was nothing to worry about.

He glanced back through the ranks to snatch a reassuring glimpse of his horse’s head.

Oh Sigmar, he thought. Let it be over.

It was almost a relief when the knights crested the hill and, with a chorus of drawn-out bugle calls, broke into a canter.

Although he didn’t show it, General Count von Brechthold was disappointed. He had won the honour of commanding the cull on three other occasions, and each time he had bagged many more of the beasts than were gathered here today. Even after three days of baiting, there could hardly be more than a thousand down there.

Never mind, he thought. It’s not as though they’re a real army anyway.

He felt the thunder of the knights’ advance as they swept up behind him. His own mount, who was itself a charger, shifted impatiently beneath him but he held it in check. There would be time enough to take his own scalps later. For now his job was to make sure that the regiments kept to the plan.

He watched as the first ranks of knights thundered past him. Their armour was so dazzling in the sunlight that it almost seemed to be aflame, and their standards glowed against the deep blue vault of the sky. There were some who said that handgunners would one day be a match for these warriors, but in that moment the count knew that such a thing would never be. The very ground trembled beneath the power of the knights’ onslaught, and as they cantered down the slope they looked as beautiful and terrible as angels.

The beasts below were too wracked with hunger to notice the line of cavalry that had appeared on the slopes above them. It wasn’t until the knights had closed to within charge range and the high, clear notes of their trumpets rang out that the foul things looked up and realised that their doom was upon them.

Brechthold felt his blood quicken in sympathy as the last high note of the charge was drowned out beneath the bone-shaking thunder of hooves and the jangle and crash of steel.

His mailed fist clenched around his sword when the steel hit the mass of flesh that stood before it.

With barely a pause the knights sliced through their foes. Their lances ran through the first of their victims, skewering the twisted bodies and pinning them to those who stood behind. Then, lances gone, the knights drew their swords with a steel hiss. The blades rose and fell, shining at first, then dulled with the dark filth of their enemies' blood.

And all the while the juggernaut of their charge continued, ploughing on through the mob of terrified beasts until it emerged on the other side.

Another chorus of bugle calls, and this time the knights' formation opened up, the three regiments spreading out as suddenly as the wings of a stooping eagle. They formed a steel cordon between the enemy and the forest which might have offered them sanctuary.

"Well done," Brechthold muttered approvingly, and for the first time he turned to look at the infantry who were advancing down the hill in the knights' footsteps. If the knights had been surgeons the men who followed them were butchers, their craft simple but methodical.

The count frowned. They were too slow, almost five minutes away from the battle. Against the subhuman vermin that even now milled and knotted in confusion below that would not be a problem, but even so, too slow was too slow. A human enemy might have taken the opportunity to seize the initiative. With the elements of the army divided, he might have counter-attacked, perhaps defeating the regiments piecemeal. He might have...

Von Brechthold's mouth fell open as, from the darkness of the forest, a hundred drums rolled into life. Horns sounded, savage and toneless compared to the knights', but loud enough to drown out even the shrieks of the fallen and the pulse of the marching regiments that closed in on the mob below.

His confusion turned into fear as von Brechthold realised that that mob was gone, in its place, forming up into ragged blocks that seemed a hideous caricature of his own regiments, was something resembling an army.

It should have been impossible. The beasts had formed squares, but they didn't do that. Even as he watched the largest of the enemy were bullying and beating their fellows into an even tighter formation. That was impossible too. Then a score of crude standards appeared, sprouted up as suddenly as weeds after summer rain.

Where seconds before he had been facing a foe as routed as cattle in an abattoir, now, von Brechthold realised, he was facing something resembling an army.

No, not one army. Two.

The cacophony of drums and horns grew even louder as the dark fastness of the forest spewed out another wave of the horrors. There was no doubting the discipline that bound this wave together. Although hundreds of lesser creatures swarmed around them like flies around a butcher's blade, their hooves crashed down in a rhythm which rivalled the humans' own.

"They're trapped," one of Brechthold's aides said. "The knights are trapped."

“Yes. I know.”

From their hilltop, the general’s staff watched the thin line of knights. They were as hard and sharp as a razor, but suddenly they were just as brittle. For a moment they milled in confusion, and then their trumpeters called them to order. They turned back to face the enemy they had charged through and, with a wild cry, charged back towards them, ready to hack their way through to safety.

But this time, it was no disorganised rabble they faced. The sand they had so easily cut through before had hardened into solid infantry blocks. The blocks shuddered beneath the knights’ onslaught, but they didn’t break.

They bled beneath the cyclonic steel of the knights’ blades, but they still did not break.

They gave ground beneath the weight of armoured horses, but not much and not enough.

And they did not break.

Then the second wave of the enemy reached the rear of the knights’ line, and suddenly it was the men who started to die. The remains of their formation collapsed as their horses were torn from beneath them. Their regiments disintegrated, and as the slaughter continued the last survivors met their doom, alone and surrounded.

Von Brechthold was unaware of the tears which ran down the runnelled lines of his face. He cursed himself for not having kept a proper reserve force. He cursed himself for not teaching his regiments to keep tighter together, and for not having developed a proper contingency plan in case something like this happened.

Then he thrust aside such pointless indulgences and cursed the infantry instead. Events had developed with such terrifying speed that they were still plodding on, holding to the original plan even as it turned to ruin before them.

“Charge!” the general cried, signalling for his drummers and flag men to pass the message on. “Charge!”

If all of the regiments had followed his lead, they might have arrived in time to save some of their comrades. Perhaps the remains of the knights could have held out until the infantry had reached them. Perhaps the beasts’ new-found discipline would have snapped when caught between two foes. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

In fact, only two of the six regiments charged when they were ordered to. The others were not as alert. It took them time to understand the order, and more time to follow their comrades’ lead. As for Viksberg’s regiment, it didn’t charge at all.

Von Brechthold watched as the solid front of his infantry fell apart. Skirmishers fell upon one of the outermost regiments, attacking the unguarded flanks with the ruthless instinct of wolves snapping at an ox’s hamstrings. Another regiment reached the enemy just as the last of the knights disappeared. They were enveloped, surrounded and torn apart by creatures who now seemed frenzied with victory. The remaining regiments saw what was happening, and the captains slowed. Then they stopped, balancing on the precipice of retreat.

It was at that moment that the general heard the cavalry beat of speeding hooves coming from the east.

For one wild moment he thought that he was saved, for even in the midst of battle he could distinguish a horse's tread from that of the things before him. He stood in his stirrups to see the riders as they emerged from around one of the sweeping arms of the forest.

They were no knights, that was for certain. Even at this distance he could see that they were dull and scruffy. He didn't care. Irregular as they might be, they were fine horsemen, and even as he watched their pace quickened into a gallop. They came in a great mass, sweeping across the green pasture like the shadow of one of the great white clouds that drifted above.

It wasn't until they had drawn close enough for him to see what they truly were that he lost all hope.

It was a strange feeling, this despair, almost liberating. He had no more decisions to make, no more mistakes to avoid. He and his army were doomed. As the savage cavalry thundered towards the remains of his army, the general knew that there was only one thing to do. Still standing in his stirrups he unsheathed his sword and, with a roar of defiance, led his bodyguard in a final charge.

"My lord, we must advance," the captain said, his exasperation only held in check by a lifetime of military discipline. "We are ordered to. Look, see how the other regiments are outstripping us!"

But Viksberg was already looking. In point of fact, he was looking at the destruction of the spearmen who had so rashly followed the order to charge. They were no more than two hundred yards closer to the enemy than he was, and he could hear the terror in their voices as they were swallowed by the endless, heaving mass of the enemy.

Compared to the stinking ocean of the beasts' massed bodies the regiment looked tiny, forlorn. The troopers, who an hour ago had seemed so impressive to Viksberg, now looked like children in the shadow of these savage creatures. Even their standard, once so magnificent, now seemed like no more than a vainglorious boast.

Viksberg grimaced as the spearmen's square finally broke. The flanks caved in and suddenly there was no regiment, just an explosion of men desperately trying to survive.

"My lord, I am going to give the order to charge," the captain told him.

"No." Viksberg shook his head. He had caught sight of another regiment. Or at least, of the beasts who had closed around it, their ragged formations as tight and deadly as a strangler's fingers. Above the ringing steel and guttural roars of the enemy, he could already hear the men's shouts becoming shriller, more desperate.

"Sigmar help them," he mouthed reflexively.

At that moment, as if in answer to his prayer, the thunder of hooves sounded in the east. He could feel the thunder of the charge through the soles of his boots, and the traditional cry of the charge was taken up by the men around him.

"Ur-ra!" The men cried in salute. "Ur-ra!"

Viksberg felt his stomach unknitting in relief as he peered through the confusion of the battle to catch a glimpse of their saviours. He couldn't remember any talk of such reserves during the previous night's planning, but that hardly mattered now. All

that mattered was that they were here, the hammer of the Empire, the lightning bolt from a clear blue sky, the steel weight that would tip the scales.

Then the first wave of the charge surged through the melee, and Viksberg realised what they truly were.

For one terrible moment he thought that he was going to scream. Even at this distance he could make out the twisted confusion of their bestial forms. In some ways they echoed those of their kin that had emerged from the forest. They had been created by the same hideous fusion of men and beasts, and the viciously curved horns and yellow goat eyes and snarling muzzles were the same as those Viksberg had already seen.

But whatever foul gods had shaped these blasphemous creatures had gone even further. Where others had remained vaguely humanoid, these things' torsos melted seamlessly into horses' bodies. They galloped forwards with the instinctive grace that it took a knight a lifetime to learn, and they held their crude axes and stone-headed spears with an effortless balance.

As Viksberg watched they hit the first of their victims, leaping over their lesser brethren to smash into the faltering lines of the humans. The formation wavered. Then it broke.

It was all too much for Viksberg. Even as he had remained frozen, his mind had been working as frantically as a rat caught in a trap. He turned to the captain, his face a haughty mask.

“You wouldn't desert, would you, captain?” he demanded.

“Of course not, sir.”

“Good. Then stay here. I'm going to get help. You men,” Viksberg called out, turning around, “clear the way. I'm coming through.”

“What?” For a moment the captain was lost in confusion. He watched as Viksberg started elbowing his way through the neatly dressed ranks behind him. “What are you doing?”

“Going to get help,” Viksberg called back, trying to keep the terror out of his voice. “Reinforcements. Won't be long.”

As one man, the regiment turned to watch him clamber onto his horse. It shifted nervously beneath him, eyes wide, nostrils flaring.

“I'll be back soon,” Viksberg promised and then, with a sense of wild relief, turned and galloped off.

“What a complete...”

“No talking in the ranks,” the captain snarled. “Eyes front. Halberds at port. Big they may be, but they're still no more than animals. Drummer, sound the advance!”

As Viksberg raced away, his regiment moved towards the galloping horrors who hurled themselves so eagerly forwards to meet them.

Viksberg stopped briefly on the crest of the hill, his horse's flanks heaving. Below him he saw not just defeat but annihilation.

Nobody else, it seemed, had shown the intelligence to withdraw when the storm of defeat had overtaken them. Here and there little knots of men still held out, clustered around ragged and blood-soaked standards. Most had already fallen,

clinging to the illusory safety of their regiments with the same misplaced faith of sailors clinging to a sinking ship. Their remains lay trampled into the mud and the gore, cold bodies hacked and gouged and savaged.

Others amongst the fallen had not been so fortunate.

Even before the last resistance had been crushed, the celebratory feasting began. If the beasts below had hungered after the blood of the bait animals, they were starving for the more refined taste of human flesh. Viksberg watched armour being stripped from bodies, and then flesh being stripped from bones. He watched heads torn off, skulls smashed, brains gnawed out of the cavities. He watched a man screaming as he was devoured from the fingertips inwards.

And all the while the sun shone brightly in the clear blue sky above. Somehow the perfection of this spring morning made the nightmare that was unfolding below all the more unreal, and Viksberg sat mesmerised as the last little knot of resistance disappeared beneath the victorious horde.

Then some instinct made him look to the left. Half a dozen of the horse creatures had caught sight of him. Their fur was blackened with spilt blood, and flies swarmed around them. They showed no desire to join in the feasting. It would take more than dead meat to slake their bloodlust.

Viksberg snapped back into the hellish reality of his situation, turned his horse and fled.



## Chapter Two

“Schmitt, you old villain. Where are you?”

The barge master cringed at the voice that boomed through the narrow confines of his boat. Realising that he couldn't close the hatch that led down into his quarters without being noticed, he rolled beneath his narrow cot instead.

“Schmitt!” His persecutor's voice sounded like that of a wounded bull. Schmitt plucked at his ear-ring, and desperately wished that he was somewhere else. He could already hear the boot steps clumping on the deck above him. Even more ominously, he noticed that the usual chatter and arguments which accompanied his little flotilla had fallen silent. Everybody must have decided that this new drama was more interesting, damn it.

Then, a miracle happened. The boot steps marched away to the side of the boat and the gangplank squeaked as somebody walked down it.

Schmitt realised that he had been holding his breath, and sighed with relief. Then he waited for five more cautious minutes before rolling out from under his cot and sidling carefully up the stairs. He poked his head out of the hatch and blinked apprehensively.

Then he screamed as a fist grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled him up from the safety of the hold. He dangled, his scalp in agony, and found himself looking into Erikson's face. The man was perhaps thirty, perhaps more. It was difficult to tell beneath the scars, the broken nose and the military angle of his waxed moustache. His eyes, which usually showed such good-humoured intelligence, were now hard as ice. They were a pale yellow against his tan, like those of a tiger or some other great beast, and they glittered hungrily.

“Oh, good.” Schmitt, ignoring the feeling that his hair was on fire, tried to smile. “I was looking for you.”

Erikson barked with what might have been laughter.

“Were you indeed?” he asked. “And why was that? To tell me that you have stolen my money and reneged on our agreement?”

“No, no, no.” Schmitt shook his head and then thought better of it. “Well, that is to say, yes.”

Erikson dropped him in disgust, and now that his scalp had stopped hurting Schmitt had time to notice how much bigger Erikson was than him. He stood six foot tall, and even beneath the leather and velvet extravagances of his uniform it was possible to see that he was built like an ox.

“Now you look here...” Erikson began.

“No, you look here,” a woman's voice interrupted.

Both men turned to watch Schmitt's wife make her way up the gangplank. She was short, but what she lacked in height she made up for in girth. Her body seemed to consist of nothing but curves, not all of them in the right places. Her dress bulged tightly as she clambered onto the boat, and her double chin wobbled with indignation.

"Madam," Erikson said with a withering scowl, "this is between me and your husband. I will thank you not to interfere."

"Madam, is it? Madam!" Having made it onto the deck she put her hands on her hips and looked up at Erikson menacingly.

Erikson looked at Schmitt, who smiled weakly.

"Maria does tend to look after the accounts," he said.

"And the cleaning," she reminded him. "And the raising of the babies and the feeding of the tow horses, and the cooking and the looking after the barge while you're drunk in town."

Schmitt had looked happier when he was being dangled by his hair. Erikson decided to save him.

"Look here, my good woman," he said, his eyes twinkling with an expression that so many women before had found so charming, "I'm sure this has all been a mistake."

"First a madam and now your good woman," Maria sneered. "The man can't decide whether I'm a whore or a nun."

There was muted laughter from the bank, and for the first time Erikson realised they had an audience. A score of people, well dressed but dirty, huddled together behind Maria. Erikson tried to ignore them.

"It's just that I paid full passage to Hergig. Full passage. And now I hear that the barge isn't going to Hergig at all. That it's going to turn around and go back down the river."

"And so it is," Maria told him, her chins jutting defiance.

"But," Erikson said, "I've paid my fare."

"And we've given your money back. You'll just have to make other arrangements. We've got refugees to transport, poor souls. Some of them with youngsters. A big lug like you is perfectly capable of making his own way without denying transport to those in need of it."

Erikson looked at the people who were gathered on the bank, and yes, he saw of course they were refugees. He had seen thousands like them throughout his career. Tired, frightened and moving like beggars even though they were dressed in their finest clothes.

In spite of their plight, he couldn't help feeling a flicker of satisfaction. Here at last was the proof that the rumours of war in Hochland had been true. And war, after all, was his business.

Then something Maria had said sunk through.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You said I'd been given my money back?"

Both he and Maria turned on Schmitt, who already had the coins in his outstretched hands.

“Here you go,” he smiled. “If only you’d given me the chance I’d have returned it sooner.”

Erikson took the coins, and looked from Schmitt to his wife to the refugees who huddled beyond.

“Very well,” he said, shrugging, “but can you at least let me have one of your tow horses?”

“Yes,” Maria decided. “Twenty-five crowns.”

Erikson thought about haggling, then looked into the flinty eyes that gleamed within her plump features and knew that it was pointless.

“Let’s see this beast then,” he said and followed the triumphant woman back down the gangplank. He turned to Schmitt one last time and, instead of the glare he had intended, he found himself giving the old villain a sympathetic nod.

In front of him, Maria was already scolding somebody else.

The horse, although cheap, was at least sturdy. It carried Erikson’s few pieces of luggage easily. There wasn’t much of it. A leather cape, his best clothes, spare feathers for his hat. There was also his camping gear in the form of a bedroll, a pot and a light bow for hunting. Hidden beneath this miscellany were his spare sword and, most prized of all, a waterproofed wooden box of pipe weed.

The horse also carried water skins and a couple of sacks of hard tack and dried meat. As he passed the refugees who trudged past him in the other direction, he was glad to have it. Unlike those which had been rich enough to book passage on Schmitt’s barge, these families had a lean and hungry look.

On the first evening ashore Erikson shot enough pigeons and squirrels to fill his pot, cooked up a stew and invited those passing by to join him. They were pathetically grateful, and begged him to turn back and accompany them. But Erikson wanted neither their gratitude nor their advice. He wanted their knowledge, and between mouthfuls of stew they shared it with him eagerly.

They told him of how the beasts had emerged from the forests to annihilate an entire army. Only the hero Otto Viksberg had survived. Apparently this great warrior had slaughtered a score of the beasts to retrieve his regiment’s standard only to lose it whilst crossing a river.

Erikson refilled his guests’ bowls while they told of the terror which had spread like wildfire as the victorious beasts had ravaged the land. It was this panic that had driven many into exile, or at least into hiding behind the walls of the cities. Erikson, who had once seen the creatures which now descended upon Hochland, could well believe it.

By the time he had passed around the bottle of schnapps they had told him of the mustering of the regiments by Baron Ludenhof, and by this point Erikson was finding it hard not to show his satisfaction. It seemed that after the destruction of an entire army, Hochland was desperately short of armed men, and it was that desperation Erikson was counting on.

Later, when the fire had burned down to embers and his guests slept huddled around him, Erikson filled a pipe and smoked, blowing smoke rings into the warmth

of the calm night air and up towards the stars. This was to be his last campaign, he had decided. Then he would retire.

He smiled in the darkness, and let his mind wander away to dreams of the land he would buy and the horses he would breed there. Soon he was asleep.

\* \* \*

Erikson was awoken by the rain. It hissed down through the leaves of the tree beneath which he had slept, and by the time he had pulled on his leather overcoat the remains of last night's fire were too sodden to make them worth relighting. Instead he loaded his horse and, walking beside it to spare its strength, made off northwards towards Hergig.

He passed a few more refugees, indiscriminate shapes huddled miserably around overburdened carts or beneath bundles of their possessions. Erikson ignored them. In his profession he had become hardened to suffering a lot worse than theirs.

The first thing he really noticed about them was their absence.

It was midday. The rain had stopped and the sun had burned through the last of the cloud to set the ground steaming. The path which Erikson had been following through fields of newly planted wheat had reached the outskirts of the forest. The trees here were coppiced and interspersed with well-grazed pastures but ahead, as dark as a storm cloud on the horizon, the deep forest lay.

Erikson looked at the shadow of it and pursed his lips.

"What do you think, old girl?" he asked his horse, who merely flicked her ears in response.

Erikson sighed, cursed Schmitt and then filled his pipe. Only a fool braved the Empire's forests alone, and that was at the best of times. Now, when the elector's forces were holed up in their cities and beasts were ravaging the land... well, it scarcely bore thinking about.

"You're right, of course," he told his horse, and breathed out a plume of smoke. "We don't have a choice."

He finished his pipe, knocked out the ash and started unpacking. He changed into his finery, leaving his travel clothes by the pile of gear on the side of the road. Then he started discarding other bits and pieces. By the time he was finished he was carrying nothing but his bow, his sword, his leather cloak and a couple of water skins. After some thought he took his pipe weed and three days' worth of dried meat too.

"Right then," he told his horse. "Let's get going."

He took a firm hold of its bridle and, ever ready to swing onto its back and gallop away, he pressed on.

They were waiting scarcely half a mile within the forest.

By then the endless blue of the sky had been squeezed into a thin strip that barely lit the path. It wriggled between ancient trees with trunks like clenched fists and thickets of sharp-thorned brambles which thrived in the darkness.

Erikson didn't like the way the forest leaned over the path, nor the fact that it was impossible to see more than a few feet into the gloom, nor the cloying smell of rot and decay. What he liked least of all, though, was the quiet. There was not so much as the call of a bird. Instead there was a deep, liquid silence, as endless as the forest and as cloying as a grave.

It was almost a relief when his horse stopped, digging its hooves in and flattening its ears against its head. Its eyes swam in the darkness, white and terrified, and it whinnied miserably.

Erikson tightened his grip on the bridle when he noticed how its nostrils flared. He sniffed the stifling forest air and yes, there it was. That's what had spooked it.

It was sharp, as acrid as wood smoke but a lot less pleasant. Erikson had never smelled anything like it before. It combined the biting ammonia of a latrine with the sickly, rotten taste of spoiled meat. There was something else in it, too. Something vile.

"Steady on, girl," he whispered, and slipped onto his horse's back. It jittered nervously backwards, but Erikson held it with his knees and reins and the soothing tone of his voice. He touched it with his heels and, against its better judgement, it walked on.

Then it screamed and reared onto its back legs, and Erikson realised that they had been ambushed.

The things that burst from the cover of the undergrowth were so close that even Erikson couldn't bite back a bellow of surprise. They moved with a speed that left no time to react, and even as he dragged his sword from its scabbard his mount was fleeing, its hooves accelerating into a gallop.

One of the shapes leapt up in front of it, and Erikson had time to see the curve of its horns and the yellow glitter of its eyes. He swung his blade towards its neck and after a brief shock of steel against bone the thing fell headless onto the ground.

He reversed his grip as another attacked from the right, but this time he was too slow. Before he could thrust the point into the V formed by the thing's collarbone it had slashed at the horse with a crudely shaped axe. Erikson felt it jump beneath him, and its hooves blurred as it put on even more speed, but he could already feel its warm blood soaking his leg.

He glanced down as they rocketed through the gloom of the twisting path, but in the darkness it was impossible to tell how badly his horse had been injured. He concentrated on holding on, keeping his head down so as to avoid low-hanging branches, and turned to see if they were being pursued.

They were, and with a terrifying speed. The path seemed choked with a sprinting mass of goat-legged horrors, their teeth bright with saliva which glistened like jewels in the occasional flash of sunlight. Some of them were howling, their deep-throated voices wordless and inhuman, but most were just running.

"Come on, girl," Erikson whispered as he leaned over his horse's neck, and in that moment they burst into a clearing that opened up where a stream crossed the path. The brightness of the sunlight here made the forest ahead look as black as night. Even in the midst of this danger Erikson felt a flash of joy as the sunlight warmed his face. Then joy turned to horror as, with a lurch, his horse stumbled and fell forwards into the stream.

Erikson rolled clear, dropping his sword and ignoring the snap in his ribs as he hit the stones beneath the water. He leapt to his feet, grimacing at the shot of pain that burst in his ankle, and snatched up his sword. A single glance at his horse was all he needed to see that it was finished. A soup of entrails was spilling through the gash in its side, and blood spattered out with every breath it took.

He looked into its eyes, maddened with terror and pain, and then beyond to where the things were spilling out of the forest.

He didn't have time to put it out of its misery. He couldn't waste the strength.

He did it anyway.

"To Sigmar's fields," he whispered, reversing the blade in his hand and stabbing down to end its life. Then he turned and ran to the narrowing gap of the path as it left this brief clearing. He glanced over his shoulder, hoping that his pursuers would be content with the feast of fresh meat he had left in their path.

They were not.

Barely pausing, the front runners vaulted over the dead horse and closed in on him. Now they were so close that he could count their fangs and see the hatred burning in their eyes. There would be no escape, Erikson knew.

"Come on then," he snarled, turning to face them. They paused as the leader, a thing which might once have been human, rolled back its misshapen head to bellow out its own challenge.

Erikson didn't wait for it to finish. He leapt forwards, the point of his sword stabbing through the knotted muscle of the thing's neck and out on the other side. With a grunt Erikson used the vertebrae to lever the sword back out in a wide slash that opened up the throat and turned the challenge into a hiss. He leapt back and watched as the beast collapsed, gurgling into a pool of its own blood.

Its followers hesitated, and Erikson described an arc in front of him with the bloodied steel of his sword.

"This is mine," he snarled at them. "Understand? Mine."

He met their eyes as he spoke, glaring through the burning hatred to find the sanity beyond. But with these things there was no sanity beyond. There was only rage, bestial and unreasoning.

They charged him in a wall of muscle, hide and horn. Erikson stepped forwards to meet them, and as he did so thunder rolled from behind him.

The first of the creatures, its almost-human face twisted up into a crown of antlers, flew backwards. Erikson caught a split-second glance of the wound that had blossomed in its chest, a sudden cavern fanged with splintered ribs.

The beast to the right of it, goat-headed and boar-fanged, continued to charge even after its head had exploded like an overripe pumpkin.

The beast to the left, its slit eyes as red as poppies, collapsed forwards in sudden agony, revealing its following companion even as its jaw was torn off and sent spinning away in a spray of blood.

And still they came, and still the thunder rumbled. Limbs splintered as suddenly as branches snapping beneath hoarfrost, skulls exploded like snapdragons in spring, bodies burst open. As well as thunder, Erikson noticed the smoke that had begun to drift from behind him. Blackpowder smoke.

As the slaughter continued he decided that it was the most wonderful thing he had ever smelled.

The beasts smelled it too. Erikson watched as the mass of creatures hesitated, then stopped, then turned and slipped back into the forest. They vanished with an eerie silence, slipping like shadows away from the sun and into the undergrowth. Some of them carried the still-warm corpses of dead comrades between them. Erikson's stomach rolled with nausea as he realised what they wanted the bodies for.

"Good afternoon."

The voice was as cool and as languid as the stream which gurgled carelessly between the bodies littering the clearing. Erikson turned and saw the men who had saved his life. Half a dozen of them had stepped out of the forest, although he was sure that many more waited behind.

They were dressed more like bandits than soldiers. They didn't seem to be wearing any armour, and their clothes were dyed with dull greens and browns. Instead of cloaks they wore stained and shapeless sackcloth sheets. Even the man who was so obviously their leader lacked even a single plume in his shapeless slouch hat.

On the other hand, Erikson noticed with a professional eye, the handguns they carried were perfectly maintained, the metal well-oiled and the stocks well varnished. And as he had seen, they were expertly handled.

"Mein herr, I am at your service," he said, sweeping his own hat off in an elegant bow that wouldn't have been out of place in the Emperor's own court. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Free Captain Erikson, late of Praag, late of Reikland, now seeking fresh glories in the war against the beasts."

"And I am Freimann," the gunner said, without returning the bow. "Tell me, captain, do you think it wise to wander the forest alone?"

"Sigmar is my shield," Erikson told him, his hackles rising at the man's patronising tone.

"Yes," Freimann said, mockery bubbling beneath the surface of every word, "I suppose that he is. Well, fare-thee-well, then."

"Just a moment," Erikson said as the men turned back into the forest. "I wonder if you might tell me how far Hergig is. I am new in these lands."

Freimann shrugged. It was a gesture his lank form might have been made for.

"Perhaps a week on foot," he said. "Perhaps more. But there is a town a few miles ahead. If you make haste, and if it still stands, you might reach it before nightfall."

"Thank you," Erikson said.

"You are very welcome. If you will take my advice, you will hurry. The smell of blackpowder carries a long way, and brings as many creatures as it scares off."

Then, sweeping off his shapeless hat in a gesture that could only have been sarcastic, Freimann turned and led his men back into the dark vastness of the forest. They disappeared into the undergrowth as easily as the beasts they had been hunting. As silently, too. Within a couple of minutes Erikson found himself alone with the carcasses of his horse and the abominations that had died in the volley. He examined them, nose wrinkling.

The vermin which had infected their fur were already streaming away from their cooling bodies, lice and ticks hopping into the undergrowth in search of fresh carriers. The first of the flies had arrived to cluster around the wounds, but despite them Erikson could make out the way in which beast and man had been so horribly fused together.

Although goat-legged and horned, the creatures might once have been men. Their melted features still bore signs of humanity, and Erikson's eyes widened when he noticed what appeared to be a regimental tattoo on one of the thing's sinewy arms.

He was stooping to examine it when, from the depths of the forest, a horn sounded. He straightened at the sound and, selecting only a water skin and a pouch of dried meat from his luggage, set off down the path.

When the horn sounded again he broke into an easy, loping run along the shadowed track that led to the north.



## Chapter Three

“So you are the famed Otto Viksberg, hero of the battle of the Waldenstein?”

Viksberg, his breastplate and gorget sparkling beneath the chandeliers of the palatial ballroom, bowed towards the young woman who gazed up at him with such puppy-dog admiration in her eyes.

She was perhaps the twelfth who had approached him tonight, and the ball had hardly begun. The ice sculptures still had sharp beaks and hard claws, through the windows Hergig’s roofs could still be seen in the dusk, and the most fashionable of guests had just arrived.

“I’m hardly a hero, madam,” Viksberg replied, modestly dropping his eyes and peering down her bodice. Despite the fact that she was a count’s niece, she didn’t seem to mind his indelicate attentions. Quite the opposite.

“But you risked your life to recover the standard,” she insisted, and wriggled seductively beneath his gaze. “You must have been the bravest man there.”

“Not at all.” He glanced briefly up to meet her eyes. “The bravest men died on the battlefield. I was merely unfortunate to lose the standard so close to the city walls.”

It was the standard reply. Complete nonsense, of course. Those who had stayed to die had been idiots, not heroes. Still, it was what people wanted to hear, and one of the more successful of the lies he had polished over the last few weeks.

It hardly seemed credible now that he had actually considered going into exile after the battle. He had been terrified that the solid tactical good sense he had shown in fleeing would be misconstrued, and even if he wasn’t hung for desertion he would have become a social pariah. It was only on the second morning of his flight that the extent of his good fortune dawned upon him. The battle had been a complete slaughter. There was nobody, nobody at all, who could accuse him of anything.

At least, nobody who could accuse him of anything and prove it.

The orchestra, the finest in Hochland, struck up a waltz and Viksberg’s admirer cooed happily.

“This is my favourite piece,” she told him. “Would you care to dance?”

Viksberg did. Before he had become a hero only the most desperate daughters of Hergig’s poorest families had ever asked him to dance. Not anymore, though. Now he was not just the toast of society, but the baron’s newest colonel. He swirled the girl around the dance floor, and if he squeezed her tight she squeezed him even more tightly back.

Before the music stopped Viksberg felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned, one eyebrow raised in annoyance.

“I would prefer it if you didn’t cut in,” he told the young man who had accosted him.

“This is my sister,” the interloper said. “I would be grateful if you would unhand her.”

Viksberg glared at him, considered arguing, and then changed his mind. He didn’t like the set of the brother’s jaw, or the width of his shoulders. And anyway, there were plenty of other women.

Hiding his embarrassment by rolling his eyes, he kissed his partner’s gloved hand and retreated, the sound of squabbling siblings following him.

“Very wise, Viksberg.”

Viksberg looked down to see the provost marshal, Otto Steckler, smirking up at him. Whereas Viksberg was tall and angular, as he believed all true aristocrats were, the provost marshal was a squat, solidly built man. But beneath the bulk of hard muscle and soft fat he was as physically agile as he was quick-witted.

He needed to be. Keeping the baron’s regiments fed and clothed and armed, not to mention housed and disciplined and paid, was no job for a fool. Although the provost marshal enjoyed neither the prestige nor the glory of a field commander, he certainly wielded more authority.

That was one reason why Viksberg so disliked him. The other was the look of suspicion that always glittered in his beady little eyes. It always made Viksberg feel uneasy. Ignoring the feeling, he laughed easily and gestured towards the young woman who was now stomping off, her brother trailing behind her.

“No point in causing trouble between a brother and sister, Steckler,” he said indulgently.

“No point in getting into a duel with some young tough either, eh?” The provost marshal winked insolently.

Viksberg shrugged.

“Anyway,” the provost marshal continued, “I just thought I’d drop by to let you know that another survivor has just turned up. He’s in a hell of a state, but he should live. It will be interesting to hear about the battle from another point of view. Even a humble captain’s.”

Viksberg froze. He tried to force a look of uninterest onto his face, then realising that this was inappropriate, tried for sympathy instead. The suspicion in the provost marshal’s eyes turned to contempt.

“A captain, provost marshal?” Viksberg asked him, his voice croaking. “From what regiment?”

“One of the halberdiers. At least, I’d say so from his build. We’ll find out in due course. He’s at the hospital of the Merciful Sisters of Shallya at the moment, and you know how skilled they are in healing a man. At keeping him breathing. And talking.”

Viksberg swallowed a lump in his throat. It felt as big as the knot in a hangman’s rope.

“I am looking forward to hearing what he has to say,” the provost marshal continued, looking at the glittering crowds that eddied and swirled across the dance floor.

“Excuse me,” Viksberg told him weakly. “I want a drink.”

The provost marshal watched the younger man plough through the crowd towards the nearest table.

Then he turned and, a smile of satisfaction playing across his chubby features, slipped from the room. Making the arrogant little fraud sweat had been enjoyable, but as usual he had a thousand and one more important tasks to be doing.

When Viksberg slipped from the ball and into the night, he had a bottle of peach brandy with him. He would need it, he knew. He would so desperately need it.

After stopping at his quarters to swap his embroidered tunic for a hooded cloak, he made his way through the darkness towards the hospital. The streets were swarming with refugees and those who preyed upon them. The darkness was alive with screams and arguments and sobs. In the occasional splashes of light Viksberg saw miserable knots of humanity huddled in every available corner. Some stretched their hands out as he hurried by, but others just stared, their eyes dead.

Viksberg cursed them as he made his way through the winding alleys of the weavers' quarter and then up the hill to the hospital.

It wasn't until he arrived at the always-open doors that led into the building that he hesitated. They led into a lamplit courtyard, and after the gloom of the street he had scurried down, everything seemed awfully bright. Bright enough to reveal the snarls and grimaces of the gargoyles which hovered against the night sky above, and certainly bright enough for the porters who slouched at their post to recognise him.

To recognise him and to remember him.

Viksberg dithered, shifting from one foot to the other as he waited in the shadows. Then he took a long, gurgling swig of the brandy he had brought with him and, riding the temporary flash of courage it brought, he stepped into the yard.

"You, porter," he said to one of the men who guarded the courtyard and the doors which led off from it. "I've come to visit one of the patients."

If the porter liked the tone of Viksberg's voice he did a good impression of hiding it. He merely exchanged a glance with his companion and spat dangerously close to Viksberg's feet. Typical, Viksberg thought, and produced a coin. It glittered in the lamp light with a lustre that was impossible to ignore.

"Visiting hours are over," the porter told him, scratching his armpit with the cudgel he was armed with.

"They are," his companion agreed. "They're over."

Another coin appeared between Viksberg's fingers, as similar to the first as the two porters were to each other.

The two men exchanged another glance.

"Who is it you wanted to see?" the first one enquired with a forced insouciance.

"We would need to know," the second explained.

"A captain," Viksberg told him. "A halberdier. I hear he's in quite a bad way."

"I know who you mean. But no, not him. He's in close confinement. If Mother bleedin' Superior finds out we've let members of the public go traipsing through his room we'll be out on our arses."

"Without a penny."

Viksberg sighed theatrically, although he was relieved. The less eager these two were to talk about his visit the better, and they would hardly care to discuss accepting a bribe.

“Well, in consideration for your trouble, then...” he plucked another coin from his purse and offered all three to the first porter, who took them with an expression of a man doing him a huge favour.

“What about mine?” his partner asked. Viksberg, whose unease was growing every moment he stood in the lamp light, bit back his curse and gave the man his due. He tried not to look smug as, with a long-suffering expression on his face, the first porter led Viksberg into the depths of the hospital.

They made their way down twisting corridors lit by small lamps in glazed alcoves, and through tiny courtyards surrounded by towering walls. Occasionally the porter, his ears attuned to the footsteps of the sisters, would freeze with the instinctive caution of some wild thing in a forest, or suddenly veer off down a side passage. After perhaps fifteen minutes of this circuitous route Viksberg noticed that the porter was fidgeting with his cudgel, twisting it between his hands as if he were a child with a security blanket.

Eventually he stopped outside an oaken door.

“He’s inside,” he said with a quiet misery. “But we shouldn’t really be in here.”

“If the sisters catch us, I’ll explain,” Viksberg reassured him, and took another swig of brandy to prepare himself for the ordeal ahead.

“It’s not that. It’s just that this part... well, it’s haunted.”

Viksberg smiled weakly and patted the porter on the shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he said, glad to have so easily found the means of getting rid of the man. “I’ll find my own way out after I’ve seen him.”

The porter hesitated, torn between the ragged remains of his sense of duty and superstitious dread.

“Go on,” Viksberg told him. “I might be here for a while.”

There was a distant scream. It was too much for the porter. With a thankful expression lighting his beady eyes, he turned and retreated swiftly down the passageway. Viksberg desperately wished that he could follow him.

But no. No, he had to make sure.

He waited until the porter had scuttled around the corner then lifted the latch on the door and stepped into the injured man’s bed chamber. The narrow cell was lit by a single oil lamp which sat on a shelf beside the bed. In the flickering light it was impossible to make out much of the bed’s occupant. His head was swathed in bandages, and one eye was covered in linen gauze which was stained yellow with either ointment or pus.

“Who’s there?” the patient rasped out, and with a thrill of horror Viksberg recognised the voice. It was no more than a shade of the barrack-room bark that it had once been, but he recognised it.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he choked back a sob of terror. This place was haunted after all. Haunted by the living.

“It’s just me, captain,” Viksberg said, stooping over the man he’d left to die on the battlefield. “I’ve just come to make sure that you’re all right.”

He stooped over the wounded soldier, and saw the cast that bound one leg and the webbing that held his bandaged arms in place. Now that he was so close Viksberg could smell the sweet, gangrenous stink of corruption. There was no doubt now that it was poison that was weeping from his bandaged eye.

The other eye was still bright. When it focussed on Viksberg it grew brighter still.

“You!” the captain said, and the word was a curse. “You coward. You deserter.”

Viksberg clutched at his throat as though the noose was already around it and stepped away. His back hit the unforgiving stone of the wall as his nemesis tried to sit up.

“I’ll see you hang,” the captain hissed, then with a sob of frustration, allowed his body to fall weakly back onto the bed.

In one terrible moment Viksberg saw the future that was laid out before him. The public humiliation. The court-martial. The execution. The prospect lent him a resolve he had never known that he possessed.

“It’s not my fault,” he told the patient as he rolled up his cloak.

“It is,” the soldier sneered at him, teeth as sharp and yellow as one of the beasts that had almost done for him. “And you’ll pay for it, Viksberg. You’ll pay. I’ll see you swing, and I’ll spit on your corpse afterwards. I’ll... wait. Wait, what are you doing?”

They were to be his last words. Emboldened by the dying man’s weakness, and driven by the terror of what his loose tongue would bring, Viksberg had acted. He brought the bundled cloak down over his persecutor’s face, and pressed it into his nose and mouth. The man struggled, but the fire in his blood had been chilled by the approach of Morr. He flailed helplessly, his broken bones and ruined muscles useless against his assailant’s desperate strength.

“You’re making me do this,” Viksberg told him and, biting back a sob, leant forwards so that his entire weight was on the rolled-up cloth. Soon his victim stopped moving. Viksberg, fearing some ruse, just pressed down harder. Something snapped beneath him and finally he relented, stepping back to view his handiwork.

The patient was dead. One eye stared accusingly upwards, and the blood from his broken nose had already stopped running. Viksberg reached out and, with one trembling hand, felt for a pulse. There was none. He hadn’t expected there to be.

“So,” he told the corpse. “I did it.”

The words were the key to open a floodgate of terror. What would happen if he were caught? If that door opened, right now, and somebody stepped in? Or what if, he wondered hysterically, somebody had been watching through the key hole? The porter, or perhaps one of the sisters?

Seized with a sudden, unreasoning impulse to hide the evidence of his crime, Viksberg’s eyes fell upon the oil lamp. The glass reservoir was still over half-full. He picked it up, weighed it in his hand, and stared at it. He stood like that for a full five minutes, mesmerised by the slosh of oil and the flicker of the flame. Then he placed it on the linen bedclothes that now served his victim as a shroud. They were so well mended, these sheets. So well laundered.

So perfectly flammable.

“You made me do it,” he told the corpse accusingly as, with the hilt of his dagger, he smashed the glass.

The ferocity of the flame took him by surprise. He whimpered as he staggered away from it, and suddenly it occurred to him that he’d made an awful mistake.

“No,” he said, and looked aghast at the tongues of fire that were already licking their way up to the desiccated timbers of the ceiling.

“Oh no.” He flapped ineffectually at the burning bed. “I didn’t mean it!”

But mean it or not, the fire had taken hold with a ferocious enthusiasm. Viksberg’s eyebrows were singed and his skin was already beginning to blister when he staggered out of the room and slammed the door shut.

The hallway was gloomy after the eye-watering brightness of the fire, and it took Viksberg a moment to realise that he wasn’t alone.

“What have you done?” the voice asked.

Viksberg turned, his face a mask of horror, to see the youth who had spoken. Beneath his mop of red hair he was skinny, perhaps in his mid-teens, and dressed in the grey shift of the foundling hospital.

“I heard arguing,” the boy said, and it seemed to Viksberg that the accusation in his wide eyes was even more dangerous than the flames. His hand strayed to the hilt of his dagger. But before he could draw it the door exploded outwards with a roar of flame.

“Take me to the entrance,” Viksberg told the boy.

“This is your doing,” the boy said with a dull certainty.

“Move!” Viksberg raised his hand and the youth bolted.

As he followed his guide Viksberg heard the first cries of alarm ringing out behind him and then, over the quickening roar of the inferno, the first screams. One of the sisters barrelled into him, her robes undone and her hair awry. She bellowed a question at him, but he just pushed her aside and rushed on. The red-haired youngster he was following led him out into the courtyard where the two porters stood open-mouthed as they watched the first snicker of flames emerge from the roofs.

“Stop him,” Viksberg said, with an invention born of desperation. “He started the fire.”

The porter who had led him to the cell thought faster than at any time in his life. He saw Viksberg’s singed eyebrows. Saw his reddened skin. Saw that the only thing between him and the gallows was the scapegoat who was now running so conveniently towards him.

He swung his fist. There was a crunch as it connected with bone, and the fleeing youngster was knocked back to the cobbles, his eyes rolling back into his head.

“Better keep an eye on him,” Viksberg said with a shard of hysterical laughter in his voice. “Who knows what else an arsonist may be capable of?”

“Right you are, mein herr,” the porter replied, and as his companion started ringing the alarm bell, he tied the youngster up nice and tight and ready for the magistrates.

Since his narrow escape in the forest, Erikson had spent the nights in whatever sanctuary he could find and the mornings running to the next. After almost a

fortnight of grudging accommodation and constant flight he had begun to grow scrawny and to suffer from a constant, bone-deep fatigue that never seemed to leave him. So it was that when he saw Hergig it was with the thankful joy of a pilgrim who has reached his shrine.

Although he had seen bigger cities he had not seen many better fortified. Perhaps because of the endless forests which lay in constant wait for them, the Hochlanders built their walls well. As Erikson approached he studied the impressive height of the granite walls, and the fine masonry above the machicolations. Towers studded the walls, their arrow slits scowling down on the lands below, and the crenellations were alive with distant guards.

When he drew close enough to smell the cheerful reek of the city Erikson felt as though he were coming home. It had been a while since he had been in civilisation, and as he elbowed his way through the refugees that were camped outside the gates he became aware of quite how filthy, and how ragged, he was.

Well, that would never do.

After paying the toll to the gate keepers he set about finding a room in an inn. The fee was exorbitant, but he soon forgot about it.

First he spent an hour in a hip bath, scrubbing a month's worth of grime from his skin and then carefully shaving around the military curves of his moustaches. When he had finished he was as pink as a newborn babe, and as hungry.

He ordered bread and stew, and then bread and sausages, and then bread and cheese, and finally half a dozen baked apples. He drank his way through a jug of wine while he did so, and then a couple of glasses of schnapps.

By the time he had finished he was so stuffed that he didn't even have enough appetite left for the plump little serving girl who had been looking at him so invitingly. Instead he checked that his sword was loose in its sheath, made sure his purse was secure in his breeches and then curled up on the almost unbearable luxury of a stuffed mattress. For twelve hours he could have been described as sleeping the sleep of the dead, if the dead had snored with such impressive volume.

The next morning he awoke, stretched, and after a breakfast of goat's milk and pastries, went out to find a tailor. Only then, clean, shaved and resplendent in his finery, did he set out to hire his regiment.

\* \* \*

He returned to his quarters that evening, if not worried, than at least concerned. After washing down a boiled ham with a gallon of ale he spent a while staring into the fire. It wasn't until he took the serving girl to bed that he unburdened himself.

"I've never seen anything like it, Helga," he told her as she lay with her head on his chest. "I've been in a dozen wars. More. But there are always men to be hired. Men desperate enough to want to fight."

"Not here," Helga told him, braiding her hair around her finger. "The baron has drafted every spare man into the regiments. He had to after he lost the last lot."

Erikson smiled indulgently.

“Rulers always do that. It doesn’t mean anything. If men don’t want to fight, they can always find a way to escape. And if they are too slow-witted or infirm to do that, they’re no good anyway. Only the Bretonnians force men to fight, and a more miserable bunch of creatures you will never see. I fought them at Couronne once. We called it a great victory, but it was pathetic really. All they did was run around like a herd of sheep. The knights, though...”

He trailed off, remembering. The knights had been like something from a nightmare. Even when the cannon had opened up, the knights had still come on. If he hadn’t had the foresight to fill that hollow with sharpened stakes and then cover it over with bracken they would have killed his regiment to a man.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Helga said and, not liking the sudden dark mood that had seized him, poked him playfully. “You’re just being modest. Tell me about your battles.”

Erikson frowned.

“No. That’s no subject for the bedroom. I just need to think of where to find a couple of hundred men. Hard men. Or if not hard, at least desperate.”

“You have one hard man already,” Helga cooed, and Erikson stopped worrying and turned his attention to more pressing matters.

Hergig Gaol squatted amongst the squalor of the old tanners’ quarter. On the outside its walls were unmarked blind slabs of windowless granite, and although there were no battlements as such, the walls were topped with walkways. Crossbow-wielding guards prowled about on them with the indolent swagger of alley cats, half-hoping for a riot to provide a bit of target practice and relieve the boredom.

Unfortunately for them, there were seldom any riots in Hergig Gaol. Not any more. Not since Gort had taken over.

Nobody was really sure where the chief gaoler had come from, but all had heard the rumours about his sadistic genius for punishment. Even Erikson had heard some of the stories and now, sitting across from the infamous man in the stone-vaulted lair of his office, he could well believe them.

“Quite an impressive institution you have here, Herr Gort,” Erikson told the chief gaoler.

Gort accepted the compliment with a nod of his shaven head. His scalp seemed to be the only part of him not covered with hair. His beard was a dense thicket, and tufts of the same black hair curled out from his collar and his cuffs, and covered the fat little sausages of his fingers.

“I take my duties very seriously,” Gort replied. “Chief gaoler is a post many seek but few attain.”

“It must take real character to deal with such a lot of responsibility,” Erikson agreed, and looked out of the window into the grim little courtyard below. From their position in the gaoler’s office he could see every inch of the sand. Or at least he would have been able to if it hadn’t been hidden beneath a choked mass of humanity.

“It does.” Again Gort accepted the compliment with a nod. He refilled his guest’s glass with sweet white wine and then his own. They had been at this for half an hour already, but that was fine with him. He hadn’t become as rich as he had without



developing a bloodhound's nose for bribes, and the man who sat in front of him all but stank of gold.

"My job also involves responsibility," Erikson finally explained. "I am a soldier, and a leader of soldiers. Sigmar gave me the ability to do both well, and I have been fighting his enemies all my life."

Gort wasn't impressed with the hard pride which flamed in his guest's yellow eyes, but he was impressed by the ring of truth in his voice.

"There are certainly plenty of enemies about in Hochland," he said carefully. "And not many soldiers to fight them."

"Very true, Herr Gort. Very true. In such desperate times it is men like us, men of responsibility, who have to make do."

The two men sat in a silence which might have been companionable if it hadn't been so cautious.

It was Gort who broke it.

"Wouldn't it be good if I could let you have some of those scoundrels?" He waved a podgy hand towards the prisoners below. Even though they were twenty feet away and on the other side of a window Erikson could see that some of them flinched at the gesture.

"It would be good," Erikson nodded. "In fact, it's an excellent idea."

"Alas," Gort sighed so deeply that his belly wobbled beneath his tunic, "regulations."

And so saying he produced a hardbound book. It appeared in his hands as suddenly as a rabbit might appear in a conjuror's hat, and he banged it down onto the table to emphasise its weight.

He and Erikson exchanged a long, cool glance, the hard stones of the mercenary's eyes meeting their match in the unfathomable depths of the gaoler's.

"It is well," Erikson said, suddenly philosophical, "that men like us, men of responsibility, can improve upon regulations."

"If only it were so." Gort shook his head mournfully. "But as a humble servant of the baron, Sigmar bless him, my authority in that direction is limited."

"You are too modest." Erikson waved the claim away. "I am sure that your judgement and discretion are invaluable when it comes to running this place. By the way, I noticed a small shrine on my way up to your office. Who is it to?"

"Ah yes, the shrine," Gort nodded, happy to follow the sudden change of subject. "It is to Shallya. A lot of our guests have need of her after they arrive here."

He grinned at his own humour, then realised what he had said. "Not that the prisoners aren't in excellent condition, of course. But some of them are so aggressive. Yes, they love to fight."

"Indeed." Erikson allowed a look of scepticism to flit briefly across his face. "Anyway, I was thinking of making a donation to you. For the shrine."

"Very generous of you." Gort contrived to display a smile of wide-eyed innocence. "How much were you thinking?"

"One hundred crowns," Erikson decided. "Not only that, but I'll take a couple of hundred of those reprobates under my cognisance. I doubt if they'll be much good, but they might as well die defending the city as in it."

The chief gaoler hissed through his teeth, and gazed out over the inmates below so lovingly that each and every one of them might have been his favourite son.

“Let us try some schnapps,” he decided happily. “While we discuss your generous offer.”

Negotiations continued well into the night, and by the time Erikson left he was almost as light in heart as he was in wallet. He had his war and he had his men. Now all he needed was his commission.

Life, he decided as he staggered back to the inn, was good.

The feeling stayed with Erikson the next morning as he looked down at his new regiment. The chief gaoler had found him a round ten dozen, and true to his word they all seemed to be more or less fit and healthy.

At least, as fit and healthy as the inmates of a gaol can be.

Erikson stood on a box in the gaol courtyard, which had been cleared of all the other inmates. He held a charter in his hand. Multicoloured ribbons fluttered from the heavy vellum scroll like so many battle flags, and Erikson wielded it as though it were a marshal’s baton.

“Gentlemen,” he began, and his voice was loud enough to fill a parade ground, never mind the narrow confines of this mean yard. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Free Captain Joachim Erikson, late of Stirland, Kislev and Bretonnia. My god is Sigmar and my business is war. And, make no mistake, gentlemen, business is what it is.”

He paused and studied them, gauging their reaction. It was not one to inspire confidence in a military commander. They looked sullen, suspicious and resentful, and that was only amongst those who weren’t looking morosely into space.

Erikson didn’t care. It didn’t really matter what they were now. It was what he would make of them that counted.

“At the moment,” he reminded them, “you are prisoners. I don’t care why you are prisoners. I don’t care if you are innocent or guilty. All I care about is that, outside those walls, the forests are alive with vermin. Dangerous, murderous vermin that need to be destroyed. If you are willing, I will help you to destroy them.”

“Why in the name of Ranald’s balls would we want to do that?” one of the men asked. Erikson studied him with a keen interest. He wasn’t an imposing man. Beneath his baggy clothes he had a scrawny frame and a pigeon chest, and beneath his ragged blond hair his blue eyes twinkled out from a hollow-cheeked face.

And yet, although his shoulders were narrow there was a confident set to them, and although his face was bony it showed neither fear nor respect.

“A good question,” Erikson told him. “And it deserves a good answer. If you fight you will have both your freedom and a share in the spoils. Just because we are a free company doesn’t mean that we fight for free. Far from it.”

He winked at them and grinned, his teeth dazzling white in this gloomy place.

“Not much good to a dead man,” the sceptic said.

“Oh don’t worry about that,” Erikson told him, his grin spreading even as his eyes grew cold. “If you stay here you’ll be dead men soon enough. Imagine what will

happen when the beasts break in here and find you all chained up like suckling pigs outside a butcher's shop."

"Come now," another man interrupted. His voice was a deep baritone, and Erikson turned to see that it belonged to a thickset man with the shaved head and black robes of a Sigmarite priest. "Do you really believe that Hergig will fall to a pack of beasts?"

"Yes," Erikson told him simply. "If we don't all fight. Those same beasts have already destroyed one of your baron's armies and you, my friends, are next."

"Unless we fight," the man said, and appeared to be thinking it over. Those around him watched in silence, their evident respect lending the man a gravity despite his tattered robes. "Well, then, I suppose I will fight. Better to face the enemy free and armed than locked in cages."

There was a murmur of agreement, and it occurred to Erikson that he had found his first sergeant. Then laughter, as harsh and cold as a Reikwald winter, echoed out.

"Fight by all means," an old man said. "Why not? But don't be fools. You heard the good captain here. An army has been wiped out. An army of state troopers. Well trained. Well led. Well armed. What chance will we have?"

"I have heard something of the battle," Erikson told him. "It would seem that the commander underestimated the threat. That won't happen again. And you will be trained and armed. And fed," he added, noting how skinny most of them were.

"That's only the half of it," the old man spat with disgust. "The regiments train for years, each man fitting into his formation just as each formation fits into the others. I should know. I was a halberdier myself for twenty years. A sergeant."

"Then we have reason to thank Sigmar already," Erikson told him. "I will have need of your talents. We all will. If we are to play our small part in the baron's host, then we will need to train, and that relentlessly."

"I don't care about that," somebody else interrupted, a young voice full of determination. "I just want to fight."

Erikson looked down into the lad's eye's. He barely seemed old enough to be here. Like so many of his comrades he had a wasted frame, but beneath the red mop of his hair his eyes glittered with a hatred that filled Erikson with a wary satisfaction. He had seen that sort of hatred before. Had seen what it could do.

"Why do you want to fight?" Erikson found himself asking.

"Those things killed my family when I was a babe," he replied simply, "and I have nothing else."

There was a heartbeat of silence before another man took the opportunity to complain.

"It's all very well for those who are to be hanged," he said, his voice an irritating whine, "but what about those of us who aren't?"

Erikson allowed himself a look of cool contempt as he regarded the complainant. The man had weak eyes beneath a receding hairline, and they refused to meet Erikson's. But Erikson didn't care. Like a good angler he knew when the time was right to strike, and it was now.

"Nobody is forcing you to sign anything," he told the assembled men. "I don't want slaves, I want comrades, which is why the choice is yours. You either join up,

in which case you'll have freedom, full bellies and a chance to make your fortune in this war. Or you don't. You stay here and wait for the beasts to find you. So what's it to be?"

"Well if you put it like that," the first man to have spoken said, "I think I'd be a fool not to. Where do I put my mark?"

"Right here," Erikson told him, unfurling the parchment and hoping that nobody would realise that the text he had written so beautifully across it was pure nonsense.

## Chapter Four

The feasting had been sublime. The warriors' flesh had been lean and tender, and their blood had been maddening in its potency. Its sweetness had filled the victors with dark fires of animal rage and they had fought and rutted and lost themselves in a blood-soaked orgy that had lasted for days.

There had been so much meat after the slaughter that every single member of the herd had filled its belly. Even the pathetic, almost human things that skulked around the edges had eaten their fill of man-flesh, squabbling for precedence over remains which their betters had been too gluttoned to eat.

Alone amongst the thousands, Gulkroth had shown some restraint. While his lords lost themselves in the bestial excess that surged around the battlefield, and whilst his shamans, as gorged as ticks on blood, had used their gluttony to launch themselves into the terrible abysses of their nightmarish visions, Gulkroth had eaten sparingly and thought.

He had had the body of the humans' lord brought to them. The meat was old and stringy, but that didn't matter. Its heart was strong, and its liver was rich with wisdom. Human wisdom.

In the midst of the carnival Gulkroth sat and thought. Occasionally one of his herd would come too close or smell wrong or look at him. When that happened he killed with a natural savage joy, glorying in the power that warped through his veins and the effortless slicing of his fangs through hide and muscle and bone.

For the most part, though, he sat and thought. If he could have, he would have withdrawn his herd into the dark reaches of the forest, but he knew that to do so would have been to court mutiny. There would be no reasoning with any of his kind until the tide of their victory had ebbed away and the flames of their bloodlust had burned down to ash.

It wasn't until the second night, after he'd had time to digest the human's liver, that he began to summon his lieutenants.

Viles had been one of the first he had called. He had led the charge of his brother centigors into the humans' wavering flanks, and had been feasting ever since. The man-flesh had kept him awake and wracked him with an almost unbearable energy which he had burned off in wide, wild gallops through the forest. His hide was torn and studded with thorns, but neither that pain nor the glorious waves of blood-fuelled euphoria that surged through him did much to allay his fear.

Gulkroth was the beast lord, and to be summoned to his presence was enough to send the musk of fear spraying down anybody's tail.

The messenger led Viles into the forest. His eyes adjusted to the gloom, and in the perfect darkness the blurred outlines of the trees emerged, green-tinted against shades too deep for even his eyes to penetrate.

But he hardly needed to see. The scent of the urine with which the beast lord had marked his territory was unmistakable. Even here, on the outskirts of the forest, the terrifying musk of it was a rich enough stink to cut through the smell of ripening corpses and the horde which even now feasted upon them.

When the smell had become almost unbearable, the messenger who had summoned Viles fell to the floor in a position of grovelling submission.

“Viles,” a voice barked from the darkness, and the centigor found his hooves carrying him forwards into the clearing. His lord had carved it from the forest as easily as a maggot burrows into flesh, and the smashed vegetation that lay underfoot was littered with bones and rotten flesh.

Despite the darkness Viles’ night vision was strong enough to make out his lord’s silhouette. The goat legs were as sturdy as trunks, and the great sweep of his horns looked as high and as wide as the branches above. He was one of the most massive of his breed, but it wasn’t his physical bulk that buckled Viles’ knees in automatic submission. It was the burning glitter of his eyes, bright in the darkness.

They seemed like twin stars against the blackness of the void, and in the vertical slashes of the pupils Viles could see the life and the death of his entire herd. As he knelt amongst the ruin of his lord’s presence Viles knew in every twisted fibre of his being that the creature which studied him through those eyes was the only real thing in a world composed of shadows.

“Viles,” the lord asked, the growl of his voice so deep that it resonated within the confines of Viles’ own skull. “I want to know about the humans’ greatest town. The one where their lord sits behind high stone walls, waiting for us like a maggot in a corpse.”

“I know a little of it, lord,” Viles said, his voice an insignificant squeak. “It lies a day’s march away from the nearest forest.”

“Go. Find out exactly where it is. Find out how many humans enter and leave, find out how high the walls are, and whether water flows into or out of it. Find out how many animals are in the fields outside of it, and how much feed is brought into it. And find a way for us to arrive at it secretly. Do you understand?”

“Yes, lord,” Viles whispered.

“Then take your people and go. Return in one week, and tell me all that I have asked to know.”

Viles found that his voice had deserted him. With a whimper he backed away from his lord and, once clear of that terrible gaze, he bolted into the darkness.

When he had gone Gulkroth beckoned his servant forwards and bade him go and rouse the shamans. He would need them to inflict his will upon the herd when they were ready to be driven forwards, and as always the shamans would be the echoes of his own voice.

The baron’s council chamber was as clean, spartan and functional as the man himself. A single trestle table ran down the length of the hall. On one side glazed windows looked out over Hergig. The city’s red-tiled roofs seemed to huddle around the palace like sheep around a shepherd when the wolves are nearby.

On the wall opposite the windows there were half a dozen boards. Maps had been fastened to them. Maps, and projections, and rotas, and graphs and all the other paperwork of modern warfare.

It was an overcast morning outside, and the light which streamed in through the windows was heavy and leaden. So were the faces of the men who sat around the table. To take his mind off his own troubles Ganamedes, the scholar who had advised the baron for the past ten years, studied the assembled commanders.

Colonel Viksberg was a particularly interesting specimen. He was sweating despite the chill, and his eyes flitted constantly between Provost Marshal Steckler and the door. For his part Steckler had been staring at Viksberg since the man had entered the room, his gaze still and predatory.

Ganamedes knew why. He had been there when Steckler had asked the baron for permission to arrest Viksberg for burning down the hospital.

It had been a truly horrendous attack. The fire had been started amongst the most helpless patients, and as they had roasted so had the sisters who had gone to help them. Almost a hundred people had died, and it could have been a lot worse. Only Steckler's timely arrival had seen the flames doused before they could spread beyond the hospital complex.

At first everybody had suspected that the enemy had had a hand in the crime. It was only when Steckler, conscientious as always, had interrogated the porters and one of the surviving sisters that the truth had emerged.

But by then a scapegoat had already been found and the baron had decided, quite rightly, that no purpose would be served by destroying the reputation of one of Hochland's few heroes. And so Viksberg, all unknowingly, had been spared.

Ganamedes watched the arsonist squirm beneath Steckler's unrelenting gaze. Eventually, perhaps after the war, the provost marshal would be let off his leash and allowed to exact an appropriate punishment. Until that happy day they all had other things to worry about.

"The Baron Aldebrand Ludenhof of Hochland!" the herald cried, and everybody leapt to their feet. A dozen pairs of heels clicked together, and a dozen heads bowed.

"Sit down," the baron told them and took his own place at the head of the table. He was a lean, well-muscled man with a neatly waxed scalp. He moved with the clipped, controlled energy of the professional soldier he had been before he fought, schemed and married his way up to his present rank.

Quite an achievement, Ganamedes thought as his baron gestured down the table. Quite a man to serve. And quite a one to betray.

He shrugged off the shiver of guilt and fiddled with his pipe to calm himself.

"Provost marshal, you first." The baron pointed down the table. "What's the situation?"

"We have lost an entire army," Steckler said.

"I think we know that, provost marshal," Ludenhof said with a dangerous spark of impatience.

"Of course, my lord. But I think that it bears repeating. At the moment we have full granaries. We also have adequate supplies of hay, blackpowder, hemp, canvas, edged and pole weapons, cured wood and everything else we need. We have twelve

great cannon from Nuln, good maps and perfect campaigning weather. What we don't have is enough men."

Steckler paused, letting this sink in as he looked around the table.

"If estimates are to be believed," he continued, turning a sceptical eye towards Viksberg, "we are facing a force of perhaps fifty thousand beastmen, each one created by the Dark Gods for no other reason than our destruction. Even if we don't believe those estimates, we know what these creatures are capable of against a man, and we know that we are outnumbered."

"We are always outnumbered by the foul things," one of the regimental colonels cut in. "That doesn't matter. We have the discipline and technology to deal with them. With Sigmar's help, we will prevail."

There was a chorus of assent from around the council chamber, and the cups bounced on the table as the man's brother officers banged the table in applause. Steckler waited for the noise to die down before he continued.

"I'm sure that General Count von Brechthold thought the same. Right up until the point where he and his entire army were devoured."

It was Ludenhof who broke the ensuing silence.

"Well, Steckler?" he demanded. "What are you doing about it?"

"Militias have already been raised in all of our major towns, and of course in Hergig itself. We have also sent word out through our couriers to the free companies, although I don't hold much hope in that direction. By the time the mercenaries arrive, things are likely to have been settled one way or another. There is also one more possibility, as your lordship knows."

"Out with it, man."

"Although we haven't always seen eye-to-eye with our neighbours they do share a border with us, and it would be in their interests as well as our own to deal with this situation. They have sizeable state forces, and deep purses. If we could prevail upon them to send us some troops..."

"They would come, that's for sure. But I doubt if they'd leave. What do you think, Ganamedes?"

Ganamedes, who had been lost in his own private thoughts, was startled enough to answer abruptly.

"I think that the beasts are the enemy of all mankind. The threat they pose to us, to all of us, is far more important than the petty squabbles of princes."

Ludenhof snorted.

"Be thankful I know the value of honest advisors," he said. "But petty or not, I have no intention of letting that bastard from Ostland station his troops on my land. Not the one from Middenland either."

"Even so," Steckler risked pressing the point, "we are dangerously lacking in manpower. Not only that, but the harvest is only a couple of months away. Then we'll be faced with the choice between keeping the population under arms and gathering the year's wheat."

Ludenhof looked out of the windows. Across the gabled roofs of his city and beyond the ordered green squares of the farms beyond, the low line of the forest lay



in the distance. It sidled across the horizon like some great animal getting ready to pounce.

“Your advice is good, but the political situation prevents me from taking it.” He nodded to Steckler, who sat down. “Now, Ganamedes. What news of the enemy?”

The scholar tapped the bowl of his ivory pipe on the table to hide his unease. It wasn't what he could tell his baron that so troubled him. It was what he couldn't tell him. The guilt that had begun to gnaw into him made him angry as well as nervous. It wasn't fair. When all was said and done, a man had a right to save his own skin.

“The beasts are numbered between ten and fifty thousand, depending on the source. Captain Freimann of the long rifles estimates that we are facing perhaps twenty thousand, although he only made that estimate at my insistence.”

“What do you mean, ‘only at your insistence’?” the baron asked.

“I mean that he and his men have been skirmishing with such creatures for long enough to know how well they can hide themselves. To be honest, I am more concerned about reports of how they are behaving. There have been hardly any of the attacks on smaller settlements that we would have expected.”

“Then how can you have any information about how they fight?” one of the officers asked.

“Not how they fight. How they are organised. They should have dispersed by now, one herd attacking this village, another that town.”

“You seem almost to regret their lack of murderous spirit.” Ludenhof raised an eyebrow.

“I do,” Ganamedes told him. “Had they split up, we could have dealt with them one herd at a time. As it is...” He trailed off as the door opened and a messenger entered. He looked nervously around the room before handing the baron a scroll.

“Well, gentlemen,” Ludenhof said at length. “It seems that we will soon see exactly how many of the enemy there are. According to this, they will be outside the city walls within two days. Return to your regiments, make sure your men are assembled, armed and sober, and await further instructions. And remember, gentlemen. Sigmar is with us. We will prevail.”

For a moment Ganamedes almost believed. But of course, there could never be a real victory. He knew that now, even if nobody else did.

It took Erikson almost a day to bribe, bully and bluff his way into the provost marshal's presence. He found him in the catacomb of rooms that lay beneath the baron's palace, fighting to bring order to a lamplit chaos of messengers and applicants and stores being brought in or sent out.

“Herr Steckler.” Erikson recognised him by the authoritative boom of his voice as much as by his marshal's baton. “Provost marshal. I am here at your service.”

Steckler, who had been sweating over a pile of requisition slips, looked up, his face set in the fierce expression of a man who does not want to be disturbed.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Free Captain Erikson,” Erikson told him. “Late of Praag, Bretonnia and Nuln. Me and my company heard that we might be of service.”

The scowl on Steckler's face vanished.

“I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said, and shook Erikson’s hand. Although his hand was plump his grip was hard. “How many men do you bring with you?”

“One hundred and sixty,” Erikson exaggerated politely. “All fit, healthy and ready for battle.”

“Only a hundred and sixty,” Steckler said, disappointed. “And how are they trained? I have heard good things about these pikes you free companies are so fond of.”

“My former company had pikes,” Erikson told him, “but I found them to be unwieldy on the turn. Unless you have blocks of at least five hundred, they leave you vulnerable on the flanks and to the rear.”

“Yes, I suppose they would do,” Steckler agreed, his gaze slipping past Erikson to a chain of men who were throwing small barrels from hand to hand. “No, don’t throw them to each other, you damned fools!” he bellowed. “Pass them! Do you want to blow us all up?”

“So I take it that you will need our services?” Erikson asked. “It is just that the men are eager to take their new quarters and resume training. We are also road-weary.”

“But what did you say they... what? What is it now?”

The provost marshal turned as a messenger rushed up the hallway.

“It’s the baron, sir. He wants to know if the black-powder has been issued yet, and exactly how much we have in reserve.”

“I will come and see him myself,” Steckler decided. “As for you, captain, one hundred and sixty men are worth rations as available, ten crowns a month each, and their share of any and all booty.”

“Ah, but I don’t suppose that there will be any booty against the force we are facing,” Erikson said.

“I’m not going to argue,” Steckler told him, that impatience resurfacing. “Do you want the commission or not?”

“I do.” Erikson clicked his heels and bowed.

“Berndt. Berndt! Give him a free company contract for a hundred and sixty men at arms. Then give him a week’s rations, and quarter them in Fish Market Square. Captain, I will send somebody to inspect your company in the morning. We will have need of it soon.”

Erikson bowed again as Steckler marched off, pursued by a gaggle of assistants and messengers that followed him like chicks after a mother hen.

“You’d better follow me,” a voice said. Erikson, who had been lost in calculations of what might happen when his men were inspected, looked down to find a small, rounded man in a sackcloth robe.

“Why would I follow you?” Erikson asked him, and the man rolled his eyes theatrically.

“Didn’t you hear the provost marshal? I am to sign you up. Although why anybody would want to sign up after what happened to von Brechthold’s army, I have no idea.”

“No,” Erikson said, “I suppose you don’t.”

After completing the formalities Erikson took his contract, the company's ration charter and the proclamation granting him the freedom of the Fish Market Square.

"We need weapons, too," he told the clerk.

"I wasn't told to issue weapons," he complained.

"Yes you were. You were told to provision us. Weapons are provisions."

"No, no that's not... oh," the clerk paused as Erikson shook his hand and pressed a coin into it. The clerk turned it over just enough to see the flash of silver before continuing.

"Now that you mention it, of course weapons are provisions. Here, take this chit to the armoury. They will give you something in that line, although I don't know what they have left. There is a war on, you know."

"Yes," Erikson agreed happily. "There is."

Then he left to find his men, who awaited him at the gaol.

They were not a sight to inspire confidence in a commander who was about to have his company inspected. They lay slouched around the yard, stooped with either fatigue, starvation or instinctive idleness.

Erikson fought back the instinct to bark them into attention. Instead he found the old man who had claimed to have once been a halberdier sergeant. He found him leaning against a wall. He was perhaps fifty, Erikson judged, and he had a face that seemed to have been lined with every hard year he had lived. The wrinkles were like the rings of a fallen oak, although he wasn't fallen. Not yet.

His hair was grey but still thick, an inexpertly cut mane that stuck out in all directions, and his tunic was cut off at the sleeves to reveal sinewy forearms which were darkened with old tattoos. Erikson recognised none of them, but he had seen a thousand like them over the years. They were glorious tangles of weapons, animals, banners. Regimental numbers where names should have been.

"Is it true that you were a sergeant in the regiments?" Erikson asked him.

"Aye, it's true," the old man replied, and regarded his new captain with all the respect one would accord a dog begging for food.

"In that case," Erikson told him, his voice as soft as his eyes were hard, "you'll know that you should be standing to attention when an officer addresses you."

The yard around them fell silent as the assembled convicts, who had been surreptitiously watching Erikson ever since he had returned, stared at the scene.

"Officers," the old man turned the word into a sneer, "they are a curse on all of us."

Erikson gazed at him, his yellow eyes hard as topaz. The old man didn't flinch.

Good.

"No," he said at last. "Indiscipline is a curse on all of us. Ever seen a square break? Ever seen a formation have its flank turned, or its standard abandoned, or disintegrate in panic before a charge?"

"Yes," the old man replied simply.

"Then you'll know that that's bad enough when you're fighting men." Erikson lowered his voice and leaned forwards conspiratorially. "But imagine how it will be if we break before those things. They will devour us. All of us."

For the first time the old man looked away. He spat onto the cobbles and sighed.

“You may have a point,” he allowed.

“Then help me to pull this rabble together into something with a chance of surviving on the battlefield. We will stand together or we will die alone. You were a soldier. A sergeant. You must know that.”

“I do indeed, captain,” the old man replied. His voice was heavy with sarcasm, and the salute he gave when pushing himself off the wall was sloppy enough to be an insult. Erikson didn’t mind. He returned it with a click of his heels and a perfectly executed thump to his own chest which could have come straight from a military manual.

“Glad to hear it, sergeant,” he said, his voice once more loud enough to echo. “You’ll keep your old rank of course. What’s your name?”

“Alter, captain,” he replied, forgetting to inject a note of sarcasm into his voice this time.

“Very well, Sergeant Alter,” Erikson said, voice booming. “Fall the men into six ranks, if you would be so kind.”

And in that moment it seemed that about twenty years rolled off the slopes of Alter’s shoulders and evaporated from the cynical depths of his eyes. When he went to address his comrades it was with the aggressive, game-cock confidence of the born NCO.

Erikson watched him work with a mixture of approval and relief. He heckled and cajoled and persuaded the men into the beginnings of their first formation, and he did it with consummate skill, knowing who to encourage and who to coerce. One little knot of men in particular seemed unwilling to join the formation.

“You can play at bloody soldiers if you want to,” said their leader. “All I want is out.”

Alter’s range of expressions wouldn’t have shamed a pantomime. Disbelief turned to horror which just as rapidly turned to rage. He leant forwards with the barely controlled aggression of a fighting dog on a leash, strong yellow teeth bared as he stepped so close to his recalcitrant recruit that the man was forced to take a step backwards, then another. He stopped when he was pressed up to the wall.

“Listen carefully,” Alter told him, although the volume was such that only a deaf man could have misheard. “I want you in the front rank, facing the gate and standing in whatever approximation to attention you can manage. If you don’t I will tear off your head. I will piss down your neck. And I will enjoy doing it.”

The man swallowed nervously and looked at his companions for encouragement. There was none to be had. They were already sidling away towards the ragged formation that was taking shape almost as though they had been meaning to all along.

“Why aren’t you moving?” Alter’s voice was so high-pitched that it was almost a scream. “Go. Go, go, go.”

Whether it was because of the desertion of his comrades or the insane glitter in his persecutor’s eyes, the man went. Alter hurried along until he broke into a run. By then those who weren’t already standing in one of the lines were trying to find their positions. Nobody wanted to be the next to be chased around the yard.

It took another five minutes, and as Erikson watched he remembered an old bow maker who had plied his trade in some other war. He had spent his days patiently working the knots out of dried sinews so that he could separate the threads and then weave them back into a whole. Alter, it seemed, had a similar skill, and by the time he had finished the rabble of convicts had been transformed into something that could loosely be described as six ranks.

“Thank you, sergeant,” he said as Alter evened out the last two lines. In time he would choose section leaders for each group of ten, but for now all he wanted was to be able to keep them in one group.

“A good beginning, gentlemen,” he told them, and he meant it. Already some were starting to look like soldiers. Not many, it was true, but it was a start. “Today we will go to find our new quarters. Does anybody know where Fish Market Square is?”

“I do, captain,” an enthusiastic voice rang out, and Erikson wasn’t surprised to see the red-headed youngster who had been so keen to fight yesterday.

“What’s your name, soldier?” Erikson asked him, and the lad’s pigeon chest swelled with pride at being addressed thus.

“It’s Randolph, captain, although everybody calls me Dolf. And I can lead you to Fish Market Square, no problem.”

“Good man,” Erikson told him. “Secondly, is anybody hungry?”

This time there was a much more enthusiastic chorus, and Erikson grinned.

“Then we will march first to the armoury then to the store house, then to our quarters. Then we will eat. And when I say march, I mean march. How’s that done, Sergeant Alter?”

“By the left, captain,” Alter bellowed.

“Instruct them, if you would be so kind.”

And so, in the gloomy confines of their prison yard, Sergeant Alter put the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig through its first drill.

## Chapter Five

They had been assembled in a forest of tall birches. It was a good place. The trees towered up in cathedral columns into the high canopy above, and the ground between the mighty trunks was relatively free of undergrowth. Beams of dappled sunlight played across the detritus which lay on the ground. It flitted over the creatures which had assembled below as tirelessly as the swarms of buzzing flies which accompanied them.

Despite the heat of the summer it remained cool in this shadowed place, and Gulkroth was pleased. The flesh he had devoured had filled him out and thickened his fur to an unseasonable bulk, and he often found himself panting, long red tongue rolled out between the sharpness of his fangs.

But if he had grown in size he had also grown in other, more disturbing ways. The red of his eyes now glowed even in the light of the sun, and the glorious, liquid stink of his musk was enough to overwhelm even the proudest of his kind.

A hundred grovelled before him now, horns lowered in supplication and tails curling up between their goat legs. Behind them beasts of a purer form waited. These had none of the cursed taint of humanity about them. They were four-legged and thick-snouted. Vicious horns curled extravagantly from the thick bones of their skulls, and they bore tusks even bigger than those carried by the sweet-fleshed but vicious-natured boars which also inhabited the forest.

What was striking about the creatures was not their wholesome animal appearance. It was the contraptions into which they had been harnessed.

There was something about them which filled Gulkroth with an instinctive, unreasoning rage. A growl rose unbidden within the depths of his throat as he studied them, and the creatures which grovelled before him pressed themselves even lower down into the dirt of the forest floor.

Their lord calmed himself, although his feeling of disgust remained. It pained him to see the wild wood of the forest sawn and sectioned into ordered construction. It pained him even more to see the wheels. Of all of man's devices this was one of the most repellent in its precision and symmetry.

And yet they are useful, Gulkroth thought, forcing himself to reason with the same vicious persistence with which a man will flog an exhausted horse. If only such noble beasts were not beholden to them.

He prowled over to where one of the quadrupeds stood between the traces of its chariot. It had a vicious glint to its eye and the long, chipped horns of an animal that has killed often and well. Although it weighed perhaps half a ton it whimpered in terror at Gulkroth's approach.

The lord looked at it, and in that moment the animal fell calm, mesmerised by his awful presence. Gulkroth turned back to look at the two-legged beasts who cowered before their mounts.

“Who thought to build these things?” he asked, the snarl of his voice shredding through the last of their composure. None answered although slowly, like fleas leaving a corpse, the herd sidled away to abandon one of their brothers. Soon he was alone in a circle of isolation.

Gulkroth waited for the miserable creature to raise its head. The proud curls of its horns and the bovine bulges of its muscle were in sharp contrast to its eyes. They darted hither and thither, as panicked as rats in a cage.

Then it hit Gulkroth. With an urge that came as suddenly as a flash of summer lightning he despised the taint of humanity in this creature as much as he despised it in himself. With a bellow of animal rage he sprang forwards and, disdainful of the device of his axe, he seized the creature’s horns and lifted it from the ground.

It struggled for its survival, all deference gone as it gouged at its lord with sharp hooves. Gulkroth ignored its pathetic attack as he twisted the head back from the dangling body and took a deep, tearing bite out of its neck. His teeth sheared through muscle and bone, artery and cartilage, and even as its black blood spurted out over its lord’s face the creature’s head was torn from its still-struggling body.

Gulkroth licked the blood from his muzzle and turned back to his victim’s cowering brethren.

“I have seen these things before,” he growled. “Keep them well maintained. When the time comes, I will hurl you into the enemy and you will smash him. Then we shall all feast on meat even sweeter than that of our own kind. Do you understand?”

There was an immediate yapping chorus of assent and Gulkroth, enjoying the taste of their leader’s blood even as he regretted giving in to the impulse to kill him, turned back to the sprawling anthill of the main encampment.

It was incredible that the humans, flat-faced and weak though they were, hadn’t been able to smell their approach. Their city lay less than two days’ march to the west, and it seemed inconceivable that they couldn’t yet taste the glorious stench of his mighty herd.

It was a miasma born of stale musk and suppurating wounds and rotten meat and trampled dung. It greased the air for miles around, and was why the only animals that approached were the flies. Swarms of them, fat and satiated, buzzed around the camp in a constant cloud. They crawled over everything, paying homage to the blood in which the herd had bathed. They even crawled over Gulkroth, although those which lingered had a tendency to swell up and die, falling from his hide like rotten figs.

The lord inhaled the heady perfume as he prowled around his herd. The smells of life and the smells of death mingled together within the caverns of his nostrils, and he revelled in the joy of existence. To fight. To kill. To dominate.

Life!

He passed Viles and his brothers, horse-bodied and as swift as the northern wind. He had used them to find this place, and he would use them tomorrow to scout forwards. His mouth watered at the thought of all the humans who awaited him, plump and juicy behind their walls. What a slaughter it would be, he thought, and

bared his fangs in a grimace of pleasure that sent a quiver of unease running through even his own guards.

“My lord.” The voice was as hoarse as winter winds through withered trees.

Gulkroth turned and looked down to see Ruhrkar. He was bent almost double, and the patches of fur that remained on his wrinkled hide were as white as bone. Insects buzzed around the fluid which wept from his eyes, and when he spoke he revealed fangs that were little more than rotting stumps.

Only his horns gave any hint of what he once might have been. They had grown grotesque with time, and now the bulk of them weighed his aged head down so that he walked with a permanent stoop.

It was unusual for any of the herd to reach such an age. In the normal course of things such a weakling, even if he survived the rigours of the forest, would have long since been devoured by younger, stronger members of his herd.

But Ruhrkar was not normal.

Far from it.

“Ruhrkar.” Gulkroth acknowledged the withered old creature, who returned his gaze with rheumy eyes. He was one of the few creatures left that could still meet his eyes, but Gulkroth didn’t mind. It was resignation he saw in old Ruhrkar’s eyes, not defiance.

“My lord, I have grave news.”

Gulkroth waited. His visions, even since he had touched the stone, had never been the match of Ruhrkar’s. That was another reason the ancient was still alive.

“Tomorrow is the wrong time for battle. We must wait for the rising of the Chaos Moon. We are children of Khorne. The time for us to do battle is at the time of the holy slaughter, when the Chaos Moon bathes the land green and our power is at its strongest. Such is the way it has always been.”

Gulkroth regarded the ancient shaman. If there had been the slightest scent of fear or defiance about him then Gulkroth would have killed him, sorcerer or no. But there was nothing. Nothing but the calm disinterest of a creature which no longer feels attached to this world.

“Have you seen it?” he asked. “Have you seen our defeat?”

“No,” Ruhrkar answered with a shrug. “But that doesn’t matter. We are not supposed to fight tomorrow.”

Gulkroth thought about the ten thousand beasts he had hidden amongst these trees. Each one of them was a wild thing, born to be free. They were bound together with nothing but a hunger for destruction, and the strength of his will. Although none realised it, the hold he had over them was as fragile as the gossamer threads which drifted in the canopy above.

“We cannot delay,” he decided, then took a step forwards so that the shaman’s scrawny throat was just a claw-reach away. “If you tell anybody what you have told me, I will have you killed one piece at a time.”

Ruhrkar shrugged.

“It is as it should be,” he said, turned the bony column of his back and ambled away. Gulkroth was considering snapping the withered creature in two when, from the east, there came a shriek. The cry was sharp enough to cut through the hubbub of



the packed forest, and it was followed by a deep-throated bellow that could almost have been laughter.

Gulkroth's nostrils twitched, disturbing the flies that had been crawling over them, then grunted with satisfaction. Even through the stink of the camp, he recognised the scent of the newcomers. It was as clear as the avalanche rumble of their voices and the screams of their victims.

So, they were here. Something that might once have been called fear lifted the fur on the back of Gulkroth's neck, and he unconsciously widened his shoulders and expanded his chest as he turned towards the newcomers. It was time to teach them who their new lord was.

Hefting his axe he stalked eagerly towards them, his blood already aflame with the instinct to dominate.

"Is this a joke?" Viksberg asked, holding a handkerchief to his nose.

"I don't know what you mean," Erikson told him, although he did. In the last two days they had worked hard, but however convincingly the company stood to attention there was no mistaking them for a regiment.

No regiment would have tolerated such a mismatch of ragged clothes, or allowed such bony and malnourished men to join. Nor would it have tolerated the bizarre mixture of weapons with which the men were armed. They seemed more like the contents of an eccentric's collection than of an arsenal. Halberds, spears, axes, cutlasses, even hunting bows were present amongst the ranks.

Viksberg regarded them suspiciously. At first he had been relieved to have been assigned to the provost marshal's staff rather than to a field command, but every time he met his new commander his paranoia grew. Steckler knew something, he was sure of it. The suspicion was always there, clear as day within his little piggy peasant's eyes.

As Viksberg inspected the ragged men before him, the idea that this was some vast practical joke was growing.

"You," he said and pointed to a man with ragged blond hair and twinkling blue eyes. "What's your name?"

"Porter, your lordship. My mother always liked the name, she told me, ever since she was a little girl. And what with my father being such a kind-hearted man he agreed to let her call me that. Decent of her, don't you think, your honour?"

Viksberg glared at the man, who smiled cheerfully back.

"What is that in your belt?"

"A ladle, your lordship," the man said as though this was the most natural thing in the world.

"This man is the company cook, colonel," Erikson explained, and contrived to move Viksberg along the line. The next man loomed over both of them. The double-handed sword which rested over his shoulder had a blade as big as a guillotine's.

"And who are you?" Viksberg asked.

"Who?" the man asked.

"You," Viksberg snapped. "Who are you?"

"Brandt. I'm his mate."

“That’s me he’s talking about, your worship,” Porter explained helpfully. “He helps me with the cooking. Chopping things up and whatnot.”

“Yes, thank you, Porter,” Erikson told him, and all but pushed Viksberg further down the line. He next stopped in front of the solid figure of Gunter, who had the shaved head and dark robes of a warrior priest. He had the stern, judgemental gaze of one, too, and Viksberg tried not to quail beneath it.

“This is Gunter,” Erikson said proudly. “He was a Sigmarite priest before he joined up.”

Viksberg muttered something, uncorked his silver flask and drank deeply. He was trying not to think about the sisters who had died in the fire as he avoided Gunter’s steady gaze and walked quickly down the line.

“And this,” Erikson said, catching him up, “is our drummer. Every regiment needs a musician, don’t you agree?” he asked with forced bonhomie.

But Viksberg suddenly seemed beyond speech. The flask fell from his fingers to ring out on the cobbles, and his mouth gaped open in a perfect circle of shock.

Dolf, scrawnier than usual behind the fat tube of his drum, looked equally horrified. This was the arsonist, of that he had no doubt. The arsonist who had framed him.

“Are you all right, colonel?” Erikson asked, reaching out to touch Viksberg’s shoulder. The man jumped as if he’d been shot and swivelled around, a look of terror in his eyes. Then he swallowed, rubbed his hands on the front of his tunic and stooped to pick up his flask. It had gurgled empty on the cobbles and he pocketed it absent-mindedly.

“This one,” he finally managed to say. “He should be in gaol.”

Erikson felt his stomach drop.

“Why do you think I should be in gaol?” Dolf asked, his voice as smooth as a stiletto slipping through silk. “Have we met before?”

Viksberg turned back to him, realising the trap that he was walking into. Although the flames of that terrible night had burned his scapegoat’s face into his memory, he could hardly admit to knowing him.

“Don’t be so impudent,” he blustered, horrified at how much he had given away. “You look like a villain, that is all.”

“Do I?” Dolf asked coldly.

Viksberg’s mouth worked, but he had had enough. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the yard.

“So do we pass muster?” Erikson asked, hurrying after him.

“Yes,” Viksberg choked as he made his escape. “Why not?”

Erikson watched him go, disappearing out through the entrance to the square they had been assigned to. Then, with a sigh of relief, he turned back to the men.

“Porter, as soon as we fall out, start cooking lunch. That kind of near miss always gives me an appetite. And Dolf. Let’s me and you have a chat. The rest of you, well done. We are now on the muster of Baron Ludenhof. Sergeant, fall them out.”

Alter did so, and as the men dispersed around the yard Erikson filled his pipe and considered his good fortune. Today had been the final hurdle. Now all he had to do

was to protect his flock until he could shepherd it out to the slaughterhouse of the battlefield.

It had taken Viksberg a lot of time and a lot of gold to track down the porters from the hospital. They hadn't wanted to be found. The flames of the hospital were still bright in their memories. They danced through their nightmares, along with visions of the hangman's noose. The last thing they wanted was to be seen with the mad man who had put them in such a hellish position.

But he had wanted to see them and so, in amongst the ebb and flow of the city, Viksberg had finally found their lair.

"Can't fight," a voice said as he banged on the door of their hovel. Since the hospital had burned down the porters had been left to fend for themselves; not an easy task in a city as crowded as Hergig.

"The sisters can't spare us," another voice added.

Viksberg, his nerves frayed by the expectation of the coming battle and pickled by the day's gin, kicked the door open with a savage snarl. The two porters sprang to their feet, clutching at their staffs.

"No need for that," Viksberg told them as he let himself into the stink of their room. The only furniture consisted of a table, a pair of chairs, a bunk bed and a slop bucket that appeared to be almost full. Even so there was barely room for all three of them.

"I've never seen you before in my life," one of the porters said.

"Nor have I," the other agreed.

Viksberg regarded them with undisguised contempt. Then he popped his head back out of the door to see that nobody had followed him, and closed it with a squeak of rusting hinges.

"We have a problem," he said. "It seems that the arsonist responsible for the fire at the hospital has been released from gaol."

"What fire?" asked one of the porters.

"What hospital?" asked the other.

If they had been smaller men Viksberg would have struck them. As it was he just pinched the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. Why oh why had he agreed to accompany that idiot von Brechthold to battle? Everything had been going wrong ever since.

"Listen, morons," he said. "If he has been released, it could be because he has convinced somebody."

"Who?" asked one of the porters.

"Never mind that," Viksberg told him. "Just somebody is all. That's why you have to get rid of him before he can do any more convincing."

"Get rid of him?"

Viksberg nodded.

"You'll have to be careful. He's in some sort of ragbag of a militia, Sigmar curse them. So now it's down to you."

"Why us?" one of the men asked.

"And not," the other clarified, "you?"

“Because people know me.” Viksberg, who had expected the question, was ready with the answer. “And because if we don’t silence him we’re all for the chop.”

“Can’t be done,” was the immediate reply.

“Not if he’s in a militia. Got no individuality, those mugs.”

“Can’t do anything without help from their mates.”

“That’s right.”

“For Sigmar’s sake,” said Viksberg. “Just tell me what you want for doing the job so I can get out of this shithole.”

One man pursed his lips. The other shook his head.

“We’ll need gold,” said one.

“And we’ll need a gun,” said the other.

Viksberg snorted with laughter.

“A gun? You’d blow your own heads off.”

“Not us,” one said smugly.

“Dad was a hunter,” the other explained. “Taught us how to shoot as soon as we could walk.”

“Then why aren’t you in the long rifles?” Viksberg asked.

“Didn’t fancy the hours,” both men said, this time in perfect unison.

“Very well,” Viksberg decided. “I’ll bring you what you need. But it has to be done quickly. The longer we leave it, the more danger we’re in.”

“Right you are, chief,” said one.

“Leave it to us,” said the other.

With a final glance around the shack Viksberg hurried off to collect their tools.

## Chapter Six

In the grey chill of predawn the men rolled out of their blankets and formed ranks on the dew-slicked cobbles of their square. Despite the fact that the birds had barely begun to sing, the city all around them was alive with noise and movement. As the men shivered and thought wistfully of their bedrolls they could hear the marching feet and bellowed orders which echoed through Hergig, and the beating of drums and the blowing of trumpets.

Today, the baron's army was going to meet the enemy in the fields beyond. Today they were going to war.

Erikson had dressed in his finery, his hat adorned with a blizzard of dyed feathers and his breastplate gleaming with a deep polish. Sergeant Alter, holding his halberd with an effortless panache, stood beside the captain and listened approvingly as he gave Porter and Gunter, the company's newly appointed corporals, their instructions.

"Remember," Erikson told them. "Our job is to keep the formation in the right shape. To keep the ranks in line and the files tight. In time we'll practise other manoeuvres, but for today all we have to do is make sure that we keep our square tight, tight, tight."

"Reminds me of a girl I knew once," Porter said and licked his lips.

His comrades regarded him with expressions which ranged from amusement to contempt.

"She was a stickler for detail too."

"This is no damned detail," Alter told him. "The formation breaks, and we're finished. All of us. I've seen it happen before. Once men start running, they're easy meat."

"But if the formation holds," Erikson promised him, "we will have a good chance of coming out of this in one piece. And for today that's all I want. No charges. No glory. No heroics. Just survival."

"Sounds good to me, boss," Porter told him.

"Address the officer by his proper rank," Alter told him.

"Captain it is," Porter said with a gracious bow.

"What you say makes sense," Gunter said with the air of a man who had obviously been thinking. "But only so far. Let us not forget that we are here to smite the enemy. To clean him from our lands as Sigmar himself commanded us to do."

His mild tone was belied by the hard edge of fanaticism. It shone in his eyes even in the gloom of the courtyard. Erikson and Alter exchanged a look.

"Trust me," Erikson said, turning back to Gunter. "We'll have plenty of chance to do that, and probably sooner than any of us would want."

As if summoned by his words one of Ludenhof's heralds arrived. He wore a breastplate and greaves over the gilded velvet of his uniform, and instead of the placid contentment which usually characterised the expression of the average palace servant, his features were drawn with tension.

"Captain Erikson?" he asked, his voice hoarse with anxiety. "It's time for your company to go. Do you want me to show you the way to the gate?"

"Why not?" Erikson smiled easily and grasped him by one shoulder. "And don't look so worried. By tonight we'll be celebrating the victory."

The herald looked at him, his eyes wide, and swallowed. For the first time Erikson noticed the grey bags of fatigue that lay beneath his eyes, and the way that his left cheek twitched. He frowned and wondered if using the man as a guide was such a good idea. Fear was as contagious as any plague. Fortunately, so was courage.

As Sergeant Alter and the two corporals hurried back to their sections, Erikson turned to address the company.

"Gentlemen," he told them. "Today we will be united by our first battle. It will be frightening. It will be confusing. It will be bloody. But that is not your concern. Your only worry is to make sure that we hold our formation. If we do, we will come through this together. Are you with me?"

With their cries still echoing in the yard Erikson turned to Dolf, his skinny frame dwarfed by the drum he wore slung across his shoulder, and nodded. The drumbeat rolled out eagerly, and as he called out the order to march Erikson could hear in it the old hypnotic pulse that he had followed across countless battlefields over the years.

As he straightened his back and marched forwards it occurred to him that the drumbeat never really stopped. It was always there in the beating of the blood in his veins and the throbbing of the heart in his chest, an endless, irresistible call to march from one blood-soaked battlefield to the next.

Well, no more, he decided. This is my last war. After this I am retiring.

But even as he told himself this he could feel the energy that flooded through him and the anticipation of the savage joy to come, and he knew it to be the lie that it was.

High on the gatehouse walls Ganamedes watched as the vast, living beast of his baron's army uncoiled itself and streamed out from the cramped confines of Hergig.

From this height it was possible to see the contrast between the barely controlled chaos which choked the streets of the city and the sharp-edged units which emerged from the gates to deploy into the wide open spaces below. Ganamedes, his eyes bloodshot after another night spent sweating with guilt, watched the army emerge and tried to find solace in the splendid geometries of its ranks.

As always, the first through the gate had been the knights. In this great beast of an army the knights were the claws, hard and sharp and brittle. They were born to their role, and they moved within their armour as easily as beetles within their shells. The steeds which bore them had been bred for battle too, and despite the weight of steel they carried the warhorses trotted along with an easy grace.

Ganamedes watched the green silk banner of the first regiment to emerge. The ghost of a smile passed across his face as he remembered the arguments there had been over precedence, and the baron's impatience with his followers. Eventually he

had ordered them to draw straws, and the great lords had done so as suspiciously as peasants squabbling over a windfall of apples.

By the time the knightly regiments had emerged, the old man's smile had gone. He watched as they spread out, using the space the fields afforded them to deploy into wide ranks. It was the best way of using these great open spaces, as it would give as many of them as possible the room to use their lances. The mighty spears were tipped with ribbons of brightly coloured cloth which fluttered in the breeze, the decorations lending a festive air to their murderous purpose.

As the knights manoeuvred into position the state troopers were already marching out of the city. If the knights were the army's claws, the troopers were its muscle, its hide and its sinew. What they lacked in individual killing power they made up for in sheer mass, and as they passed beneath him Ganamedes could feel the city's stones vibrating beneath his feet as if in sympathy for its sons who now marched to war.

By the time the last of the state regiments had emerged the sun had risen, cresting the hills in the east and casting the shadow of the city walls far out into the plain beyond. It was a clear blue summer's day, and the tips of countless spears and halberds glittered like a field of stars above men who were still in shadow. Ganamedes watched them and blessed the city founders who had ensured that dawn light would follow the defenders out of the main gate.

Not that he thought it would do them much good.

He knew too much.

He cast his eyes down and saw the regiments who were following the state troopers out. They were smaller, and their uniforms were little more than coloured rags tied around arms and heads. These were the militias. Some of them were almost as impressive as the regiments they would be attached to. A lot of the guilds had their own militias, like the smiths who he saw armed with hammers and covered with patchwork armour, and who practised their drill on feast days.

Then there were the other militias. The dregs and scrapings of Hergig and the lands beyond. They varied in size from a score to a hundred and they didn't so much march as tag along behind the main army. Only one of them seemed of any use.

Ganamedes watched the hundred or so men of Erikson's command as they marched behind the beat of their drum. Despite the ragged condition of their garb, and the bizarre collection of their weapons, they kept step with each other and had an almost military bearing.

And then, finally, came the artillery. They rattled along on sturdy carriages which were drawn by stocky little ponies. The gunners themselves clustered around the mighty weapons like chicks around the mother hen. Some walked, others rode the ponies and more sat atop the wagons that creaked beneath the weight of powder and shot.

Empty braziers and bundles of fuel swung from the sides of these wagons, and the mismatched vehicles and grizzled gunners made the artillery chain look more like a merchant's caravan than the lethal engine of war that it was. Ganamedes wondered vaguely what part of this beast of an army the collection of cannon and mortars might be. Teeth, he decided. Or perhaps the roar.

The last of the wagons emerged from the city. A hurried order rang out and the gates swung closed. Ganamedes watched the squares and rectangles of men spread

out across the plain. There was nothing to interfere with the calculated geometries of their formations in that wide open space and they were laid out just as neatly as plans on a tactician's slate.

The sun cleared the city walls and set the army aglow. The blazing steel made Ganamedes' bloodshot eyes water so much that the banners which fluttered above the army became so many multicoloured blurs. If only he hadn't been cursed with the knowledge that had kept him awake for so many long and lonely nights. Then, perhaps, he might be able to believe in victory. As the first distant scouts sounded the alarm Ganamedes wiped his eyes and looked to the west.

Then he wiped his eyes again. Beneath the panicked swarms of birds that rose up before it, the dark, distant line of the forest seemed to be moving forwards. Ganamedes squinted at the advancing tide, and he heard a roar as if from some distant ocean.

The stone beneath his feet seemed suddenly less solid and the ranks of the army beyond seemed like no more than chaff before the wind.

The beasts had come.

"Drum the halt, Dolf," Erikson told the youngster. He tried not to wince as the marching company stumbled to a ragged stop just beyond the city walls. A chorus of curses and complaints rang out as men were jostled or pushed back into place by their comrades, and their section leaders began to harangue them back into formation. Erikson pretended not to notice the confusion as a herald cantered up, pulled his horse around and sprang from the saddle.

"The Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig?" he asked, and cast a doubtful eye over the mismatched weapons that were waving around above the company's heaving ranks.

"That is indeed our name," Erikson said, raising his voice above Porter's sudden stream of curses.

"Yes," the herald said vaguely. He gazed at the company with horrified fascination before tearing his eyes away and delivering his message. "The baron commands you to move to a position equidistant between Jung's Halberdiers and the Most Noble Company of Greatswords. If you would follow me I will act as your guide."

"In the front line?" Erikson asked, suddenly glad of the commotion which was distracting most of the men from the conversation. "This is a militia regiment, not a phalanx. Are you sure we're to go in the front line?"

The herald took another glance at the company and shrugged sympathetically.

"Those are your orders," he said. "If you wish to be relieved of your position in the line..."

"No, of course not," Erikson said hurriedly. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Very well, if you would follow me then. Double step, if you can manage it."

Erikson frowned. Forward of the line was a position for one of the great bastion regiments, a bristle of pikemen or the shield wall of a sword company. The only reason that a militia would be sent forwards would be if things were truly desperate.



He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and smiled as brightly as the rising sun.

“Dolf,” he commanded, looking down into the trusting eyes of his drummer. “Sound the advance.”

The drumbeat started again, and Sergeant Alter’s voice rang out above it, calling the right, left, right of the march. They had not had time to practise double time any more than they had had time to practise much else, but at least they could march with something approaching a military manner. Between them Erikson and Alter had taught the men that much.

Even so, as they passed through the neatly drawn ranks of the state regiments Erikson couldn’t help feeling something approaching embarrassment at the state of his ragged company. The feeling was heightened when they staggered to another halt between the halberdiers on one side and the greatswords on the other.

“Don’t they look fantastic, captain?” Dolf said, drumsticks idle in his hands as the ranks behind him gradually shoved and kicked themselves into a square. “I always wanted to be in a state regiment, ever since I can remember. One of the sisters told me that my father was a state trooper, although I never knew him.”

Erikson smiled at the wistful tone of his voice, and clapped him on the shoulder. The youngster looked up at him with such transparent hero-worship that it looked as if he wished he had a tail to wag.

“You never know.” Erikson winked at him. “Carry on the way you’re going and you could end up commanding one.”

Dolf looked sceptically at his captain then back to the block of greatswords who stood beside them. The men were barrel-chested and thick-armed from a lifetime of training, and they carried the great double-handed swords with an easy grace. Their armour was burnished by the sunlight, and the velvet and lace beneath the metal was of the very best quality.

One of the men, his beard large enough to have shamed a dwarf, caught his eye and called over.

“What are you doing with that war drum, lad? Somebody leave it in the rag and bone?”

Dolf’s mouth worked as he tried to think of a rejoinder. Before he could the rest of the company retaliated on his behalf. They jeered and swore, hurling ribald abuse at the greatswords with an effortless cohesion that was quite at odds with the rest of their manoeuvres.

Erikson smiled behind his hand as he cast his eyes up and down the line. It was neatly dressed, and from this angle it was impossible to see how many regiments stood shoulder to shoulder. He could see the lance tips of cavalry rising from behind a roll in the ground on the left side, but apart from that they seemed to be at the very front of the army.

But why? Why were they here?

It wasn’t until Porter started a chant regarding the greatswords’ female relatives that he realised why. They were the matting over the pit. The twig holding up the dead weight. The bait in the trap.

They were here to break.

Erikson thought of the regiments that lay on each side of them, and the regiments which they had passed on their way to their position. They were the best armed and most professional in the entire army. After the enemy had destroyed Erikson's regiment and poured through the gap in the line, those regiments would surely close upon them like the jaws of a steel trap.

"Stupid bastard," he muttered beneath his breath. "Why didn't I see it sooner?"

By now the greatswords' officers were calling them to order. Erikson waited until Porter got in the last word before signalling to Alter, who bullied the men into something resembling silence.

Erikson was no longer listening. He was too busy trying to think of a way out of the doom which the baron's strategy required them to face. He was so deep in thought that it took him a while to realise that the entire line had fallen into a nervous silence, a thousand ears straining to catch the sound of the enemy's advance.

When Erikson finally heard it the skin on his scalp crawled. It didn't sound like an army. It sounded more like some force of nature. Even the sky darkened beneath a swarm of panicked birds it drove before it. That was more redolent of a storm front than an army.

"I can feel the ground shaking," Dolf told him, and looked at the captain with eyes that had grown impossibly large within the pinched lines of his face.

"That's normal," Erikson lied with an easy aplomb. "Cavalry always does that."

"I don't think that it's cavalry," Dolf shook his head doubtfully. "Look."

Erikson looked, squinting into the distance. Here and there copses of trees studded the open spaces of the fields, and the shadows they cast were long and dark beneath the rising sun. But now there was another shadow too, a line of darkness which rolled towards the humans' line as remorselessly as a tsunami heading for a beach.

"They're coming," Sergeant Alter said with something that sounded strangely like anticipation. Already the musicians were starting to sound the alarm. Erikson, not to be outdone, slapped Dolf on the shoulder.

"Sound the stand-to, drummer," Erikson said as, above the humans' musicians the first of the enemies' horns sounded. They rang out with toneless shrieks of discordant sound, and again Erikson felt his skin crawling and animal terror gnawing at its leash within his stomach. As always, he ignored it.

"Don't know that one yet, captain," Dolf said.

"Three short one long," Erikson told him. My men can't double time. My drummer can't sound the stand-to. And my job is to provide a welcome mat for the enemy.

Fantastic.

He drew his sword, the steel feeling ridiculously light as his heart raced, and turned back to hammer home the message one more time.

"Remember, gentlemen," he shouted above the drumbeat and the growing thunder of the enemy. "Hold your position and we will live. Break the formation and we will die. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, captain," Gunter bellowed.

“Do you understand me?” Erikson asked again, and this time the whole company responded. Erikson nodded and turned back just as the first wave crested a hill which was no more than a quarter of a mile away.

In a hundred battlefields he had never seen anything like them before. The beasts which strained beneath crudely lashed-together harnesses were neither boar nor bull nor any other animal which he knew. As they thundered forwards, closing the distance with an impossible speed, Erikson studied the confusion of horns and tusks which sprouted from the creatures’ massive skulls. He could see their wickedly curved fangs too. They were bared impatiently as the charge rolled forwards.

Although no bigger than small ponies the beasts were obviously possessed of an immense strength. They were bound together by crude harnesses of leather and wood, and behind each pair a cart bounced and jolted along. The horrors which rode these contraptions, their bestial features even more vile for being melded with a humanoid form, clung to the woodwork with one hand while holding their axes ready with the other. The misshapen metal was dulled with rust and filth, but here and there sunlight caught a scrape of clean steel.

In the semaphore flash of these weapons Erikson could see that they were doomed. The beasts advanced in a wall that stretched as far as he could see in either direction, and the sheer, murderous weight of the bizarre chariots would be enough to crush them on its own. He had seen it happen before. You couldn’t stop a chariot. When they hit, they...

No.

No, stop that.

Erikson literally shook himself, and noticed that Dolf’s drum had fallen silent.

“Carry on drumming,” he said. “The stand-to continues until I give the order to stop.”

Dolf tore his eyes away from the advance and started drumming, tentatively at first but soon quickening to a solid beat.

The chariots were close enough that Erikson could see the turfs that were kicked up by their hooves. Then so close that he could see the spray of mucus that splattered around their nostrils. Then, when they were so close that he could see the vicious pink slits of their eyes, the thunder broke.

The sound of it echoed from both flanks, a deep boom of harnessed alchemy, and the effect was immediate.

The chariot which Erikson had been watching exploded. The riders disappeared as the vehicle burst asunder in a shrapnel storm of splinters and metal. The beasts that had been pulling it were pulled back and then thrown together by the shattered remains. One of them was already bleeding, its hindquarters a ruin of blood. Its fellow turned on it, animal panic finding escape in the feast of its dying kin.

Erikson stared stupidly as, with a solid beat that made his teeth rattle, a plume of soil and grey smoke rose in a sudden cloud directly ahead of him. It lifted another of the chariots as easily as a breath of wind will lift a dandelion seed. The mangled contraption flipped over in the air, beasts and riders hurled from its tumbling ruin.

Behind him, Erikson could hear the cheering of an entire army. It rang in his ears even as the acrid stink of blackpowder rolled lazily across the battlefield. Another cannon ball, blurring with the speed of Sigmar’s comet, scythed along the

disintegrating line of the chariots. It sliced the legs from half a dozen of the beasts, which collapsed with squeals of pain.

One of the chariots, its yoke caught in the harness, flipped over, catapulting its riders ahead of it. A survivor rose to its feet, but only for a second. The advance still thundered forwards, and the beasts which pulled the following chariot gored the survivor as it thundered over the ruin.

The cheering faltered as, despite the rolling thunder of the artillery, the charge swept on. Now the beasts were so close that he could see the flies which swarmed around them. And now they had arrived.

Despite the eye-watering sting of blackpowder smoke, Erikson could smell the beasts as they barrelled into his company. It was the smell of rotten meat and foetid musk, and he would remember it for the rest of his life. At that moment he had no time to think of anything other than the ton of hoof and horn and steel that was smashing into his company.

It hit to the left of him, and although its momentum was hardly slowed by its impact with the screaming mass of its victims, it was slowed enough. Erikson ducked beneath the arc of one of the rider's axes, ignored the agony of the spinning wheel that sheared the flesh off his right arm, and slashed through the fetlock of the nearest beast.

It turned on him, vicious pink eyes wide with pain, and Erikson sprang away from the slash of its tusks. Another man was not so quick. As the crippled beast lunged forwards it caught him in his stomach. It lifted its head and shook, gouging its tusk even deeper into the impaled man. Meanwhile one of the riders, a nightmare thing with a goat's head and arms as thick as a man's leg, was hacking down into the men who swarmed about him with the wide, easy strokes of a farmer clearing brushwood.

Blood splattered across Erikson's face, but despite the carnage, and despite the shrieks of his dying comrades, he was joyous with relief. For all the damage it had done, the chariot had been stopped. Now the advantage was theirs.

The beast which he had hobbled was the first to be felled, its skull split by a single stroke from Brandt's greatsword. Its fellow died soon after, blinded by spears and bled out by the hundred cuts that sliced open its arteries. The beast which had ridden the chariot leapt clear, but before it could run the company surged forwards, the men roaring with their thirst for vengeance.

It was Gunter who felled the beast. He waited until it had buried its axe in another man's head before leaping forwards, robes flailing, and swinging his warhammer down in a blurred arc that ended up between the thing's slit-pupilled eyes. It fell back in a daze, and a dozen mismatched weapons butchered it as easily as if it had been a trussed pig.

"Back into line!" Erikson cried, grabbing the men and pushing them back towards the square. "Ten paces back, and form up ranks. Ten paces!"

The men turned to him, their pale and blood-spattered features a study in confusion. There was no semblance of anything resembling a square anymore. Just a mob of milling individuals. Erikson felt something close to panic.

"Alter!" he cried. "Gunter. Porter. Re-form your sections ten paces back. Come on, re-form them."

“Shall I drum the assembly, captain?” Dolf asked, and Erikson turned to him with the gratitude of a drowning man who has found a single solid timber.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, drum the assembly. Porter, where the hells are you? There you are. Leave that corpse and get your men back into their ranks. Gunter, leave the wounded for now. We will see to them when we’ve re-formed.”

Slowly, terrifyingly slowly, the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig re-formed into something resembling a square. If another chariot had hit them then they would have been finished, driven before it like a flock of chickens before a fox. But even as Erikson bullied his men back into their places he saw that the artillery had done its work. The charge had been broken.

All across the front the remains of the chariots lay scattered like flotsam on a beach after some terrible storm. Here and there beasts cried out in pain or limped and crawled away. An occasional shot still rang out, but now the rolling thunder of the cannonade had dwindled into the occasional ranging shot. Erikson watched a plume of smoke and shrapnel erupt from the ground perhaps a quarter of a mile away, well short of the mass of creatures which had spilled across the green horizon like some dark cancer.

“All accounted for, sir.”

Erikson took a deep breath and turned to find Sergeant Alter standing to attention. Perhaps it was the battle, but he looked twenty years younger than he had when Erikson had found him rotting in the gaol. Behind him the men had formed up into the beginnings of a square, and Porter and Gunter’s calls still rang out over their charges’ complaints.

“Casualties?” Erikson asked, although he could see the bodies that still lay tangled in the mud and amongst the traces of the chariot. Six men who would never eat or drink or dance again. Six men who would still be alive if they hadn’t followed him onto this battlefield.

“Just those six, sir,” Alter told him. “And a dozen more wounded.”

“Keep them in the centre,” Erikson told him, and looked again at the remains of the chariot.

Yes, he thought. Yes, that might do it.

It would be better than nothing, anyway.

“Then choose one section to go and find another one of those things,” he told Alter. “We’re going to build a barricade.”

“It was truly a magnificent sight, wasn’t it?” the seneschal asked. He had come to join Ganamedes on the battlements, and the two old men had watched the battle unfold below.

Ganamedes merely grunted. High on the walls his robes were flapping around his spindly arms as the breeze picked up. The rising sun warmed the back of his neck even as it shortened the shadows on the battlefield below. Perhaps it was the weather, but he was beginning to share the seneschal’s optimism.

He had seen the baron’s artillery at work before, of course. They practised their art on feast days with carefully doled-out rations of blackpowder. But to see them on the battlefield was quite different. There had been no miserly rations of blackpowder

today. No single shots. Instead there had been the earthshaking thunder of a rolling cannonade. Even through the grey fog it had sent drifting through the perfect clarity of this summer's day he could see the devastation it had wrought amongst the enemy.

"They barely reached our line before they were wiped out," the seneschal continued, jabbering with the excitement of the battle that was unfolding below. "I knew we needn't have been so worried. What can beasts do against our weapons? Wait until the rest of them come."

"Yes," Ganamedes said. "We are waiting. Ever heard of that happening in a battle with the beasts before?"

The seneschal shrugged.

"Perhaps they've been scared off."

"They don't look scared," Ganamedes told him. "They're not running away. They're just waiting for us to come to them. Their charge has failed, and that is the only way left to deal with an enemy which outguns you."

"But they're only beasts," the seneschal scoffed. "They don't think like that."

"And yet," Ganamedes said vaguely and turned his full attention back to the massed ranks that waited just out of cannon range, "they wait."

The seneschal fell silent and, as the sun rose ever higher, they waited and although the seneschal grew more uneasy, Ganamedes suddenly felt at peace. He had made his mind up. If the baron survived this day he would confess everything.

"What is that?" the herald asked. He was regarding the construction before Erikson's company with the same amused interest as the regiments which stood on their flanks.

"Address the officer by his proper rank," Sergeant Alter snarled at him.

The herald looked from the ragged sergeant to Erikson, who was regarding him with a dangerous calm. He cleared his throat and tried a different tack.

"The baron wants to know," he said, "what that is. *Captain.*"

"Give the baron my compliments," Erikson told him. "And inform him that it is a barricade."

The herald looked again at the timber balustrade. It had been formed out of several ruined chariots. Although the splintered and bloodstained timber had been lashed crudely together it seemed secure beneath its own weight. Sharpened staves of wood thrust out from the front of it, the tips at eye height.

"Very ingenious," the herald said. "Not sure that you haven't wasted your labour, though."

"Are you pulling us back?" Erikson asked, and cursed himself for sounding too eager.

"No." The herald looked at him, and shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. "No, quite the reverse. You are to stay here. The baron personally commands you to hold your ground until you are given permission to leave. The other regiments will be pulled back, but not you."

Even as he spoke Erikson saw that the regiments on either side were turning and drawing back.

"But if we stay here," Erikson asked, "who will guard our flanks?"

The herald shifted uncomfortably in his saddle.

“I’m sure the baron knows best,” he said, and the guilty expression on his face filled Erikson with even more fear than the sound of the regiments on either side of him marching back towards the city.

“Where the hell are they going?” Porter shouted, and the men burst into a chorus of their own questions. The herald’s horse shifted nervously beneath him and skittered back.

“Silence in the ranks!” Alter bellowed.

“Good luck,” the herald said and, with a salute, turned and cantered away after the retreating army.

“Stuff this,” Porter said, summing up their position with an elegant simplicity. “They’re leaving us out here as bait.”

“Or as an appetiser,” Minsk added, provoking a chorus of mutinous assent.

Erikson could feel the company breaking. It was something about the level at which the muttering was pitched and the way that the men immediately behind him had fallen silent. He examined the barricade. Now that the regiments on either side had disappeared it looked ridiculous, as useless as a child’s sandcastle against an incoming tide.

Still, at least it made a good podium.

“Gentlemen,” he cried, scrambling on top of it. “I can see that you are unhappy with our place in the battle line.”

The catcalls and laughter were quickly silenced as his eyes swept over them.

“I don’t like it either. I think that we are being used as bait.”

“Let’s leave then.” Minsk called out.

Erikson waited for the applause to die down before replying.

“If we run now,” he said, “it will be straight to the headsman’s block. Desertion in the face of the enemy is a capital offence.”

“Better a nice clean axe than those things,” somebody added.

“No,” Erikson snapped. “Better neither. We’ll wait. The enemy might not come. But if they do we will run.”

“Back to the headsman’s axe?” Gunter asked. Of all the men he seemed the only one not relieved by the prospect of retreat.

“I don’t think so,” Erikson shook his head. “Breaking before a charge is shameful, but it happens. Gentlemen, I know that this is an uncomfortable situation, but I ask you to trust me. After all, I have been a soldier all of my life, and I’m still alive.”

“What did happen to your last regiment?” Minsk asked. Erikson ignored him and hurriedly carried on.

“All I ask is that you wait for my signal before we withdraw. Will you do that?”

The men looked at one another.

“When you say withdraw,” Porter asked, “you do mean run?”

“As fast as you can.” Erikson grinned.

“Then of course we’ll follow you,” the little man said, and to relieved laughter Erikson leapt off his perch and turned back to face the enemy.

The glory of war, he thought, and bit down on a cynical smile.

\* \* \*

Gulkroth could feel their frustration. It vibrated through the herd, greasing the air with the musk of aggression, and no wonder. The smell of blood was delicious on the breeze, and the maddening order of the enemy stood barely a charge away.

The beast lord was amazed that he'd been able to hold his army back this long. Such restraint went against every fibre of their being just as it went against every fibre of his. Yet still, held them he had, relying on the shamans that lurked behind the herd leaders to enforce his will.

"You are right to wait, lord," Ruhrkar said. "Here is no place for us to do battle. The vile humans have made of this place a desert, and within it our herds have no defence against their alchemies."

Gulkroth glanced down at the wizened shaman. Exposed to the unbroken light of the noonday sun it seemed incredible that he was still alive. The weak throb of his pulse was visible beneath the parchment skin his moulting fur revealed, and flies feasted on the yellow pus that seeped from his nostrils. Yet despite his frailty the shaman glowed with such power that he seemed almost a living herdstone.

"No, we will fight them in another place," Ruhrkar continued, talking as if to himself. "We will draw them to us and feast upon them at our leisure. Fighting them here is as foolish as trying to suck the marrow from a still-living bone. First it has to be caught and smashed."

Gulkroth watched the shaman drool, and wondered how much of his authority over the herd depended on this creature and his brother shamans. It made him uneasy and he turned back to watch the humans. They were withdrawing.

At least, most of them seemed to be withdrawing. They had left one of their herds out in the middle of the field. It was a miserable-looking mix of humans, and huddled behind their makeshift barricade they looked as tempting a morsel as a deer with a broken leg.

Gulkroth felt his resolve wavering when Ruhrkar spoke again.

"Look at the bait which the humans dangle before us," he mused. "And look at the jaws that they would close on any who survived the thunder of their alchemy." He gestured to where the state regiments, their army ablaze in the high sun, had taken positions within charge range of Erikson's company. "What a snare that would be to put our heads into."

Gulkroth growled with frustration and wished this day over. They would not come to him and he could not go to them. The torment of unsatiated bloodlust coursed through him so much that when the minotaurs broke lose he could hardly blame them.

They broke from the formation with a roar, a black avalanche of hate-fuelled muscle. Gulkroth caught a brief glimpse of the shaman that he had set to hold them crushed underfoot, bleeding even as he hit the ground, and the herds of gors on either side swayed as if caught in the minotaurs' wake.

Gulkroth bellowed at them, venting his fury on those who dared to defy his order. They turned and cowered at his voice, hunkering down as the minotaurs charged off across the churned-up mud of the battlefield. A moan of yearning rose up from the



herd at the sight, and that was when Gulkroth knew that without the shamans he would have lost them long ago.

“Here they come,” a voice cried out, and Erikson felt the company shifting behind him like wheat beneath strong wind.

“Hold your damned ground,” Sergeant Alter snarled.

“But he said that we could—”

“I said hold your ground,” Sergeant Alter said, turning on the man. “Wait for the captain’s order.”

Erikson peered over the top of the barricade and prepared to give the order to flee. Then he hesitated. This wasn’t the onslaught he had expected. The enemy still remained out of cannon shot, their obscene standards foresting the horizon even as they howled and moaned in some unholy chorus.

No more than a dozen shapes were galloping towards them. The creatures were as misshapen as the others, but whatever forces had twisted their forms had also given them an immense size. They stood taller than any two men, and their heads seemed to have been made in mockery of a bull’s. The horns they bore were stout, simple juts of bone, each as wide as a man’s outstretched arms, and as they ran great slabs of muscle moved beneath their thin fur.

But still. There were only a dozen of them.

As Erikson considered this, the first of the cannon roared out. The grey smear of its projectile flashed towards the creatures and the rest of the artillery opened up.

“Hold your ground, lads,” Erikson said. “The gunners will see to them.”

Cannon balls sliced through the ground, searing through the soil and sending up great divots of turf. Mortar bombs, their trajectories traced by goose-down trails of smoke, arced easily across the clear blue of the sky to land in volcanoes of smoke and debris.

By the time Erikson realised the gunners were not hitting the monsters they were already halfway to his regiment. Whereas the cannon had smashed through the densely packed mass of chariots, these bull-headed horrors were too nimble to be caught. They sped through the storm of iron, bounding through the gunners’ art with an effortless grace.

“Oh damn,” Erikson said as they closed in. It was too late to run now. If they did they would be caught in the open and...

Behind him, the men began to run. At first it was only a couple, but even as Erikson called to them the rest were going, the formation crumbling with a terrifying speed. He watched them, caught sight of Sergeant Alter’s uncertain face, and did the only thing he could do to stop the company from mutinying.

He joined them.

“Retreat!” he cried, signalling with his sword. “Retreat! Back to the lines.”

They needed no further encouragement, and the desertion became a stampede, each man trying to outdistance the next. Erikson snatched a last glance at the approaching horrors as they bellowed, venting their frustration as their prey fled. Then he turned to flee himself but before he could he saw the wounded that had been left by their comrades.

There were half a dozen who couldn't join the flight. Some lay silent and bleeding. Others, crippled with shattered limbs and torn ligaments, were less fortunate. They were conscious of the fate that was upon them, and they cried out in their anger and their fear.

Even then he might have run, but before he could he saw that Dolf had dropped his drum and armed himself with an abandoned sword.

"Go on!" Erikson shouted at him. "Retreat! That's an order."

"Can't leave our comrades for those things, captain," the lad said with a simple certainty.

Erikson looked at him, then turned back to the slaving beasts that were bounding towards the barricade.

"No," he decided, and it seemed that somebody else was speaking with his voice. "No, I suppose we can't."

He cast a last look towards the retreating rabble of his company then went to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Dolf. As he did so the first of the beasts vaulted the barricade, its obscene bulk blocking out the sky, and hurled itself towards them.

Sir Gerhardt Schleismann had spent his whole life training for war. He had been able to ride as soon as he had been able to walk, and he had started learning the basics of the lance and the sword soon after. He and his brothers had spent most of their days practising these arts, and they had grown as burly as any labourer with the constant use of steel.

When he had been old enough Schleismann had started riding in tournaments, and soon after that had come the proudest day of his life. He had been sworn into the Knights of the Silver Order.

And yet, despite the darkness of the forests that circled these lands like a wolf's jaws around a lamb's throat, he had never found true battle. He had arrived late, or been sent to the wrong flank. Even a gang of bandits which had made the mistake of attacking a caravan of which he was a part had escaped his blade, fleeing into the impenetrable undergrowth before he had slain any.

Now, at almost twenty years of age, he was beginning to wonder if he was the victim of some sort of terrible curse. It seemed that he was to spend his entire life in limbo, hovering like a hawk over a field without once being able to fold his wings and dive.

At first today's battle had done little to dispel the superstition. Even in a field containing thousands of foul horrors from the woods beyond, it seemed that his sword was destined to remain dry, his lance unbroken.

So now, when he saw the minotaurs charging at Erikson's lone company, he took it as a gift from Sigmar.

"Sound the advance," he told his squadron's bugler, his voice sharp with excitement. As the note rang out he touched the spurs to his horse's flank and cantered forwards. Only when the rest of the squadron had matched his pace in a perfect razor's edge of a line did he turn back to the bugler and, through a wide smile, order him to sound the charge.

The minotaur's axe buried itself in the soil between Erikson and Dolf. The men sprang to either side as the creature prised its weapon back out of the sucking wound it had made in the earth.

Dolf stabbed wildly at the solid bulk of its ribcage, but although the blow was enthusiastic it lacked finesse. The steel bounced off hide and bone, and the beast's roar was of outrage rather than pain. It spun towards the youngster, the stained steel of its axe a blur, but Dolf had already ducked and rolled backwards.

The creature raised its axe again, its muzzle peeled back in a snarl of murderous joy as it struck down, but Dolf twisted away. Although he had never handled a sword in his life, he had dodged a thousand blows, and it showed as he scuttled and raced around the creature's assault.

Erikson, meanwhile, had been taking his time. While Dolf distracted the creature he had worked his way behind it, and although the urge to strike was strong he spent priceless seconds studying the roll of muscles across its back. He studied the thickness of the pelt and the width of its ribs. Only when he was sure did he strike. With a grunt of effort he slid the sword point between the back ribs, through a kidney and then into the liver.

The beast screamed with agony and leapt away Erikson's sword, which had buried itself up to its hilt in the beast's flesh, was torn from his hand. In the brightness of the rush of combat which pulsed through him he snatched a weapon from one of the wounded who lay sobbing to one side.

It was a butcher's cleaver, heavy and unbalanced, but it was better than nothing. Floating on the balls of his feet Erikson watched as the stricken beast choked up a lungful of blood and staggered backwards, clawing ineffectually at the blade which still skewered it.

"Look behind you, captain," Dolf cried out. Erikson turned, twisting away from the lunging spear thrust that would have pinned him as neatly as a butterfly on a pin. Although he was fast he lacked Dolf's grace, and even as the crudely forged weapon sliced past him the ridge of black-furred bone which lay between the beast's horns crashed into his skull.

There was a crack and he fell backwards. He saw a sparkle of galloping lightning with his last blink, but then there was nothing but darkness, painless and silent.

In the second before his charge connected with the monsters before them, Schleismann was numbed with a sensation that he was watching himself from some far distant place. He could still feel the beat of the horse's heart between his legs, and the weight of the perfectly balanced lance in his mailed fist. He could even hear himself roaring a challenge, the cry echoing in the throats of his brother knights as they fell upon the beasts, but until the impact none of it seemed real.

It took the bone-jarring thud of his lance impacting into flesh to snap him out of the daze. As the lance snapped, splintering before the bones in his arm did, reality rushed back over him, and he was roaring with the terrifying joy of battle.

The creature he had hit staggered back, its horned head level with his horse's as he turned it with his knees and unsheathed his sword. The steel hissed from the scabbard, and he stabbed down even as the beast lunged at him.

His blade pierced the column of its spine, slipping through the boulders of its vertebrae with the precision of a bull-fighter's strike, but it was too late for his mount. Even as the beast died its horns were tearing through the flesh of his horse's belly. It screamed and Schleismann, though he had known it since it had been a foal, leapt free without a single glance back. He had already identified his next target.

Its hide was as black as sin and its eyes were as red as hell itself. He barrelled towards it, closing the distance to deny it the advantage of reach. The thing swung a misshapen axe at him, but he angled his shield to deflect the blow and thrust upwards, cutting through dewlaps, through the throat, through the base of the skull and, with a final cry of effort, into the brain.

The beast fell back and Schleismann, who found that he was laughing with the joy of battle, kept his sword wedged in the shattered bone of his kill so that the pull of it propelled him forwards into the next target.

Around him his brother knights were plying their trade with the same joyous abandon. The creatures they faced were monstrous, and the power behind their blows was awesome, but they had neither art nor the weaponry of the men.

Still, the beasts knew how to kill. Armoured carcasses littered the churned-up ground as well as furred ones. The blood was as bright against their steel carapaces as the beasts' blood was dark against their hides, and Schleismann felt a moment's sobriety as he recognised one of the fallen.

But only a moment. His training left no room for hesitation, and he had already marked his next victim. It was larger even than its fellows, probably the bull of the herd, and it was flailing around at some ragged, scampering target. Schleismann leapt onto the remains of a barricade and saw that it was roaring with frustration as it tried to kill a boy. He was unarmed and barefoot, but still agile as he harried the monster. He danced between its blows as he hurled abuse at it, his red hair flashing in the sunlight.

If the spectacle had been within a fighting pit Schleismann would have enjoyed watching it. But here and now his instincts had him moving already, shield first and sword held back like a scorpion's sting. The beast heard the clatter of his approach, spun around with a terrifying speed and angled an axe stroke towards him.

This time Schleismann didn't angle his shield neatly enough, and the bound leather and hide of its construction shattered as the crudely forged blade bit through steel and into his shoulder and knocked him to his knees.

He ignored the pain and staggered back to his feet, lunging in through the beast's guard to deliver a killing blow. Before he could the creature lunged down, moving with such a speed that the spread of its horns blocked Schleismann's vision. He turned but the blow caught him on the helmet. He collapsed backwards, stars exploding beneath his dented steel visor as he fell heavily.

Numbed fingers fumbled for his sword as he blinked to clear his vision. When the world came back into focus he saw that his death was upon them. Disdaining weapons, the monster clutched him by his arms and lifted him towards its stinking maw. Schleismann's stomach rolled with nausea as he inhaled the rotten meat stink of the creature's breath and saw the chipped blades of its teeth.

Before it could bite it screamed, a surprisingly high-pitched shriek of agony, and dropped the knight back down to the grass. Schleismann saw two things. The first

was the hideous wound in the monster's groin, and the second was the youth retreating from his handiwork, his knife as red as his hair with fresh blood.

Then Schleismann saw his sword. He grasped the hilt and struck up, a lifetime of training sending the steel into a cluster of nerves and arteries inside the creature's leg.

It bellowed as it fell, arterial blood fountaining into the air, and Schleismann scabbled away from its death throes. He caught a glimpse of the youth dragging an unconscious man away, then wheeled around to see how the battle was going.

It was over. Even as he watched the last of the monstrous creatures was being butchered from all sides, its doom as certain as that of a lame bull surrounded by a pack of wolves. And beyond, the rest of the enemy army still waited, unmoving.

Schleismann gingerly removed his ruined helmet and used the plume to wipe the blood from his face. Then he heard the drumming.

He turned to see the youth, the man he had saved lying at his feet, his knife sheathed, and a battered old drum slung over his shoulder. Although he was pale and wide-eyed his narrow jaw was set with a grim determination, and Schleismann looked past him to the gaggle of ragged men who had fled long, long minutes ago.

They had been stopped by the steel thicket of pole arms and shields that marked the baron's army's vanguard. From this distance it was impossible to see if the routed men were rioting or re-forming. Not that it would make much difference to their usefulness, Schleismann thought with a cheerful contempt.

In any case, he thought, regarding the drummer with a cold appraisal, this lad was too good for the rabble he was with. He made a mental note to find him after the battle, then went to reorganise the survivors of his squadron.

\* \* \*

"Come on, get back into line," Alter said. Although oblivious to Schleismann's cold appraisal his neck was burning with shame after the other regiments had witnessed the company's disgraceful flight.

"Do as the sergeant says," Gunter boomed, and looked eagerly back to where Dolf was dragging Erikson away from the slaughtered minotaurs.

"Come along, ladies," Porter added. "You heard the man. Back into... Minsk, where the hell are you going?"

"I'm..."

Porter looked at Brandt, who clapped a friendly paw on Minsk's shoulder and pushed him back into the mass of his fellows.

"You heard the corporal," he said.

The regiments who stood behind them had been watching the skirmish between the knights and the minotaurs, but now their attention was back with the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig as it slowly drew back together. The suggestions came thick and fast, although for once even Porter was too preoccupied to return the favour.

"Listen to the drummer," Alter bellowed at them. He exchanged a glance with Gunter who briefly appeared amongst the mass of men. The warrior priest nodded so Alter, whose own section was in something approaching order, decided to take the risk.

“Forward march,” he called, gesturing with his sword.

The officers took up the call. For a moment it seemed that the company would collapse into further mutiny but gradually, under the threats of their officers and encouraged by the fact that a company of knights now lay between them and the enemy, the company did march. The formation even started to march in time as Alter bellowed out the left, right, left in time to Dolf’s drumbeat.

When the shape of Erikson staggered back to his feet in front of them, waving his battered cap full of broken feathers, they even had the cheek to cheer.

And so the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig skulked back towards their victory. As they assembled around their captain, their drummer and their wounded, the army of beasts who still lined the horizon turned and left, fading from their positions as quickly as a nightmare fades upon waking.

This time the whole army cheered. Only Erikson remained aloof. Despite the pain that still held his skull in a vice-like grip, he was already calculating how best to turn the day’s events to the company’s advantage.

## Chapter Seven

The baron's war room was packed with men and thick with the smell of sweat and smoke and alcohol. They had come straight from the field, and although many had not eaten that day most had found the opportunity to drink. They continued to do so now, their voices loud and their laughter louder as they contemplated what they chose to think of as their victory.

Ganamedes sat in silence at the end of the table, too lost in thought to pay much attention to the boasting that was going on around him. He knew that the decision he had taken on the battlements was the right one. There was no other way.

And yet, life was so very sweet. And who knew, who really knew, what fate would decide one way or the other?

There was a roar of laughter from the back of the room, and two of the knights, steel-clad giants in full armour, gripped each other's gauntleted hands and arm-wrestled over some disputed point of strategy.

For the first time Ganamedes realised that they thought they had won. He put his head in his hands and leaned forwards.

"His excellency the baron!" a herald cried out, and all eyes turned to the entrance as Ludenhof strode into the room. The hawkish lines of his face looked even harder than usual, and as sharp as the sabre he wore at his side. Although he had removed his helmet he still wore full armour, and he moved within the well-crafted steel as easily as if it had been made of silk.

The applause began as soon as he entered the room, a thunder of claps and bravos that shook dust from the rafters above.

The baron looked surprised, but recovered enough to nod gracefully at his commanders.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Let us begin. Provost marshal, casualties."

"No more than a couple of dozen, sire," Steckler told him.

"Current dispositions?"

"Pickets on the mile towards the forest, the remainder of the regiments drawn up on the field."

"We must bring them back into the city before nightfall," the baron said. "Gentlemen, as soon as this council is finished you will withdraw your men back behind the walls."

There was an awkward silence. It was broken by the commander of one of the regiments of sword.

"Sire, the city is becoming ever more unhealthy. The pox and the dysentery have already done more damage to my men than the enemy have. Might I suggest we leave the army encamped outside the walls?"

The baron shook his head.

“I understand your concerns. But while the beasts’ forces remain disciplined and intact I have no wish to gift them the opportunity of night.”

“But, sire, you saw them today. They ran in terror from the fury of our artillery and the cold steel of our single charge.”

“Precisely,” Ganamedes snapped.

“You have something to say, old friend?” the baron asked him, and the old man immediately regretted his tone.

“Just that our commander is right about the artillery. It did indeed hold the enemy at bay. However, the enemy neither broke nor ran. They withdrew in good order to await a better opportunity.”

“You talk of them as though they were human,” the swordsman jeered. “We have fought these things for long enough to know that they are creatures of base instinct.”

“Not, apparently, anymore,” Ganamedes said.

The room sank into a thoughtful silence, which the baron broke.

“Very well,” he decided. “For now let us concentrate on bringing the men back in and feeding them. They have done well. We will discuss broader strategy in two days’ time. Questions?”

“Should I prepare to award any honours?” the provost marshal asked.

The baron stroked his beard. “Suggestions?”

“Gruber laid out the ordnance. Perhaps he should get something. And Schleismann led the charge. Oh, and what about that militia unit?”

“The one that ran away?”

A rumble of laughter around the table. Steckler just shrugged. “They didn’t all run. And they did return.”

“After Schleismann had finished the enemy off,” one of the knights pointed out, to more amusement.

“They’re right,” the baron decided. “Give them something from the stores if you like, but Gruber and Schleismann are the only two to have won anything today. But don’t fret, gentlemen,” he told the assembled men with a wink. “I am sure you will all have your chance before this is over.”

So saying he turned and left, spry with energy even after a day directing a battle. Soon after the men made their way back to their units, and Ganamedes was left alone in the echoing chamber.

Why didn’t I speak up, he asked himself as he watched the light of the setting sun fade on the neat brickwork of the wall.

But of course, he knew why he hadn’t spoken up. It was because he was human. He was weak. He was as doomed as the rest of them.

When the servants came to clear the room they did so quietly, ignoring the old man who sat sobbing into his hands at the head of the table.

The Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig held their own counsel after the battle. It was a somewhat more rowdy affair.

Erikson and Alter retreated to the balcony that overlooked the yard as the men celebrated their victory. Porter and Brandt held court as always over the cauldron.



Today's stodge had been a fragrant combination of pork, herbs and vegetables, and Erikson had also provided two casks of vinegary wine.

By now one of the casks was already empty, and the roar of the men's celebration was becoming ever louder. Erikson had already handed the company's dead over to the priests of Morr and its wounded over to the more delicate hands of the sisters of Shallya.

Those that remained were unscathed by the day's events. Unscathed and victorious. What was more, this was the first alcohol any of them had taken since being arrested, and they sang and danced and laughed with a wild abandon.

Dolf, the hero of the battle, drummed a beat and another man piped an accompaniment on a flute. Occasionally one of the revellers would stagger up to slap the lad on the shoulder and pay his respects. Every time it happened Dolf would grin and quicken the pace so that the folk dance had by now become a wild jig.

While some of the men danced in the centre of the yard their comrades bellowed encouragement, or simply gorged themselves on the food and drink.

"The conquering heroes," Erikson said to Alter, who barked with laughter.

"Give them a week or so," he said, "and they'll have convinced themselves that they are."

"That's what I'm hoping for," Erikson told him and grinned. The pain from his cracked skull had eased with wine, and although his purse was disconcertingly light tonight's feast had been well worth the coin.

A reward was exactly what the company needed to convince it that it had acted courageously.

"They need a good six months' training," Alter decided. "Those formations today... if the enemy had meant it we'd be dead."

"Don't worry," Erikson told him. "We'll start tomorrow. I want to practise marching in block, and consolidation of ground. Are you familiar with that from the halberdiers?"

Alter looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Just checking," Erikson said, then sighed contentedly. "Well, I don't want to cramp the men's style," he said, as dancing gave way to an impromptu jousting tournament. The champions were carried on their comrades' backs, and their weapons, Erikson was pleased to see, were thick-bristled brooms.

"No, wouldn't want to do that," Alter nodded sagely as, with a roar of applause, the first casualty went crashing backwards onto the cobbles.

"Think I'll go see how the wounded are getting on," he decided. The sisters of Shallya had rebuilt their hospital amongst the smoke-blackened ruins. Crude, wood-framed halls had taken the place of the previous quarters but they were as clean and orderly as always. The sisters had been expecting an onslaught of the wounded after the battle, so the few patients Erikson had given them were well looked after. Even so, as the commander it was his duty to check up on them.

At least, that was the excuse Erikson made to himself as he made off to find Helga and a quiet corner somewhere. He would be back in time to set the guards, he thought as he made his way out of their yard. Even though they were drunk and victorious he didn't trust some of his men not to try to escape.

Erikson slipped out onto the street, but as he did so he almost ran into a knight. The man still wore the armour he had worn on the battlefield, and although the bloodstains had been washed off the metal was still as dented as an old copper pot.

“Captain Erikson?” the man asked, and even in the near darkness of the street Erikson recognised the voice.

“Schleismann!” he said, and stretched out his hand. The knight took it in a steel fist and the two men shook. “I believe I owe you a debt, sir. If it hadn’t been for your squadron we would have been finished.”

Schleismann shrugged.

“You and the boy, perhaps. I have every confidence that the rest of your company’s speed would have carried them to safety.”

For a moment Erikson’s face hardened, and his eyes glittered dangerously in the darkness. It was one thing to criticise his own company, but to let somebody else do it... then he saw the smile on Schleismann’s face and his anger evaporated.

“Yes, well,” he said. “If I can get them to fall into formation half as quickly as they fall out of it I should have quite a unit. Anyway, will you come and drink with me? There is a tavern yonder.”

“Of course,” Schleismann said. “In fact I wanted to talk to you. It’s about your drummer.”

“You mean Dolf?” Erikson asked. “What about him?”

“I want him,” Schleismann said simply, and led the way into the nearest tavern.

Later, when the company had emptied both wine casks and the torches had burned down, Erikson returned to the square. He walked carefully through the gloom, not just because of the wine he had drunk with Schleismann but because of the proposal the man had made.

He was relieved to find two sentries on the entrance to the square.

“Who goes there?” Sergeant Alter asked as he loomed up out of the darkness.

“Erikson,” Erikson said. “Go and get some sleep, sergeant. I’ll take watch for a while. You too, soldier.”

“That’s all right, sir,” the man said, a reedy voice in the darkness. “I like it at night.”

“As you wish,” Erikson told him and fished out his tobacco. “Would you like a fill for your pipe?”

“No thank you, sir,” the man said, his voice a dull monotone. “I can’t smoke. It does things to me.”

Erikson grunted as he prepared his own pipe and lit up. It was late, and although the sounds of the victorious army still echoed through Hergig’s crowded streets the uproar had died down to the occasional snatch of drunken singing and the odd argument.

“We did well today,” Erikson told his companion, his face lighting up as he drew on the pipe.

“Yes, sir,” the man said. It was impossible to make out his features in the dark, and Erikson tried to recognise the voice. He couldn’t.

“It wasn’t perfect, but things never are in a battle. We can learn a lot from what happened, and next time we’ll do even better.”

The man said nothing.

Must be shy, Erikson thought.

“What’s your name?” Erikson asked him.

“My name is Hobbs, sir,” the man said in the same flat, toneless voice.

Erikson waited for him to expand. He didn’t.

“And whose section are you in?”

“Sergeant Alter’s,” Hobbs said, sounding as depressed about this as about everything else.

“Ah, Sergeant Alter,” Erikson exclaimed with enthusiasm. “We were bloody lucky to get him, I can tell you. Every company needs a man like that. A real professional. What did you do before you were a soldier?”

“Nothing.” Was there an inflection in the voice this time, Erikson wondered? A touch of guilt, perhaps?

“I didn’t mean why were you in gaol,” Erikson reassured him. “That life is over now. I meant, what was your trade?”

“Tanner,” Hobbs replied, and Erikson noticed he’d dropped the sir.

Well, never mind, he thought. Battle took people in different ways. If this man wanted silence and isolation instead of laughter and drink, Erikson would let him have it.

Erikson smoked and thought and wondered if, in time, this Hobbs might not make a corporal. He might not be the most charming of men, but he was probably the only sober one left in the entire city and that alone was worth a lot.

He waited for what he judged to be two hours in silence. Then he went to fetch Gunter, who rolled out of his blankets and followed him uncomplainingly to the gate. When they arrived Hobbs had gone.

“Gods damn it,” Erikson cursed. “I thought I might have been able to trust that one. Oh well. Would you like another watchman to keep you company, corporal?”

“Sigmar is my companion,” Gunter told him.

“Yes.” Erikson nodded. “Well, good night. We’ve a busy day tomorrow.”

In the days since Viksberg had armed them, the two porters had explored every inch of the crumbling roofs which overlooked Erikson’s encampment in Fish Market Square. They had moved with a stealth which would have surprised those who knew them. It certainly surprised the pigeons and rats who they stumbled across at precarious heights.

They had spent countless hours watching the company in the square below as it crashed and bashed around the yard. Their target was as easy to spot among the vagabond soldiers as a dove amongst a flock of crows. His young face was in stark contrast to the battered and suspicious countenances of his fellows, and he was never without his drum.

Now, content that they had lined up the perfect shot and sure of their escape route, the two men waited.

Waited and argued as only brothers can.

“You know that I am the better shot,” one told the other, for perhaps the dozenth time that day.

“Neither of us is better than the other,” his brother responded with the calm indifference of a man who knows that possession is nine-tenths of the law.

“If that were the case,” the first man reasoned, “you would have let the winner of a shooting competition have it.”

“And have everybody hearing the noise and smelling the powder and poking their noses into our business?”

“Guns are being fired all over the place,” his brother said. “The city is one big garrison.”

“I’m not going to argue.”

The two men lapsed into a hostile silence. They were lying side-by-side on a piece of flat roof that lay within a nest of chimneys. The object of their contention remained wrapped in the sack they had used to prevent any glimmer of sunlight semaphoring off its barrel. It was a beautiful piece of work, which was part of the problem. The walnut stock was polished to a liquid sheen, and the hexagonal perfection of its barrel was engraved with patterns. It was so light, too. Barely heavier than a halberd.

“It was like this when we were kids,” one brother told the other. “You never would share.”

“Look, there’s only one gun and that swill bucket of an aristo gave it to me. I’m taking the shot.”

Below them the company was being drawn up. It was later than usual, and the remains of last night’s feasting still littered the cobbles. The target bobbed amongst the men, his mop of red hair blinking in and out of view, but the assassins knew that they didn’t need to worry about that. When the formation was drawn up, and when he was standing out in front just as clear and perfectly presented as a target in a shooting range, then they would take him.

That, at least, they could agree upon.

“If you let me take the shot,” one told the other, “I’ll give you the gun.”

“It’s my gun already.”

“No it isn’t. It was for both of us.”

“Shut up, will you? Look, they’re starting to get into their positions. Who’s that?”

His brother, suspecting that this was another attempt to change the subject, glanced down and saw the knight who had entered the yard. His armour was probably worth more than the militia’s entire arsenal. The knight nodded towards the company’s commander and walked over to him.

“This is ridiculous,” the brother without the gun said as the target appeared, darting forwards to greet the newcomer. “You’ll never hit from this...”

But his brother had had enough. Even as the figures milled about in front of him he found himself squeezing the trigger. He kept the barrel tracking his target as the hammer clicked down into the flash of blackpowder in the pan and, with a sudden jolt, the gun roared.

For the first time in his life, Dolf understood what it must be like to have a family. His comrades, rowdy and villainous as they were, had shown him more affection in the past few days than he'd known in his entire life. It helped that he had emerged as the hero of the battle, but even before that he had felt a sense of belonging.

It came in the huddled warmth packed in amongst others on the cobblestones of the yard, in the jokes and the laughter, in the food they shared, and the discomfort and the fear. Most of all, it came in the form of the pride that was beginning to bind them all together. They were, after all, the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig.

That was why the choice Erikson was now offering him was so hard.

"Here comes Schleismann now," the captain said as the knight, splendid in his armour, clanked into the square beneath the curious gaze of the assembled company. "As I said before, it's up to you. I don't want to lose you, but I won't stop you either. The choice is yours."

"Yes, sir," said Dolf. He noticed that Schleismann was wearing a fur cape over his armour and wondered vaguely how much it cost. Not that it would matter to a knight like Schleismann. A knight. Imagine being the squire to such a warrior.

"Captain," Schleismann said, nodding to Erikson. "So, have you put my proposal to young Dolf here?"

"I have indeed," Erikson said. "Although perhaps you'd like to make it yourself."

"Very well." The knight looked down into the youngster's face. "I need a squire. A lad I can trust. A lad who won't run away when the going gets tough. You did a damn fine job yesterday, and I think you'd fit the bill. Well, what do you say?"

Dolf opened his mouth to say yes, but before he uttered the word he looked past the knight to the ragged bunch of men behind him. There was Gunter, as stern in his decency as any man he had met before. There was Porter, who had recently started a fight by claiming that he spat into the stew to improve the flavour. Then there were the others. Men who had slapped him on the back, men who had told him jokes, and shared their food, and complained if he beat the drum too fast even as they picked up their step to keep time.

"No thank you, sir," he said.

"What?" Erikson and Schleismann spoke in unison.

"I'm happy with the company here, sir," Dolf told him. "And I'm a good drummer."

The nearest of the men laughed, and as they told the men behind them what was happening a delighted murmur spread through the ranks. Another man laughed, and Sergeant Alter barked them back into silence.

"I'm sure they are all fine men," Schleismann lied, "but—"

They were his last words. As he spoke there was a clang and he fell forwards even as the gunshot echoed around the yard. The knight collapsed to his knees with a clink of metal. A gout of blood vomited out of his mouth and he fell onto his face.

In the centre of his back plate, a neat hole had been punched through the steel. The blood that had splashed out was already slowing as his heart stopped pumping.

Erikson looked up to where the shot had come from and saw it. Saw the movement amongst the chimney stacks as the assassins emerged from their hide. For

a second the two murderers seemed to be fighting over the gun. Then one of them saw Erikson's hawk-like gaze fixed upon them and they turned and fled.

"Corporal Gunter!" he cried. "Sergeant Alter! See those men? You take the streets on the left, and you those on the right. We have to capture them."

"What about my lot?" Porter asked and Erikson, who was already sprinting towards the balcony and the rooftops, called back over his shoulder.

"Follow me."

They did. For a moment the men in the yard milled about, as confused as any pack of hounds before a hunt, but within seconds the three prongs of the chase were moving.

Erikson sprinted up to the balcony, bounced one foot off the end wall and twisted to get a grip on the guttering. Before it could break he vaulted onto the sliding tiles of the roof and raced up to the ridge.

The cluster of chimneys from where the shot had been fired rose up from the next block of buildings. With a quick prayer of thanks to the architects who had made Hergig such a nest of overhanging gables he leapt down onto one and then sprang across the gap above the street.

He landed easily on the balls of his feet, drew his dagger and clenched it between his teeth. Only then did he scramble up to the chimney stack. Once there he flashed his head over the edge before pulling it back out of shot. The assassins seemed to have gone, and he fought back a sudden urge to let them go.

Behind him there was a dull clump as another man landed on the roof, and he was soon joined by a third.

"Where'd they go, captain?" Porter asked as he climbed up the roof.

Erikson roused himself.

"Not sure yet. Follow me."

As soon as he was amongst the chimneys he saw the evidence of the murderers' long vigil. Empty clay pots lay around amongst the crushed birds' nests, and half a loaf had been left beside a couple of apples.

Erikson looked frantically around over the wasteland of baked clay tiles and mouldering thatch. Here and there towers rose up like islands amongst the crumbling heights and in the distance, like the shores of some far-off continent, the broken-toothed line of the city's battlements provided a horizon.

"Do we get to keep the loot if we catch them?"

Erikson looked down into Porter's pinched features.

"Yes," he decided. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Then follow me," Porter told him with a wink. For a moment it looked as though he was about to throw himself off the roof, but then he turned and Erikson saw the rope that he had picked up. It led down into the street below, a perfectly planned escape route. Erikson stood back as Brandt followed his comrade down the rope. It looked dangerously thin in the hams of his fists as he swung over the edge and abseiled down.

Erikson was about to follow them when Dolf appeared beside him.

"Shall we stay up, sir? See if we can spot them from up here?"

“Yes,” Erikson decided so rapidly that it might have been his intention all along. “Think you can make it to the next roof?”

Dolf leapt almost from a standing start, skinny arms flailing as he flew over the gap between the buildings and landed on all fours on the next roof. Erikson followed him, scrambled up to the ridge, and squinted down into the city below.

The streets were crowded, but after last night’s celebrations not as crowded as they might have been. He briefly saw Gunter’s section ploughing through one of the side streets below, and was pleased to see the corporal sending his men off in different directions even as they spilled through the streets.

Not that they were likely to do much good. The assassins had been too far away to be easily recognisable, and they had fled before most of the men had seen them. Now that they had escaped the company’s first rush all they had to do was to split up, abandon the gun and vanish into the crowd.

“Look!” Dolf cried, pointing to the street below. Erikson looked, and could hardly believe his luck. The two killers were almost directly below him. They were behind a mountain of barrels which were stacked outside the brewery opposite. They were fighting over the gun, pulling at it like dogs over a bone and cursing so loud that he could hear them even from the rooftop.

As he watched, one elbowed the other, an expert blow to the temple that sent his opponent reeling, and clasped the gun to his chest. He looked up, a grin of triumph on his face, and in that moment his and Erikson’s eyes met.

He grabbed his companion by the shoulder, dragged him to his feet and ran.

“Wait.” Erikson snatched at Dolf’s shoulders as he bunched his leg to jump. “I’ll follow. You direct the others. Understand?”

“Yes, captain,” Dolf said, and even as Erikson hurtled through the air and then rode the timber avalanche of the mountain of barrels that collapsed beneath him, it occurred to him to be grateful not to be losing the youngster. Especially as Schleismann had paid for the transfer up front.

He hit the cobbles hard enough to knock that happy thought from his head, and sprang out of the way as the barrels thundered past him. The brewers’ angry voices followed him as he sprinted along the street.

He skidded around the corner and his teeth were bared in a hungry snarl as he saw that he was closing on his quarry. The man with the gun was still dragging his companion along behind him, and Erikson assumed that the man was still dazed from the elbow he’d received to the forehead.

“Stop!” he called ahead of him, his voice ragged as he panted with the effort of the chase. “Stop, thief!”

The warning was a mistake. Had the fleeing men been small and unarmed the civic-spirited citizens of Hergig may well have done their duty and kicked out their legs. But two fully grown men armed with a blackpowder weapon and motivated by a gallows desperation were a completely different matter. The street cleared before them as people hurried out of their way.

Erikson cursed as they opened up their lead and jinked around another corner. He charged after them, refusing to contemplate the possibility of an ambush, and as he spun around into the street down which they had fled he slowed to a halt.

The way ahead was blocked by Sergeant Alter and a dozen of his men. Their various weapons gleamed dully in the shadow of the street, and they were advancing in a line. The two assassins turned and saw Erikson, who had drawn his sword and drifted to a halt.

“It’s all over, lads,” he told them, trying to sound kindly even as he shifted his sword into an underhand grip. The two men looked at him, and for the first time he noticed that, beneath the wiry desperation, they were identical.

Alter’s men hit them like a moving wall, and for a moment they were lost between swirling bodies and stamping boots.

“Don’t kill them,” Erikson said, rushing up and pushing his way through the melee. “We need them alive. Alive I said!”

As Erikson and Alter rescued the assassins from the beating they were being given, nobody saw Porter sidle up and steal the gun, just as nobody noticed him make off with it. Only Brandt followed him as he scuttled off, already thinking of the best place to sell it.

\* \* \*

Deep beneath the baron’s palace lay the provost marshal’s subterranean empire of cellars and store rooms and dungeons. In the midst of this catacomb was his office, a bolt-hole which nature had carved out of living stone.

Steckler was sitting in this lair now, drinking steadily from the pot of wine that rested on the table beside him. After another exhausting day he was as slumped as a bag of laundry, and his eyes were blank as he stared into the flames of the fire that lit his office.

It was late, and now that the screaming from the interrogation chambers had finally petered out the crackle of the fire was the only sound in the room. He watched the flames, mesmerised after the horror and exhaustion of the night. There were times when the duties of the provost marshal weighed heavily, and of all the duties the one he had just completed was heaviest of all.

A knock on the door roused him, and he reached for the small steel crossbow he kept behind his chair.

“Come in,” he said, pulling the slide back to arm the weapon. When he saw who it was he relaxed.

“Ganamedes.” He nodded towards the old man. “Take a seat. Wine?”

“Yes,” Ganamedes said. “That would be a good idea.”

Steckler poured another goblet and handed it to Ganamedes. They clinked their goblets together and drank.

“There is something I want to talk about,” said Ganamedes as he stared into the fire. The flame sparkled in the dark hollows of his eyes, and glistened in the tears that were seeping down the runnels of his wizened features.

“Yes.” Steckler, too exhausted to notice the old man’s distress, nodded. “Yes, I thought you’d be curious. It wasn’t Schleismann they were after at all. It was somebody else.”



“What?” Ganamedes, who had been concentrating purely on the terrible plunge he was about to take, looked at the provost marshal.

“It’s the truth, I’m sure of it,” Steckler told him, and had to suppress a shudder. “We’ve been working on them ever since they came in. Schleismann just got in the way. They were aiming at somebody else, although they died before they could tell us who.”

At any other time Steckler might have seen the confusion that tumbled across Ganamedes’ face. Not now, though. Now he was too dulled by the memories of what he had had to do. The slicing. The burning. The wideness of a terrified eye, glistening with the orange reflection of the glowing poker. And then the pop and the hiss of boiling jelly.

He finished his wine in a single gulp then poured some more. For the first time in his life he felt the need to, if not apologise, then at least to explain.

“This is war, after all,” he told Ganamedes, “and they could have been working for the enemy. Killing our heroes to demoralise our people.”

Ganamedes nodded vaguely.

“Still, it is a hellish business. It is incredible how much pain one can inflict on an individual. Incredible how much pain an individual can feel. We were at it for hours and hours. And hours.”

The provost marshal shuddered again, and Ganamedes, remembering the two assassins that had been brought in, understood.

“You’ve been with the torturers,” he said.

Steckler nodded sorrowfully.

“Yes,” he said. “And the man responsible for inflicting this night on me... well, Ganamedes, if I find him he will pay.”

He looked at Ganamedes and Ganamedes felt the resolve which had brought him here evaporate like steam beneath a torturer’s iron. He couldn’t confess to what he knew. He couldn’t bear to have done to him what had been done to the others.

Am I really so weak, he wondered as he drained his goblet and got to his feet.

“You did a hard job well,” he told Steckler and let himself out of the room.

As Steckler drank himself into an uneasy sleep, Ganamedes paced the halls with an insomniac energy and, not for the first time, contemplated suicide.

## Chapter Eight

In the dark fastness of the forest, Gulkroth stood in the midst of his lieutenants. From the most ox-shouldered of monstrosities to the wiriest little humanoid runt, the beasts that were gathered here were the most vicious examples of their various herds. That was how they had come to lead them.

Even so, they cringed as their lord's gaze swept over them, the infernal fires that lit it bright in the darkness. For many of them the instinct to submit to a stronger beast was something which they had not felt for long, long years. Some tried to resist the instinct, but none succeeded. When they looked into the burning void of their lord's gaze they could feel their own souls beginning to melt like wax in a furnace, and even after they lowered their heads the terror echoed within their skulls.

If Gulkroth had been a lesser creature there would have been a mutiny, of that he had no doubt. Those within striking distance grovelled, but in the aftermath of the battle a dangerous musk of frustration and defiance still greased the air. Blood that should have been spilt had not been. The herds needed a killing to release the pent-up tension that snapped amongst them like lightning.

"I called you here to explain," Gulkroth told them, and they shifted restlessly. Only the weak explained. From the darkness in the back ranks eyes glittered as they dared to look directly at their lord before quickly glancing away.

Gulkroth bared his fangs in a grimace of pleasure.

Let them watch.

"We are the truth of the world," he continued. "We bring death and birth and death again. It has always been thus, and soon we will make the truth permanent. We will wipe the stain of humanity from the world."

"Soon!" The voice echoed his own. "We should have done it today."

A moment of shocked silence was followed by a chorus of nervous agreement, the low growls and whinnies as cautious as they were heartfelt.

Gulkroth looked at the beast who had dared to challenge his authority. It was a goat-faced thing, almost as big as the minotaurs whose blood had fertilised the field today. He could smell that it was in the prime of its life, and that its life was a great one. There was magnificence about it. A wild energy.

It would make the perfect sacrifice.

"You challenge me," Gulkroth stated, and the need for words was over. The beast bellowed, a full-throated roar that carried through the forest to the army that waited beyond, then it charged at him in an avalanche of horn and hide and muscle.

Gulkroth waited as, hidden like tumours in the darkness, Ruhrkar and his shamans seized and twisted the thread of its life. He could see their sorcerous assault as others could not, the dark energy that flowed through the forest like blood through

a body. It buckled and snarled up beneath the shamans' will, and then they were using it, curling it like a whip around the charging bulk of Gulkroth's challenger.

The beast screamed as its bones splintered beneath it, the joints grinding and snapping as they exploded within the living meat of its legs. It fell forwards, and even as it did its mighty shoulders were snapping as loudly as branches breaking beneath the frost. Its arms flailed uselessly, elbows popping and wrists crunching apart so that the muscles slipped from their moorings and writhed like coils of snakes beneath its hide.

The beast took another lungful of air, but this time it wheezed out to the crackle of disintegrating vertebrae.

Gulkroth watched his challenger flop bonelessly on the floor, as helpless as a newborn foal. A stream of ripe yellow dung sputtered from between its legs and it rolled in the filth even as blood started to leak from the sudden snap of its jaws.

"I called you here to explain," Gulkroth repeated. The beasts listened to him even as they watched the mewling thing that now lay dying in its own filth.

"The humans are weak in small numbers, and they are weak in the forest. As easy to crush as a hornet. But together, and in the open, they become strong. As dangerous as a nest of hornets. So we will lure them in."

He gestured expansively over the still-living body of his challenger.

"We will separate them."

He bent down and seized the rubbery tube of meat and splintered bone that had been the challenger's arm. With a grunt of effort and a sudden twist he tore the limb free. Blood sprayed from severed arteries as a horrible bubbling scream came from the stricken beast. Gulkroth ignored it as, with a wide-armed throw, he hurled the limb into the forest.

"And we will tear them to shreds."

He took another limb, this one the remains of a leg, and his shoulders rolled as he tore again. Then he took the other arm. More blood arced into the air as the butchery continued, the victim's still-beating heart pumping with horror and desperation as it was dismembered.

"We will tear them to shreds," Gulkroth explained as he stooped to grasp his assailant's head. It crunched like a leather bag full of broken glass as he tore it from the torso, and the eyes rolled with the last flickers of anguish even as he lifted it above his head.

"And we will tear them to shreds piece by piece," he proclaimed, and bowled the head almost casually into the frozen terror of the beasts around him.

And suddenly they were roaring their approval, a tsunami of terror and frustration and admiration for the beast who would lead them to victory. Gulkroth's eyes blazed with an unholy fire as he looked at the sea of distorted faces around him, every one twisted into a rictus of fear and aggression, and in that moment he knew that they were truly unstoppable.

He rolled back his head and added his voice to the bellow of the herd, and as he did so the thousands of beasts beyond joined them so that the trees quivered and the ground trembled and the earth itself seemed to shake with anticipation of the slaughter to come.

A week had passed since they had handed the assassins over to the provost marshal, and in that time Erikson and Alter had drilled the men relentlessly. Every morning the guards huddled on top of the battlements had watched them march out of the city into the open spaces beyond. There they had watched them form and re-form their square, or watched them cross broken ground time and again until they could do so without breaking formation, or watched them close ranks as Erikson removed random men from amongst them, or watched them move from defensive square to marching column and then back again.

And all the time Erikson and Alter harried them with the relentless energy of sheepdogs rounding up a flock. The captain and the sergeant barked and shoved and beat the manoeuvres into their men's instincts with constant repetition so that they learned to respond with unthinking precision.

Every evening the company marched back into the city before the gathering dusk, the men exhausted and their officers hoarse. For the first few days the men had staggered back after the day's exercises with their heads down, their faces grim with confusion and resentment. It was only gradually that they began to learn the lessons that Erikson was hammering into their muscles, and as they learned they began to march with a different expression.

An expression of pride.

For some, this was the first time they had felt such an emotion, and Erikson tended it as closely as the first delicate flame in a ball of tinder. He knew that compared to the clockwork precision of the state troopers his company were still little more than a mob, but that didn't worry him. They were a mob that might be able to hold together in the storm of a battle, and that was all he had ever expected from them.

Today, after marching the company out of the city, he had split it into three sections. Alter, Gunter and Porter stood at the head of their men. Erikson wondered if it would be possible to find an odder assortment of leaders. It certainly wouldn't be possible to find an odder assortment of men. When they were marching or when they had formed a perfect checkerboard of rank and file, it was possible to forget that they were the sweepings of Hergig's gaol. But when they were standing, or rather skulking, at ease they appeared exactly what they were.

"Gentlemen," he told them. "Today we are going to try something different. Today we are going to have a relay race between here and the city walls. One man from each section will run to that tower, then back to his section. The next man will do the same and so on. And the winning team," he paused for dramatic effect, "will get a roasted pig. Go!"

And they went. Gunter contented himself with the palmed fist of Sigmarite catechism as a blessing before unleashing his first man. Alter barked his own section into silence before selecting their first runner. Porter, meanwhile, was a dozen paces into the lead before either of his rivals had started.

As the first men raced towards the wall their comrades bellowed out encouragement, their voices drawing curious stares from the regiment that was marching out of Hergig's gates and towards some unknown destination. There had

been a lot of these sudden departures over the past few days, Erikson considered, then turned his attention back to the race as the spectators rose to a roar of protest.

Porter, it seemed, had kicked the legs out from his competitor.

“Carry on!” Erikson bellowed above the racket.

He was so engrossed in the race that he didn’t hear the gallop of the approaching herald’s horse until the man was right on top of him. He swung from his saddle, landed easily on his heels and saluted Erikson.

“Good to see you again,” Erikson told the man, recognising him from the battlefield.

“Likewise, sir,” the herald grinned. “After your battle you are the talk of the town.”

“That’s what we train for,” Erikson told him and the man’s grin grew even wider.

“Yes, they do seem to be getting faster,” the herald said as he watched the racing men.

Erikson bit back on the urge to laugh and forced himself to scowl instead.

“Strength and teamwork,” he said as one of the runners elbowed another in the kidneys. “That’s what it’s all about. Have you ever considered joining a frontline company? We could always use another man.”

Erikson let the question hang in the air, and was pleased to see the grin vanish from the herald’s face.

“No, I know my place,” he said and rapidly unrolled his parchment. “Which is why I’m here. Baron Ludenhof requests and requires that the Gentleman’s free Company of Hergig make all speed to the town of Nalderstein, and there make such preparations as may be necessary to its defence.”

Erikson regarded him with suspicion.

“Nalderstein? Where’s that?”

“Three days’ march down the southern road,” the herald read from his parchment. “And then one day’s march east on the forest highway. All who you encounter are required to give reasonable assistance, and may in turn apply to the chancellor for recompense.”

“The forest highway,” Erikson repeated. “Presumably runs through the forest.”

“It runs along it, sir,” the herald told him. “It might be an idea to march along that bit at double time. And in the daylight.”

“Thanks,” said Erikson as the herald formally handed him the parchment and bowed.

“Do you accept the orders as given to you?” he asked.

Erikson grunted and nodded his head.

“We will leave in the morning. I need time to prepare.”

“The orders do require you to make all due speed...” the herald began, then saw the look on Erikson’s face and trailed off. “Yes, well. As you see fit, captain.”

“Sure you won’t come with us?” said Erikson, straightening his back and beaming with confidence as some of the men looked curiously at him and the messenger.

“No thank you,” the herald said. “But I will be putting a couple of shillings on you making it back. Good luck!”

With a final salute he leapt back on his horse and trotted back towards the city walls. They suddenly looked very inviting. Very secure. And if they looked that way to him, Erikson thought, how much more so would they look to his reluctant warriors?

Well, so be it. They hadn't deserted yet. And anyway, by the time he told them where they were going they would be far beyond the safety of the city walls. The terror of what lay in the woods might be just the bond he needed to keep them together once they were outside of the reach of Ludenhof's swift justice.

There was a shriek of pain from the torn-up race track and he saw one of the men writhing around, his nose pouring with blood. Cries of outrage from his comrades vied with the jeers from those of the perpetrator, a bull-necked man who was gleefully sprinting away from the tackle.

Erikson took a deep breath, and smiled. He would run them hard today. Exhausted men were less likely to react badly when they learned where they were going. Or at the very least, they would be less likely to desert.

At least, he hoped so.

Viksberg was loitering in the hall of columns that formed the entrance to the baron's palace. It was a busy thoroughfare, and dozens of urgent footsteps echoed in the high vaults and amongst the pillars that held them up. Even during the quietest times it was busy. Now, with the army squeezed into the city and the land outside under attack, it bustled like a marketplace.

Although he hardly wanted to be seen with the herald, Viksberg hadn't been able to wait for the good news. As soon as he saw the man he scuttled over to him, took him by the elbow and guided him into one of the alcoves that riddled the masonry here.

"Did he accept?" Viksberg asked, oblivious to the look of distaste that pinched the herald's face.

"Yes," the herald told him. "Yes, he accepted."

"You don't think he doubted the seal?" Viksberg asked. "He wasn't suspicious?"

"Why would he be suspicious?" the herald asked him coldly. "He's a soldier. Going to fight the enemy is what soldiers do. Most soldiers, anyway."

That last comment slipped out before he could stop himself, but he needn't have worried. Viksberg was too relieved to notice the implied reproach.

"So is he going now?" Viksberg wanted to know. The herald, who was beginning to feel the first flickers of regret about this whole business, shook his head.

"No, they'll go in the morning," he said. "In the meantime, where is my fee?"

Viksberg was suddenly wary.

"Oh no, not until they've gone," he said and lowered his voice to a whisper. "That was the arrangement."

The herald made sure that nobody was within earshot before replying.

"The *arrangement* was that I altered the orders so that the Gentleman's Free Company was sent into the dragon's mouth whilst the company that was actually supposed to go remained nice and safe here, on garrison duty."

"Keep your voice down," Viksberg told him nervously.

The herald shook his head with disgust.

“I assume that the company that gets to stay here is yours,” the herald said.

Viksberg looked surprised, then affronted. Then he just shrugged. If the man believed that he had sent Dolf’s company to its doom in place of his own, then let him. He wanted nobody to suspect the real reason for his machinations, which was to permanently silence the little street rat who was the only witness to his crime.

“I would pay up now if I were you,” the herald told him. “Before somebody realises that a bunch of militiamen have been sent to hold a town that was actually assigned a whole regiment.”

“Why would you tell anybody now?” Viksberg sneered. “That way you’d lose your money.”

“Because I can’t help liking the poor beggars’ captain,” the herald said. “And because we’re at war.”

The statement had the ring of truth to it and, with a last look around him, Viksberg reached for his purse. He counted out the coins and handed them over.

“Just make sure that nobody does find out,” Viksberg told the herald, who nodded reluctantly.

Everything was fair in love and war, he told himself. And business is business.

He sighed, pocketed the coin and went on his way.

The next morning, in the grey hour before the sun had risen and with the chill of Fish Market Square’s cobbles in their bones, the company was roused and assembled in the midst of the square for the last time. Once they had formed rank and file, Erikson gave them the good news. They didn’t take it well.

“We’re going where?” Minsk asked, his voice high-pitched with outrage.

“Silence in the ranks,” Alter barked at him, but for once the whiplash of the sergeant’s voice wasn’t enough to quell the muttering.

“We are going,” Erikson repeated, “to a place called Nalderstein.”

“In the middle of the forest?” Minsk asked. “On our own? We won’t last five minutes.”

Erikson was disappointed that the murmur of agreement seemed to come from virtually every man in the company. He exchanged a glance with Alter, but before he could speak again Corporal Gunter intervened on his behalf.

“It is true that the forest is teeming with the enemy,” he said as he turned to his fellows. “And it is also true that we will be isolated, cut off from the artillery and the knights and the other regiments that would be able to help us. But if we die, our bodies torn to shreds and our bones littered throughout the blood-soaked wilderness, then so be it. We are the sons of Sigmar, and there can be no more righteous death than that which awaits us in the darkness of the forest.”

A handful of Gunter’s disciples nodded their agreement. The rest of the company stood in an aghast silence.

“That’s it, I’m not going.” Minsk declared.

“You have to,” Alter snapped.

“No I don’t,” Minsk said and folded his arms. “I want to go back to gaol. At least it’s safe there.”

“You really are an arse,” Porter told him.

“At least I won’t be a dead one,” Minsk said, and Erikson watched to see who nodded in agreement. He had let Minsk speak so that he would encourage the weak links to show themselves. Now that they had done so, it was time to shut him up.

“Minsk,” Erikson told him, the tone of his voice friendly and relaxed. “If you refuse to fight you refuse to fight. I can accept this. But be under no illusion. You are a soldier and we are at war. There will be no gaol for you. Just the executioner’s block.”

The mutineer’s mouth opened and then closed. He pulled nervously on his earlobe and turned to find support amongst his comrades, but they were all suddenly looking elsewhere.

“Corporal Porter,” Erikson said, raising his voice slightly. “The chopping block and cleaver you use for butchering the meat. Would it be hygienic to use them?”

“On Minsk, sir?” Porter asked with a malicious delight. “I should think so. Just have to make sure they’re thoroughly washed afterwards.”

“This is ridiculous,” Minsk said, and took a step backwards.

“You don’t expect a battle axe and a blacksmith in a hood, do you?” Erikson asked him. “We’re a regiment in the field. We have to make do with what we have. Corporal Gunter, would you be willing to read Minsk his last rites?”

“No, sir,” Gunter shook his head. “A coward can expect neither mercy nor forgiveness. I will wield the cleaver though.”

“Thank you,” Erikson said, then raised his voice to speak to the company.

“Would anybody else prefer a quick death here to taking their chances with the rest of us?”

“Wait a minute!” Minsk cried. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“You have decided not to desert after all?” Erikson asked, feigning surprise.

“Yes, yes. Of course.”

“Good,” Erikson told him. “Now, gentlemen, if there are no more questions I suggest we make a start. Porter, you will have responsibility for the mules and the stores. Your section will be in the middle of the column.”

Porter grinned and rubbed his hands with such avaricious glee that for a moment Erikson considered changing his mind. He hadn’t intended to put the company’s entire material wealth in Porter’s sticky fingers, but after his support he was feeling generous. And anyway, over the past weeks the villain’s economy had outstripped his greed, and the men were fed as well as any soldiers could expect to be. No reason this wouldn’t continue.

“Gunter,” he continued. “Yours will take the rear, and Sergeant Alter’s section will lead. Understand?”

“Answer the officer,” Alter barked, and as one man they said, “Yes, sir.”

It was on that unified note that the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig set out on their first posting.

By the time the sun had risen they were passing through the city gates. The previous day had seen Erikson and Porter bully and bribe and scrounge their way through the city’s stores, the requisition parchment in their hands, and of all the dangers they would face starvation was not one. As well as their bedrolls and



weapons each man also carried a half-sack of grain or millet or salt-fish over his shoulders. The half-dozen mules they had been able to commandeer carried barrels of wine and the two massive brass kettles which Porter had acquired for boiling water.

As the company moved off Erikson was in high spirits. Last night he had secured an advance on the payment for the company's hire, and the purse was as heavy on his belt as the sun was warm on his neck.

What more could a mercenary ask for?

They marched for four hours at a steady pace that ate up the miles with a deceptive speed. The ground rolled ahead of them in a gently undulating sea of growing wheat, waist high and shimmering with tones of green and gold. It was coated with dust on either side of the road, and high overhead hawks circled, looking for the mice that feasted on the growing crop. Erikson looked across the endless fields and wondered how long it would be until they were scythed.

For some reason the thought sent a chill down his back, and he quickened the pace until, in the distance, they could see the storm front of a distant forest. It edged up to the fields, as dark and silent as some terrible predator. As the column drew near to it the head of every man in the company turned to peer nervously into the tangled depths. If Erikson hadn't known better he would have thought it impossible that beasts the size of those he had seen could move so easily through such undergrowth.

But know better he did. That was why he marched the company through the midday heat. It wasn't until the sun was setting on the exhausted column that the road wound away from the forest and towards the wreckage of a deserted village. A stream gurgled between the broken walls and blackened timbers, and before Erikson could stop them the men were stampeding towards the delicious coolness of the fresh water.

"We'll camp here tonight," he told Alter as they watched the men slaking their thirst, getting down on all fours to drink like cattle from the stream.

"It doesn't look as though it has been deserted for long," Alter said doubtfully, and scratched a fingernail through the charcoal that blackened one of the shattered timbers which littered the ground.

"I know," Erikson nodded, and looked back towards the forest which lurked no more than a couple of bow shots distant. Whatever fate had befallen the people of this village, he had no doubt that it had come from the depths of that terrible wilderness.

For the first time he noticed the scatter of bones and stakes that lay to the south of the ruins. At first he took the bones to be human, but as he drew closer he saw that they belonged to dogs. The animals' skulls had been punched into sharpened sticks, which had since been blown over.

"I've heard of this," Alter told him. "Some say that the beasts fear our hounds more than our arms."

"They have nothing to fear from these hounds anymore," Erikson said and examined the gnaw marks that had patterned one of the skulls. He was still turning it in his hands when a scream rang out from amongst the men.

Erikson raced towards the commotion, vaulting tumbledown walls and sodden piles of collapsed thatch as he did so. His sword was already in his hand when he reached the group which had gathered around the man. Erikson pushed through them

to see a man bent over, vomiting up the water he had drunk. As he stumbled away from what he had found a groan went through the crowd and suddenly another man was vomiting. And then two more.

The acrid stink of their sickness adding a bitter tang to the sickly-sweet smell of decay that Erikson could now smell. It grew stronger with every step Erikson took closer to the stream, and by the time he reached the carcass he wasn't surprised. He had smelt death often enough in the past.

The rotting corpse was wedged beneath the bank where it had been hidden by overhanging vegetation. As Erikson leant over it and prodded it with his sword the stink of it rose up and hit him like a fist. He felt his stomach roll and saliva flooded his mouth as he fought back the urge to retch.

Whatever the thing was, it hadn't been human. The fur, which now undulated with the wriggle of maggots, was as thick and coarse as a goat's, and the partially stripped skull was armoured with horns and long, yellow fangs.

Erikson poked at it again and it disintegrated with a squelch of rotten flesh. The skull rolled out into the centre of the stream but another part broke free and floated down past where the men had been drinking moments before.

Their cries of disgust rose in a chorus, and Erikson cursed himself for letting them drink before he had checked the water source.

"From now on, gentlemen," he called, "we will boil all water until we know that it is safe."

He didn't think that he would need to tell them again.

That night they ate a hearty meal of salt-fish stew and flatbread. As the sun set and the dying cooking fires sent their shadows chasing amongst the ruins, Erikson set the first sentries and rolled into his blanket. Within minutes he was asleep, and as the fires died down so the rest of the company also collapsed into their blankets. Soon they were snoring amongst the ruins as happily as a herd of pigs, oblivious to the pale moon that rose overhead.

It wasn't until the purple of dusk had fully darkened into the velvet blackness of the night that Minsk made his move.

He was exhausted from the day's march, and only his anticipation of the trials to come kept him awake. When he finally rolled up his blankets and sidled over to where Hofstadter was curled up, he was alive with expectation.

"Hofstadter," he whispered into his comrade's ear, "Wake up."

The two of them had been together for years, right up until that last job when they'd been captured by the city watch. When Hofstadter blinked awake he took one look at Minsk, wide-eyed in the moonlight, and knew that the time had come.

"I said we'd take Karl, too," he whispered as his comrade silently gathered his belongings.

"And I promised Ernst and Hendrick we'd take them when we left," Hofstadter hissed, and Minsk sucked his teeth as he considered the idea. There was always safety in numbers, especially when some of those numbers could be outrun. On the other hand, he didn't want to take so many men that the swine Erikson would be compelled to pursue them.

Eventually it was the thought of what might happen if they ran into some of the enemy before they got back to Hergig that decided him, and he nodded reluctantly.

“Right you are,” he whispered into Hofstadter’s ear, “but make it quick. Theo is the sentry in the west, and he’s in on it too. We need to go before he’s replaced.”

The two deserters made their way amongst the patches of moonlight and endless shadows as they gathered together their little band. Now and again they froze at some movement or the sound of one of their sleeping companions crying out in his sleep, but slowly, with a stealth born of long practice, they gathered their friends and slipped towards the sentry.

He leapt to his feet when he heard them approach, and the blade of his halberd winked coldly with starlight.

“Don’t say anything,” Minsk hissed urgently. “It’s only us.”

“Minsk,” Theo said. His expression was invisible in the darkness but there was something in the tone of his voice that Minsk didn’t like.

“You ready?” he asked. “Me and the boys are heading off. Going to do our own little bit of campaigning.”

There was a snigger from behind him and an angry hush. Minsk looked back, eyes flashing with anger at the stupidity.

“No, I’ve changed my mind,” Theo said, his voice quiet but edged with defiance.

“Are you mad?” Minsk said. “This is the best chance we’ve got.”

“I think I’ll stay with this lot, all the same,” Theo said, then hesitated as he saw two of Minsk’s companions circling silently around on either side of him. “You don’t need to worry about me, though. I never saw you. All right?”

There was a moment of breathless silence in which nobody moved. Minsk broke it.

“All right, Theo,” he said. “I trust you. Let’s shake on it.”

As the two men gripped each other’s hands Hofstadter struck, banging the hilt of his sword into the side of Theo’s head. There was a crack which sounded as loud as a gunshot in the night, and the sentry collapsed into Minsk’s arms.

“Maybe we should finish him off?” Minsk whispered as he carefully lowered the unconscious man to the floor.

Another silence, this time broken by Hofstadter.

“Well, I don’t fancy doing it,” he said.

“Let’s get a move on then,” Minsk said and, pausing only to relieve Theo of his purse, he led his band of deserters out into the night.

Despite the day’s march they moved fast, especially when the glow of the company’s fires disappeared behind a small hill and they found themselves alone in the darkness. The moon had risen high enough to give them a good view of the road. The solid earth of its surface glowed pale in the moonlight and even without torches the men trotted along at a good pace.

They didn’t stop until the moon had begun to sink down towards the horizon, and even then it was only to rest for a while before heading on.

They first saw the flame a mile after the stop. It hung on the horizon like a miniature sun in the darkness.

“Are we there already?” Hofstadter wondered aloud.

“No, we can’t be,” Minsk told him.

The deserters looked at the light uncertainly.

“Maybe we should go around it,” Ernst said.

“No,” Minsk decided. “I think it’s only one torch. Let’s get a bit closer. But quietly, now. You never know, we might have found our first bit of loot on our first night of freedom.”

It was on this happy note that the men advanced. When they were close enough to see that the flame was a single torch they spread out, leaving the road on either side to outflank whoever the torch bearer might be. It was an instinctive manoeuvre, as lethal and well tried as the circling of wolves, and soon the target was surrounded.

The torch had been driven into the hard-packed earth of the road, hammered fast before it had been set alight. The top was a wicker basket that blazed with flames from the oil reservoir that had been bundled inside. There was neither sight nor sound of who might have left it there.

“Perhaps it’s a signal to somebody,” Hofstadter suggested.

“Or a warning,” Minsk replied. “Look, look there. There’s a parchment tied to the haft.”

Reluctantly, knowing that he would have to do this if he was to remain his pack’s leader, Minsk edged forwards. He moved slowly, examining the ground before him for any sign of pit or snare, although occasionally he would look to his comrades for reassurance.

He finally reached the torch and, careful of the sparks that crackled and sputtered from the fire, he untied the parchment and held it to the light to read. He squinted as he tilted the parchment to make out the single word which had been printed across it.

“What does it say?” Hofstadter called out impatiently.

“‘Goodbye’,” Minsk said, puzzlement creasing his brow.

A hum cut through the darkness, as soft as the purr of a silken cat, and when Minsk stood up his men could see that the expression had been pinned to his face for an eternity. The arrow had buried itself between his eyes, a perfect shot that had killed him so neatly that he stood for a while longer, his body not yet realising that it was dead.

The men watched in silence as their leader stood there, ridiculous in his injury.

“Gentlemen,” a voice called out of the darkness. “Minsk was given his warning. He chose not to take it. Now, I give you yours.”

The four mutineers froze. They could see each other in the torchlight. And so could the archer.

“Will you abandon this attempt at mutiny and return to your comrades?” the voice asked again, and this time Hofstadter recognised it.

“Erikson,” he said.

“What?” The voice took on a harder edge.

“Captain, I mean,” Hofstadter corrected himself with a quick glance down towards the corpse of his comrade. Minsk’s eyes glittered in the torchlight, as dead as the stars above.

“That’s more like it,” Erikson said as he rose from the hollow he had lain in and strode into their midst. He bent down over his victim and, with a well-practiced twist,

freed the arrow. He knelt on his haunches, his back to the mutineers, and used Minsk's tunic to clean the gore from it.

"Will we be punished, captain?" one of the mutineers asked.

"Yes," Erikson told them. "You will have to carry double loads until we reach our destination. And if you try to mutiny again..." He stood up and gestured towards the cooling corpse of their leader.

The mutineers hesitated, torn between returning to the company or trying to kill their captain.

"Hofstadter." Erikson pretended not to know what was going through their minds. "You can carry the body. The man may not have been much of a soldier, but I know he was your comrade and we will bury him properly before we move on tomorrow. Ernst, you help him. Come on, man, snap to it. Who knows what else that flame may have brought?"

The men looked around nervously then hurried to pick up the body of their leader.

"Come on," Erikson said, and led them back towards the camp, the occasional splash of Minsk's cooling blood leaving a dark trail behind them.

## Chapter Nine

“Mummy, I’m scared.”

Hilda looked down at her daughter’s big wide eyes, and felt her grubby little fist close even tighter around her fingers. The rest of the children were gathered about them, huddled amongst the wheat bins of the town’s granary. It was the only building to be made of stone, and it was pleasantly cool compared to the sweltering heat outside.

Not that that was why they were packed in here today.

“You don’t need to be scared, Henni,” Hilda said and stroked the back of her daughter’s neck as she bounced her on her knee. She had only started speaking in the last few months, and her vocabulary had been shaped by the horror that had emerged with the green shoots of this spring.

“But will the beasties get me?” It was a heartfelt question, and Hilda felt like crying. Instead she smiled and kissed her on the forehead.

“Of course not, darling,” she said. “You said your prayers to Sigmar, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“There you go, then. Sigmar will protect you. Remember what he did to the orcs in the story?”

“Yes, but will he protect Daddy too?”

Hilda swallowed the lump in her throat.

“I hope so,” she said. “I hope so.”

The noise of battle that raged outside was muted by the thick stone walls and bolted oaken door of the place, but even so the roars and the screams were terrible. In the darkness several children were crying, and now somebody else started. Hilda realised that it was one of the other mothers and felt something like outrage. She sat Henni down with another little girl and went to quiet the woman.

It was Gerta, the baker’s wife. Her plump cheeks glistened with tears, and she was hugging her child to her chest as she rocked back and forth.

“Gerta,” Hilda told her quietly. “Stop that.”

“I can’t. I can’t stop it. They’re coming for us, can’t you hear them? They’re going to kill us all, even the little ones. The baron has abandoned us and now we’re all going to—”

Hilda slapped her, hard. It felt good.

“I said stop that,” she repeated and Gerta, her mouth a perfect circle of surprise, already had. Hilda thought about apologising, and decided not to. Instead she stood up and looked around the other women who sat miserably amongst their children.

“She’s right about one thing, though,” she told them, her voice carefully cheerful so as not to upset the children. “The baron is no help to us now. We’re on our own. I think that the grandmothers should stay here and look after the little ones. I think the rest of us should go and give the men a hand.”

“But Elder Ronald told us all to stay in here,” Gerta whined, and Hilda had to fight back the urge to slap her again.

“Oh, you don’t want to pay any attention to that silly old fool,” Elder Ronald’s wife said. A lifetime of grinding corn and scrubbing floors had given her strong arms, and she lifted the scythe off its rack easily.

“Hilda’s right,” said Mabel, and brushed back a strand of the jet-black hair that she was so fond of but could never quite keep in her bonnet. “So tell us, Hilda. What shall we do?”

Hilda, who couldn’t quite believe what she was getting them into, shrugged.

“Take a scythe,” she said. “And go and protect our babies.”

As a war cry it would never find its way into the histories of the war, but in the darkness, with the howling of the beasts outside and the crying of the children within, it kindled their hearts with a wild courage.

“Grandma, lock the door behind us,” she told one of the old women and then, after giving Henni a last, loving kiss, she led her little band outside.

After the gloom of the granary the brightness of the world outside made her eyes water and she squinted as she marched forwards, pitchfork held expertly in her hands. The gate to the stockade was fifty feet ahead, and she could see the bodies swarming over it. The men had been standing on a walkway behind the timber, but even through the dust she could see the twisted forms that were clambering over the sharpened tree trunks to bite and hack at the men.

As she watched, one of the creatures, a nightmare of goat and man and daemon all fused into one writhing form locked its jaws on a man’s throat and shook him as easily as a terrier shaking a rat. The victim fell back with a gurgling scream and the beast came with him. There was a crunch as the man’s body hit the ground, crushed beneath the weight of his assailant, and with a wet tear that Hilda could hear even at this distance it tore out a mouthful of flesh, swallowed it, and then caught sight of her.

She screamed as it bounded forwards, pink fangs bared in what looked like a smile, but it wasn’t a scream of terror. She had recognised the man that had been killed, and her cry was one of pure, blinding rage.

She rushed forwards to meet the thing, the other women following behind her. When it was in range she jabbed at it with the pitchfork. It twisted to one side, avoiding the thrust and grabbing at the haft. But Hilda was too quick. She reversed the weapon before the beast could close its grip, and used the blunt end to punch it between the eyes. Wood bounced off bone and it staggered back with a snarl of surprise.

Hilda reversed the pitchfork again and this time when she struck the vicious serpent’s teeth of the tines found their mark. They punctured the beast’s hide and slipped in between its ribs with every ounce of Hilda’s twelve stone of weight behind them.

The beast vomited out a spray of blood along with its final scream. Hilda, struck with a sudden vision of what it would have done to her daughter, screamed back as she twisted her weapon free of the lice-ridden body.

She grimaced at the stink of its filthy hide, and then the even greater stink of its green guts as she struck again and opened a cavity in its belly. Filthy thing, she thought, and saw that some of the other women had reached the gate. But now the men were jumping down from their perches and shooing the women back as they fled.

Hilda felt a moment's rage at their abandonment of the gate, but then she saw the dark shapes that were scurrying amongst the houses and realised why. The beasts had breached the wall somewhere else, and were free within the stockade.

"Back to the granary," she cried, suddenly terrified that one of the foul creatures might get there first. The doors were strong, but they were only wood, and if one of these horrors got in amongst the old women and children...

Refusing to think about that, Hilda led the charge back to the granary. Within a dozen steps Johann, her husband, overtook her. His eyes were bright and his skin was as pale as it had been when he'd had the ague last winter, and for the first time in his life he looked afraid.

"I told you to wait inside, woman," he barked at her.

Hilda didn't deign to reply. Instead she concentrated on the sprint back to the granary. She reached the door of the granary and turned her back to it. The rest of the townspeople milled around her, confusion and then horror sharpening their voices as they realised that Elder Rijkaard was dead. One of the women was already keening as the beasts swarmed through the gates, which had now been torn off their hinges, and surged towards them.

They were a nightmare in the noonday sun. Although the beasts had fallen silent as they gathered for the final onslaught the air still buzzed with their presence. Clouds of flies swarmed around them, feasting on filth and mucus and wounds, and blood-glutted ticks burrowed busily through their matted fur.

Most were goat-legged, and all sported horns above faces made more horrible by the occasional hint of what might once have been humanity. But if their flesh still bore clues to what they might once have been, their slit-pupilled eyes burned with what they were now.

They were remorseless, rapacious, reviled. They were death made flesh and sent into the world. They were the enemy.

"Hilda," Johann said, turning to look at her. "I love you."

It was the first time he had said it, and now that he had she wished that he had not. The desperate truth in his voice sounded like a death knell.

"Never mind that silliness now," she snapped at him, and scolded herself for the rush of warm tears that slid down her cheeks.

And then the beasts were upon them.

They came in a rush, roaring in a chorus of hatred that blended into a tidal-wave sound of bestial fury. Hilda peered from between the men who stood in front of her, and as beasts struck the defenders she was crushed back with the rest towards the granary.



In the pack she couldn't see much of the onslaught. The occasional flash of sunlight on a raised blade. A gout of blood, black and ruby against the clear blue sky. A flailing limb, a snapping jaw full of razored teeth.

Even as she was crushed further back Hilda could hear that they were losing. The human voices seemed to do nothing but scream with agony whilst the beasts seem to do nothing but roar with blasphemous exultation.

In the sweat and the panic she realised that the bodies were now packed so tight that she could no longer lift her weapon. She turned to Johann, who stood beside her, their shoulders crushed together.

"I love you too," she said, but before he could reply the crush slackened, the beasts drawing back.

At first she thought that the drumbeat was the sound of her own heart, but as it grew louder she could hear the sound of marching boots and the sharp, clear sound of men barking orders.

The crush eased further and Hilda elbowed forwards. Soon she was standing amidst a tangle of bodies, men and beasts lying side by side. She stopped to dispatch a wolf-faced thing which was still spurting arterial blood from a gash in its neck, and when she looked up it was to see the rout of the enemy.

If the beasts had stood their ground the carnage on both sides would have been awful, but trapped between the anvil of the defenders on one side and the relentless marching column of soldiers that had appeared behind them they panicked, tearing at each other as they fled.

The soldiers made no attempt to pursue them. Instead they slaughtered those too slow to avoid the churning steel of their first rank, then stopped in the town square. They formed a neat square box of men and muscle and cold, hard steel.

Hilda walked forwards, hardly daring to believe that they had been saved. As she drew closer to the soldiers she could see that they were not what she had expected. They were dressed in rags more than uniforms, and they had the scrawny frames of vagabonds rather than the well-fed beefiness of state troopers.

Not that it mattered. All that mattered was that they had arrived in time.

As she stood gawping, their leader strode out from amongst their ranks, swept off a hat that had enough feathers for a brace of geese, and bowed.

"Good afternoon, madam," he said. "Might I enquire if this fair town is Nalderstein?"

"Yes," Hilda said, and found that she was rearranging her hair. "Yes it is."

"Excellent," Erikson beamed, and for the first time Hilda realised what a bright shade of green his eyes were. "In that case we have arrived at our new posting. My name is Captain Erikson, late of Estalia and Marienburg, and this is the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig."

"Very pleased to meet you, sir," Hilda said and curtsied awkwardly.

"Maybe you should see to the children," Johann told her, and she almost smiled at the jealousy she saw in his eyes. With a last look at Erikson's ragged gallants she went to deal with the moans of the wounded and the crying of the children.

So much for the romance of war, she thought, and started tearing up cloth for bandages.

A hundred miles distant in Hergig, and secure in the cool vastness of the baron's council chamber, the blood and the sweat and the dust of a hundred Naldersteins were marked on a vast vellum map that had been attached to the wall.

Cloth-tipped pins marked every settlement in the barony. Green marked those that were guarded, white marked those that had been left to their own defences, and red were the epitaphs of those known to have been destroyed.

Ganamedes was sitting alone in the hall, the low afternoon sun casting the shadows of the pins across the map. Every day more and more of the pins turned red. The depressing markers were scattered across the land like boils on a plague victim.

Some of the settlements they had lost had been tiny hamlets of no more than a few families. Others had been prosperous towns with their own markets and mills. Ganamedes wondered how many of the inhabitants had been killed and how many had fled.

He didn't look up when the doors opened. It wasn't until the clip of boots stopped behind him that he realised these men weren't the servants. When he turned he found the provost marshal standing behind him and, behind the provost marshal, two other men.

"Good afternoon, Ganamedes," Steckler said, and as soon as Ganamedes heard the sorrow in his voice he knew that he had been found out. To his surprise, the only thing he felt at this fact was relief.

"I want to see the baron," Ganamedes said.

"Maybe later," Steckler told him. "First of all we need to ask you a few questions. They're about certain things we've found in your quarters."

"Let me show you where the rest of the books are," Ganamedes told him, and sighed at the feeling of an immense weight being lifted from his shoulders. "You won't have found them all."

"You'd be surprised," said Steckler, whose men were nothing if not thorough. "And if you wouldn't mind..."

He dropped the manacles onto the table in front of Ganamedes. They were silver, and beneath the dents and scratches sigils had been etched deeply into the metal. With hardly a heartbeat of hesitation Ganamedes snapped them closed about his bony wrists, and shuddered with revulsion as the enchanted metal narrowed around them in an almost organic movement.

The material was as cold and sinuous as a serpent, and it wriggled and squirmed about the contours of the old man's wrists until it was snug.

"Here," he said, holding his bound wrists up to display that none of the sigils was yet glowing a warning. Not yet, anyway. "Lead on. I've been wanting to get this over with for a long, long time."

Steckler, by contrast, had only just begun to dread what they were going to have to do to the silly old sod.

He stood back as the two guards grabbed Ganamedes' bony elbows and pushed him forwards. He stumbled and Steckler cursed them.

"No need for that," he said. "Not yet, anyway. Let's just go to his quarters and see what else there is to find."

The pile of incriminating materials sat on the plain wooden table that ran along one wall of the torture chamber. They lent an incongruously civilised air to a place which was otherwise as businesslike as a blacksmith's forge.

It was well lit with half a dozen oil lamps. The walls were smooth granite and the floor was a neatly tiled slope that angled down towards a gutter. The fireplace was a simple, unadorned hole in one wall. Even on this warm night flames licked at the tips of the iron implements that were racked in front of it, and the glow of the iron and the crackle of the fire was making every man in the cell sweat.

There were only the three of them. Steckler and the baron stood on either side of the fireplace. Ganamedes sat before them, his ankles and wrists now secured to an iron chair that was bolted to the floor. Of the three men, he looked the least concerned.

"You should have told me earlier," the baron said reproachfully. "If you had volunteered the information..." He trailed off, and for the first time Ganamedes saw him at a loss. It was a strange experience. The baron had fought and schemed and bluffed his way to his position, a ball of energy who was as positive and direct in his manner as a beam of sunlight.

"I wanted to tell you," Ganamedes said. "That's why I did it. I wanted to help. And, your lordship," he lowered his voice, "I have succeeded. As soon as Steckler arrested me I understood that it had been there all along."

"What had been there?" the baron asked.

"The answer," Ganamedes said with the wild-eyed joy of the religious convert. "The key to our victory."

All three men turned to look at the evidence which had brought the baron's most trusted advisor to this iron chair. There were half a dozen scrolls, yellowed and stained by the ages, a pile of books and a folder of bound woodcuts.

"There is nothing to be gained from the study of such abominable works." Steckler shook his head. "They are damned, as are all those who touch them."

The baron, who had been about to open one of the books, stopped himself. He drew a dagger instead and flipped open the front cover. There was a crude sketch of some monsters feasting upon human remains. The next page was covered in an indecipherable scrawl, blotted here and there with stains.

"Don't look at that, my lord!" Ganamedes told him, panic edging his voice, but it was too late. The baron had already turned the next page.

Ganamedes and Steckler felt the air boil and catch in their throats. The oxygen in their lungs seemed to burn away and they were suddenly both gasping for air. Pressure crushed in on them, and their skin suddenly itched as though termites were burrowing beneath it.

Only the baron, who was looking at what the book revealed, wasn't gasping. He was beyond that.

The blood had drained from his face to leave him as pale as a corpse, and his eyes bulged like those of some deep-sea fish which has been dragged to the surface. Tears spilled down his cheeks, and Ganamedes saw that they were already pink with blood.

“Close the book!” Ganamedes yelled at Steckler who was staring at the baron in horror. A low, animal whimper was escaping from the knotted sinews of the baron’s throat. It came from a place beyond physical pain.

“Steckler!” Ganamedes screamed despite the feeling that his lungs were about to burst. “Close the book!”

The provost marshal looked at him stupidly, then understanding dawned. He crossed the room, pushing through air that felt as heavy as treacle, and slapped the cover of the book closed with the back of his hand. It shut with a loud snap, and the baron fell back into Steckler’s arms.

“What have you done to him?” Steckler asked and staggered back beneath the baron’s weight.

“I told him not to look,” Ganamedes whined.

“That’s right,” the baron growled. He clapped a hand on Steckler’s shoulder and struggled to stand back up on his own two feet. “He warned me. Better late than never, Ganamedes.”

The baron attempted a smile, then wiped away the red flecks of blood on his moustache from where he had bitten his tongue.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Ganamedes told him miserably. “I didn’t see what you were doing.”

The baron wiped his face with a handkerchief. When he finished he cast a nervous look at the book. Then his expression hardened into one of defiance and he went to lean against the table upon which the cursed thing lay.

“Are you all right?” Ganamedes asked him, scarce able to believe it. “The thing inscribed on that page. It is a—”

“I know what it is,” the baron snapped. “No need to harp on about it. Instead, let’s assume that I don’t want to read any further. Why don’t you tell me what you have learned from these cursed things?”

So Ganamedes nodded, chewed on the dry meat of his tongue to get the saliva flowing, and told him.

If the wind hadn’t fallen then Erikson wouldn’t have heard the screams.

It had been blowing through Nalderstein for days, this wind, a dry, withering constant that chapped their skin and kept them squinting. It made their nerves itch and their thirst for the daily wine ration a virtual constant. The townspeople called it the harvest wind, and even as it leathered their skin they welcomed it. It meant that the wheat, golden in the fields beyond, would be dry enough to harvest at its prime.

But for once it had stopped, a brief pause as if it had been catching its breath, and in that moment Erikson heard the high-pitched cry for help that came from one of the barns that lay to the east of where they had been working on the stockade.

“Hear that?” he asked Gunter. The two of them were stripped to the waist, as were the half-dozen other men who were working on this section.

“No, captain.” Gunter shook his head as the wind howled back into life.

“It may be nothing,” Erikson admitted. “But let’s go take a look anyway. Men, to arms.”

There was a scurry as the men dropped timber and hemp and raced to snatch up their weapons. Erikson didn't wait for them before setting off at a trot towards the direction of the cry, his own sword unsheathed and held ready.

"There it is again," he said and came to a stop outside the first of the barns. Unlike the solid block of the granary, the doors on this building were loose-slatted and held together by no more than a twist of rope. Even that had been untied, and now the door rattled in the quickening wind.

"Could be the enemy," Gunter said, and drifted to the other side of the door. Erikson licked his lips, took a quick glance behind him to make sure that the men were ready, then kicked open the door.

There was a shriek as he booted open the splintering timber and leapt into the gloom. Vast stacks of hay lay all around, and bars of sunlight streamed in through the slatted walls to light up clouds of swirling motes of dust. There was a moment's silence, then a sudden cry and a rush of movement from the shadows that darkened one of the corners. Erikson turned on his heel, and the bright steel of his sword blurred back as he prepared to slash down onto the shape that hurtled towards him.

He recognised it for what it was a split second before it barrelled into him. Despite the animal desperation in its eyes and the wordless cries it was making, this was no monster. It was a young woman. That was obvious from the curves that were revealed by the ragged remains of her clothes.

"Are you all right?" Erikson asked as she froze in front of him, her expression an appalling mask of horror. For the first time Erikson saw the blood that had trickled down from her nostril and the dark bruise that covered one side of her face.

"Is it the enemy, child?" Gunter asked, and this time the girl sobbed and rushed to hide behind him. In the darkness from which the girl had fled there was movement.

"Hold there," Erikson snarled, suddenly guessing what had been going on. "And come out. Slowly."

After a moment's hesitation a figure appeared. Erikson recognised him as one of Minsk's followers, a freckle-faced man with a Reikland accent. He tried to smile. Seeing that nobody smiled back, he saluted.

"What is your name, soldier?" Erikson asked.

"Traudl, sir." The man tried to smile again, but this time it came out as a leer.

"Why are your breeches undone?" Erikson asked him, his voice chill despite the sweltering heat of the barn.

"Sorry, captain," the man said as he tugged at the fastenings. "This wench jumped on me and, well, you know how it is."

He winked, and glanced past Erikson to the men who stood behind him. One of them sniggered.

Erikson swung around. "Who thinks this is funny?" he asked, gesturing to the girl who was cringing behind Gunter. This time, nobody did.

"Look, captain, I'm sorry. Maybe I was a bit rough..." Traudl stepped forwards, hands outstretched, and the girl wailed with terror and clutched at Gunter, who looked to Erikson.

"What does your order say about those who defile the innocent?" he asked mildly.

“Castration and burning at the stake,” Gunter replied with the cold certainty of a man who had read that particular part of the holy text with a thorough interest.

There was another cry of anguish, but this time it was from the man who fell to his knees.

“It’s not my fault, captain,” he wailed. “I’m a soldier. She led me on, she—”

“Stop making that noise,” Erikson told him. “Nobody is getting castrated or burned. Not in my company.”

“Thank you, captain,” the man beamed. “You won’t regret it.”

“Don’t mention it,” Erikson said with a magnanimous wave. “After all, you were one of the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig. Gunter, take this girl to her family and tell them what’s happening. You two men, bind this man’s hands. And you, go and tell Alter to assemble the company in the parade ground.”

“Why?” Traudl said, bewilderment writ large on his broad face.

“Silence from the prisoner,” Erikson snapped as the condemned man’s hands were bound behind his back with a twist of baling twine.

“Come on,” Erikson said. “Get him on his feet. Let’s get this over with.”

“But why have you tied my hands?” Traudl asked as he was hauled along behind his captain. “I am one of you. I’m your comrade.”

“Not anymore,” Erikson told him, and led the little party into the square of hard-packed earth that served as the company’s parade ground. The free company was already assembling, eager for any excuse to leave the blistering labour they were carrying out on the stockade. Sergeant Alter hurried them into ranks and files as Erikson waited, his prisoner behind him.

Behind the soldiers the population of Nalderstein assembled. He waited until the sobbing girl, her face still wet with tears even as she stood within the safe knot of her family, appeared from one of the narrow streets that led to the square.

“This man,” Erikson addressed them, “has abused the hospitality of the people of Nalderstein. For this crime he will spend three days and three nights in the stocks, after which he will be dismissed from the company. The next man to commit such a crime will be hanged. Any questions?”

“What did he do, captain?” Porter asked, his voice rich with morbid curiosity.

“Abused the hospitality of the people of Nalderstein,” Erikson told him.

“I meant what did he do *precisely*?”

Erikson repressed a sigh. At times like this he regretted making Porter quartermaster. The man could never leave well enough alone.

“What he did precisely was inconvenience a young lady.”

“*Inconvenience!*” the roar echoed around the yard and one of the civilians, his voice bellowing like a bull’s and his face as red as the rag which had enraged it, pushed through his fellows. “He did a lot more than inconvenience her. She’s my little girl, and she hasn’t even seen her fourteenth summer.”

An angry murmur rose up from the townspeople. It reminded Erikson of the noise of a hornets’ nest.

“I am well aware of that, sir,” Erikson addressed him. “And as the girl’s father your rage does you credit. But he will be punished.”

By now the red-faced man was standing in front of Erikson. He was shorter than the captain, but he was stocky. Thirty years of toil-hardened muscle bulged beneath his shirt, and his eyes had a dangerous sheen to them.

“No,” the man said. “Not punished enough. Three days in the stocks. What’s that?”

This time the growl of agreement from the crowd was louder. More purposeful. Nalderstein was small enough for everybody to know everybody else, and the sobs of the girl as she was ushered away were proving even more incendiary than the rage of her father.

Erikson looked at his men. He knew that he couldn’t show weakness. Couldn’t back down in front of this peasant. If he did, his authority would evaporate. It was a lesson he had learnt the hard way a dozen wars ago.

“Hang him!” a voice from the crowd called out, and there was a storm of agreement. The father crossed his arms and stood in front of Erikson, daring him to defy the will of the town.

“The Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig,” he said grandly, “regulates itself. As I said, this man will spend three nights in the stocks.”

There was a chorus of boos and Erikson saw, to his horror, that a couple of youths were reaching for stones.

“But before that happens,” he continued, raising his voice above the hubbub, “we will need a smith and a good carpenter.”

The girl’s father regarded him shrewdly.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because the stocks are to be built at the edge of the forest. This man acted like a beast. It is only fitting that the beasts are given the chance to return the favour.”

The father’s face worked horribly, then, to Erikson’s surprise, he laughed.

“You’re not such a fool as you look,” he confided to the captain before turning back to the gathered throng. “Narlson. Hackmeier. You heard the officer. Let’s get this thing set up in time for tonight. We wouldn’t want to keep our guest waiting.”

He snarled at Traudl, who cringed like a beaten dog.

“Captain,” he pleaded, clawing at Erikson. “Don’t do this to me. You can’t leave me trapped out there. The enemy... You saw what they’re like.”

Erikson regarded him with a mixture of pity and contempt. He didn’t let either emotion show on his face, though. His gaze was as steady as his hands as he unplucked Traudl’s fingers from his clothing.

“There is nothing I can do,” he told the man. “Wartime justice is always harsh.”

The man was sobbing as the villagers set about uprooting the stocks from the side of the square and carrying the pieces out of the gate. There was something almost festive about them as they worked. The same could not be said for the soldiers. After Erikson dismissed them they went back to their labours, stooped beneath a thoughtful silence.

\* \* \*

Even now, with dusk bruising the sky above, Traudl couldn't quite believe that this was happening.

He had been in stocks before, of course, bent double in timber-and-iron constructs that made him a victim to any passing sadist. He was a professional thief, and over the years his shackled form had graced many a town square. Sometimes he'd been pelted with mud, sometimes with rotten food, sometimes even with the odd stone.

Now, as darkness closed in around him, he thought back to those days with something approaching nostalgia. What wouldn't he give to be surrounded by a baying mob now? What wouldn't he give to see human faces, even if distorted with vindictive pleasure, or to hear human voices, even if they were shrill with cruel excitement?

Instead he was alone. Absolutely alone. The only company he had was the brooding silence of the forest. It loomed less than a bowshot away, the spaces between the trees as black as the decay between a jawful of rotten teeth.

Traudl bit back on a whimper and tore his eyes away from the wilderness. Risking a sprained neck he turned to gaze at the town. It lay a mile away, although it might as well have been a hundred. No matter what happened to him, there would be no help from there. Not tonight.

It had all been the fault of that silly bitch. Why hadn't she just shut up and got on with it? He would have paid her. He usually did, if they didn't struggle too much.

A sudden shriek from the forest ripped through Traudl's nerves. He almost shrieked back, but even as the warmth of his own urine trickled down his leg he recognised the cry of an owl. There was the suggestion of a ghostly movement above, an indistinct predatory blur chasing the bats that were beginning to circle overhead.

Traudl immediately regretted his loss of control. It wasn't just the humiliation, or even the discomfort. No, it was what the smell might bring from the shadows that were even now pooling out of the forest to swallow him up.

His eyes rolled, white in the darkness, and he stared blindly into the void. The last purple remains of the day were vanishing from the sky and the stars glittered down at him, cold and predatory and merciless.

It wasn't until the owl screeched again that his nerve snapped. Seized with the unquenchable panic of a wild thing caught in a trap he twisted and writhed, trying to drag his hands through the iron-bound boards that held them and to pull his head free. Muscles bunched. Sweat mixed with blood, greasing his body even as the skin was peeled from his neck and his wrists. But it was to no avail. The men who had built these stocks had built them to hold.

Eventually pain and exhaustion wore away at Traudl's panic. He grew still and let his body hang from the woodwork. By now the night had swallowed up the whole of the world. The only lights were the orange blinks of the torches on the distant stockade. They seemed as far away as the stars above. Traudl began to sob quietly.

He didn't stop until he heard the first snap of undergrowth breaking from amongst the trees. He turned, but the darkness was so complete that all he could see were the dots that danced across his vision. He stilled his breathing, holding his breath as every sense strained to detect what was emerging from the undergrowth. It might be a rabbit, he told himself, or a hare. Or a pony.



Then the smell hit him, the same foetid musk that had clung to the beasts they had killed in Nalderstein, and he exploded into a fresh paroxysm of panic. This time, with a crunch of gristle and a flash of pain, he managed to tear one hand free. He scabbled at the lock which held the stocks closed, but the broken bones in his hand made it impossible to get a proper grip. A low, miserable moan emerged from his throat as the smell grew stronger suddenly. It grew louder as two burning eyes flared in the darkness.

The shriek died in Traudl's throat. As he gazed into the inferno of the beast's eyes his mouth fell open and he began to drool. He could feel it in his head, gnawing at his memories with the brutal disinterest of a wolf cleaning a bone. It plucked from his mind the number of men now in Nalderstein, the number of civilians, the weak points in the old stockade and the half-finished repairs that covered them.

When it had learnt everything there was from the terrified confusion of Traudl's memories it turned and stalked back into the forest.

Traudl, still alive, began to laugh. Then he laughed some more. Soon the broken sound of his hysteria was echoing through the trees and carrying into the darkness beyond. He was still laughing hours later when a herd of boars found him and, squeaking with pleasure at such an easy meal, began to feast.

## Chapter Ten

Erikson awoke to the urgent sound of the company's drum. The beat was quick and insistent, and as he rolled out of his cot and pulled on his boots he could already hear the rest of the men racing to their defensive positions. Sergeant Alter could already be heard bellowing encouragement, and the clink of metal accompanied the pounding of rushing feet.

Pausing only to buckle on his sword belt and cram his hat onto his head, Erikson went to join them.

He was surprised to find that, although the chill of dawn was still in the air, the sun had risen high enough to light the ground around them. He had expected the beasts to attack at night, using darkness to hide the beginnings of their assault.

The captain found himself wishing that he had a cannon, or even a catapult. He should have had the townsfolk build one, although it was too late for that now. He shrugged off such useless thoughts as he sprinted down to the gate and raced up the ladder to the fighting platform that rested behind the stockade. Dolf was there already, his eyes bright with excitement as he beat the alarm.

"Where are they?" Erikson asked, squinting into the rising sun.

"There," Dolf told him without a pause in the beat. "Coming along the road."

Erikson pulled his hat down lower so that the brim eclipsed the sun, and leaned forwards. The figures that were approaching were still indistinct, veiled by the mist that steamed from the wheat around them.

"They didn't hang around," Porter said. "Must have got a taste for man-flesh, eh, captain?"

Erikson glared at Porter, who smiled before moving away to busy himself with his section. By now the men were assembled on the fighting platform in units of half a dozen or so. The townsfolk were climbing up between these groups, their own weapons and garb hardly less motley than the soldiers' own. Behind them, formed up on the parade ground, Gunter waited with his section and a dozen of the heftiest townsmen.

Not much of a reserve, Erikson thought. But then, we're not much of an army.

Then, from along the fighting platform, a peal of laughter turned into a ragged cheer. Dolf's drumbeat hesitated and then stopped as he joined in. Erikson gazed quizzically towards the enemy.

Except that they weren't. Now they had emerged from the blinding light of the sun and the clinging shadows and mist of the forest he could see that they were a company of mounted soldiers. They flew no flag, but their weapons glinted in the early morning light, and a small wagon bounced along halfway down their column.

“Shall we open the gates, captain?” Sergeant Alter asked, his wrinkled features split open in a smile of relief.

“Not yet,” Erikson told him. “Let’s see what they have to say for themselves first.”

The cheering grew louder as the men cantered closer, then disintegrated into catcalls and whistles as the column drew to a halt in front of the stockade. There were perhaps a dozen riders, and although they were no more knights than Erikson’s own men were, they rode well. They also carried impressive-looking handguns.

“Silence in the ranks,” Erikson bellowed, and the men fell quiet as the leading horseman swung from his saddle and approached the stockade. He was dressed in browns and greens, and a long rifle was slung across his shoulder. There was something vaguely familiar about his face, which was sharp and pinched.

“Well, well, well,” the man said, his hands on his hips as he looked up. “I don’t believe it. You are Captain Erikson, aren’t you?”

Erikson bit back on the retort that sprang to his lips and swept off his hat instead.

“Captain Erikson at your service,” he said. “Late of Talabheim and Bretonnia, currently serving in the army of Hochland.”

“Ha!” The newcomer barked with laughter, and in the silence the noise sounded as loud as a gunshot.

“Something funny?” Erikson asked, his eyes blazing green with anger.

“Just that I thought you were late of Praag,” the man said and grinned.

Erikson was about to challenge the impudent oaf to a duel when suddenly, in a flash of recognition, he remembered where he had seen the man before.

“Freimann!” he cried. “That was your name wasn’t it? We met in that forest. Where those beasts were.”

“The very same,” Freimann nodded. “Now that we’ve got the niceties over with, can we come in? My men and horses need resting, and the baron has sent a present for you.”

“Of course,” Erikson said, and gestured to Sergeant Alter. His eyes were already fastened on the covered wagon. It was too small to carry one of the great cannons he had seen on the battlefield, but it could contain handguns, or perhaps swivel guns to mount on the stockade.

As the riders entered Nalderstein, Erikson climbed down the ladder to greet them. He and Freimann shook hands, and as they did so the man leaned in towards him.

“We have to talk immediately,” he said, “and in private. Orders.”

“Come to the granary,” Erikson told him, then paused as the tarpaulin that covered the wagon was lifted from within. A plump, bespectacled figure who was as wide as he was tall sat up, yawned and climbed down off the vehicle.

“This is Horstein,” Freimann said with a roll of his eyes. “He’d better come with us.”

“Do you have anything to eat?” asked Horstein. For a moment Erikson thought that he was about to salute, but he was only scratching his head with a pair of pliers.

“Maybe later,” Erikson said, and led the way to the granary.

“No.” Erikson shook his head as he studied the map that had been unfurled on the table. An oil lamp held down one corner, and he could feel the warmth from the glass in the chill of the granary. “No, it can’t be done. It’s not possible.”

“It has to be done,” Freimann told him. “And of course it’s possible.”

“He’s right, you know,” Horstein said, and pushed his thick-lensed spectacles back up on his nose. “I spent five years at the engineers’ school, and I know what blackpowder can do. It really is a simple enough job. Just a matter of getting the angles right. Perhaps a bit of drilling so that we can really pack it in. And I’ve got three whole barrels of the stuff.”

The engineer’s eyes glittered beneath his glasses and he rubbed his podgy hands together in anticipation.

“I’m not talking about that,” Erikson said. “I’m talking about this.”

He waved at the parchment. Hergig was represented by a stylised sketch, a mass of turrets and crenellations. A dozen inches to the east Nalderstein was a mere dot, and a dozen inches further to the east than that, their target was marked with a small, neatly drawn cross.

“It’s not that far,” Freimann told him. “Fifty or sixty miles at most. I talked to the woodsman who knew where it was myself, and he seemed a pretty reliable chap. We can just follow the river to the ford, then pop straight up.”

“I don’t care about all that,” Erikson said impatiently. “Look at the forest we will have to cross. Not a road, not a track, nothing. Oh, I beg your pardon, not quite nothing. ‘Here be Monsters’ it says.”

“That’s just a mapmaker’s trick,” Freimann told him. “It means they don’t know what’s there.”

“Except in this case,” Erikson countered, “they obviously did. You’ve seen those things. You know what they’re like. Here, we have a chance. We have the stockade, the townsfolk, clear lines of approach. But in the forest...”

He trailed off and chewed his bottom lip as he regarded the map. The blotch of green ink gave no hint of the real nature of the forest it represented.

“Don’t worry about the forest,” Freimann told him, and Erikson’s face hardened as he detected a trace of contempt. “That’s why the baron is sending us long riflers out with the demolition parties. We’re here to guide you. The forest has been my regiment’s battlefield for generations. As you saw.”

“I don’t underestimate you,” Erikson said. “But my men are not trained for this. Besides, who will guard the village while we are away?”

Freimann shrugged indifferently.

“We are soldiers. We follow orders. These are our orders. You don’t strike me as the kind of man to mutiny, Erikson.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Erikson snapped. “Of course we will follow orders. I’ve been a soldier for long enough to know that only a fool expects orders to make sense. These, though. They seem particularly ridiculous. Tell me again, why are we supposed to be destroying this stone?”

“Because we’ve been ordered to,” Freimann told him with impeccable military logic.

“I think what he means,” Horstein said, “is that we are not privy to that information. All we know is that these stones have to be destroyed, and that their destruction is our priority. We also know that they are dangerous although,” he chuckled happily, “they will be a lot more dangerous when they explode into a thousand pieces of shrapnel.”

The engineer laughed uproariously at his own joke. Erikson grinned at Freimann, who rolled his eyes, and for the first time he realised that he liked the man.

“First thing tomorrow morning?” he asked.

“First thing tomorrow morning,” Freimann said.

Flies buzzed around the gnawed wood of the empty stockade. It remained standing where the townsfolk had planted it, the squat iron-and-timber construct hunched in the very shadow of the forest.

There was no sign of the occupant. Traudl had vanished, every last scrap of him, but not even the most optimistic of his former comrades could find reason to be thankful for that. The blood and churned-up dirt around the stockade indicated that, wherever Traudl had gone, he was never coming back.

“Looks like it was done within the last day or so,” Freimann said. He had paused, halting the column while he examined the ground around the empty stocks. He was bent almost double, and he sniffed at the mud and hoof prints as though he were a hunting dog.

“That would make sense,” Erikson told him. “He was one of ours. We had to give him to the Naldersteiners for dishonouring one of their women.”

Freimann examined the captain with a look of cool appraisal as he swung back up into the saddle.

“Well, he won’t be dishonouring anybody anymore. Those are boar tracks. Mostly boar tracks, anyway. Let’s just hope that they got to him first.”

“*Mostly* boar tracks?” Erikson asked. Freimann nodded and gestured towards the forest.

“Have your men been taught to fight in the forest?” he asked.

“No,” Erikson told him, resisting the urge to boast. “Never.”

“Mind if I speak to them before we go on?”

“Be my guest.”

Freimann turned his horse and stood up in his stirrups. The company had been marching in a column of fours when it had stopped by the stocks, and now virtually every man was gazing at the splintered signs of Traudl’s doom. Those that weren’t were gazing into the dark immensity of the forest beyond. They looked even less happy.

“Gentlemen,” Freimann said. “Soon we will enter the forest. There are no roads here, so we will use whatever animal tracks we may find. That means single file. It may be,” he continued, ignoring the unhappy murmuring that greeted this announcement, “that we find ourselves under attack. If that happens, attack back. Attack back fast, and hard. This is no battlefield we are entering. It is a confusion of timber and thorns, and in there aggression is all that counts. So remember. If we are attacked, you attack back.”

A sullen silence greeted his words. Erikson took over.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “What Freimann here tells us is all good sense. It is also to our advantage. In the open we still struggle to maintain formation, but in the forest, we are at no disadvantage. We meet any enemy that comes at us on equal terms, and on equal terms we will thrash them. That’s why we have been chosen for this mission. Chosen by the baron himself.”

“Would that be the same baron who chose to put us in gaol, captain?” Porter asked, and earned himself a smattering of sarcastic laughter.

“Not at all.” Erikson grinned with all the good humour of a wolf that has had its tail tweaked. “It’s the same baron who set you free.”

“Three cheers for the baron!” Sergeant Alter cried, and so the men cheered. But the only ones who did so with any gusto were those who sounded the most ironic.

“Let’s go,” Erikson told Freimann and so, miserable and strung out, the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig entered the forest’s embrace.

The forest canopy was so thick above them that the track felt more like a tunnel than a path. The air was damp and humid, a claustrophobic stillness that was ripe with the smell of rotten vegetation. Although the forest had at first been deathly silent it now buzzed with biting insects. They followed the column of sweating men, feasting upon the unexpected bounty of so many thin-skinned creatures.

The track twisted around trees that grew broader and more ancient the further into the forest they went. The massive trunks were gnarled by uncounted centuries. They crowded so close together that the only light was a permanent, green-tinged dusk.

Occasionally, very occasionally, one of the trees had fallen to let in a waterfall of sunlight, golden and alive with a myriad of glistening insects and flitting sparrows. But for the most part the crushing weight of the forest remained as unbroken as the surface of the sea, a seemingly endless hell of ankle-breaking roots and grasping thorns.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Freimann asked as he paused on the crest of a slope and waited for the column to close up behind him.

“What is?” Erikson asked, lifting his hat to wipe a smear of sweat from his forehead, then swatting at the fly that had just fastened onto the back of his hand.

“The forest,” Freimann said. “It’s what makes Hochland.”

Erikson was surprised to see that the rifleman wasn’t joking. He didn’t seem to be sweating, either. Despite the fact that the two men had dismounted, the better to lead their horses through the undergrowth, Freimann appeared cool and relaxed. Even the insects which swarmed over Erikson and his comrades seemed to avoid the man.

“I’ve known prettier places,” the captain said, and took a swig from his canteen. Although it was probably only a little after midday the canteen was almost empty. In this close, sweltering heat he was sweating out everything that he drank. From the little he could see of his men, they were suffering even more.

“I’m thinking about the water supply,” he told Freimann. “We need to find a stream or something.”

“Yes, I’ll end the day’s march on one,” Freimann promised. He was sniffing the air, and seemed to be enjoying the foetid fragrance.

“Perhaps we should start looking now,” Erikson insisted.

“No need,” Freimann told him. “This is a boar path we’re on. They’re as thirsty for fresh water as dwarfs are for ale. All we’ve got to do is follow one of these paths to the bottom of a valley and we’ll find one of their watering holes.”

“If you say so,” Erikson said, and with a last wistful look at it, put the cork back into his canteen.

“Don’t worry,” Freimann told him as he idly felt the bark of a tree. “I won’t see you die of thirst. Horseflies, maybe, but not thirst.”

He was smiling at his joke as he took a deep breath and, as the last of the exhausted men staggered to a halt behind him, set off again at the same punishing pace.

\* \* \*

Of all the men in the company, Porter had taken to the military life with the most enthusiasm. For years he and Brandt had kept body and soul together by any means necessary. From extortion to housebreaking to good old-fashioned robbery, the two men had tried the lot. But even during their richest years the two had never been more than a few weeks away from starvation, or a single mistake away from the gibbet.

Now, as company quartermaster, Porter had finally found the niche nature had created him for. He hardly even had to steal.

Over the weeks the company had been together he had been making a constant profit, be it by saving some of the coin Erikson had given him for supplies or by selling the surplus on to hungry civilians. But his real genius, as he saw it, was his ability to keep the men happy with their food. It was amazing what you could do with flour and herbs and animal feed, especially if you could find the occasional bit of meat to add to it.

That was why, when the herd of deer charged the company, he was the first to react.

They had been toiling up a shale slope, clinging to trees for support when, through the curses and falling stones, he heard the distant snap and crash of something big coming through the undergrowth.

A chorus of warnings and orders had come from the men who suddenly found themselves spread out amongst a confusion of trees, thorns and shifting ground, but even as they cried out the first of the animals had burst out of the cover beside Porter.

It was almost as tall as a man. Taller, if you counted the six pointed antlers that jutted up from the thick bone of its forehead. Its dark, liquid eyes rolled with panic, and even though it paused when it found itself confronted by the men, it was only for a second. Then it was bounding through them, ignoring their cries of protest as it raced through their line.

“Shoot it!” Porter called to the men on either side of them, but before any of them could react the animal was crashing into the forest beyond.

“Don’t let it get away,” he called and charged after it. As always Brandt was at his side, the greatsword slung across his back in the crude leather sheath he had

stitched for it. The two men barrelled through the undergrowth, following the trail the deer was ploughing through the thorns. If it had followed one of the tracks that crisscrossed the forest it may have survived but, sure-footed though it was, the undergrowth slowed and tangled it, and within a few minutes Porter saw his chance.

“That’s a week’s worth of meat,” he gasped to Brandt as he slipped the cleaver from his belt and hurled it like a throwing axe. The fat steel blade tumbled through the gloom towards the deer. It ended with a shriek of pain and a gout of blood, and to his delight Porter realised that the blade had hit with the sharp edge.

“I’ve got it!” he exulted, and tried to charge forwards, but before he could move he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait,” Brandt said.

“Don’t be a fool!” Porter yelled at him, shrill with outrage. “Think about how much we can make from that. We can sell the steaks, pad out the gruel... Oh. Oh damn.”

The two men listened to the screams and yells that were echoing from where they had left their comrades. There was the unmistakable ring of metal against metal, and a deep, bellowing roar that sounded like no deer Porter had ever heard.

“What were the deer running from?” Brandt asked.

“More to the point,” Porter wondered, “should we run too?”

The drumbeat sounded, the beating heart of the company, and Porter thought that he could detect Erikson bellowing orders.

For a moment Porter stood on the precipice of flight.

“We could always slip away,” Brandt suggested, the thought seemingly just occurring to him. From the distant battle there was a crash as though one of the trees had been felled.

“To what?” Porter asked. “We’ll never find a cushier number than this.”

“This is cushy?” Brandt asked, but Porter was already moving, stepping silently through the undergrowth on the balls of his toes, his dagger and short sword already drawn. Brandt, content in the knowledge that the decision had been made by a wiser head than his, followed him.

They were almost back to the track when there was a burst of movement from the undergrowth and three men raced towards them. They were looking behind them as they ran, and only the harsh snap of Porter’s voice prevented them from running into him.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he barked.

“Away,” one of them barked back.

“Hold your ground,” Porter snarled at him. “You heard what the officer said. We stand and fight.”

The man’s look of terror gave way to one of defiance, and he made as if to push past Porter. Before he could do so Brandt drew his greatsword. It hissed from the rough leather with murderous intent, and the men stopped and turned back to where they had come from.

It wasn’t until the thing from which they had been fleeing exploded out of the undergrowth that Porter realised what a mistake he had made.



For the first horrified seconds he took it to be some monstrous horseman and, even in the midst of his horror, some small, forgotten part of him was calculating what the price of horsemeat might be out here. Then he saw the hideous knuckles and grasping talons that clawed at the ground beneath it, and the seamless join of filth-matted fur between what he had taken to be the horse's body and its rider's. It reared up, baring a jaw full of fangs in a savage bellow of glee as it lunged towards its prey.

It took its first victim with an axe stroke to the head. The metal crunched through bone and brain. The skull popped open like an overripe fruit, and the beast's head was tearing back out through a shrapnelled collarbone even as the corpse fell forwards.

When it turned its weapon was already raised again, but this time the blow missed, merely slicing a line down the back of its fleeing victim. With a snarl of impatience it bounded forwards and grabbed the man with one of the talons on its forelegs. It leant forwards, pinning its victim beneath it like a cat with a mouse, and this time when it struck the blade tore off the man's head in a single, ragged stroke.

"We should have run," Brandt said, but Porter, who knew that there was no longer any chance to outrun this horror, was moving to one side.

"Go the other way," he cried to Brandt and the remaining soldier, but the remaining soldier was beyond taking orders. He merely stood there, his sword dangling loosely at his side as he watched the sinuous grace with which the beast lifted the headless corpse of its victim, tore a mouthful of flesh from the muscle of the shoulder, then flung it away as carelessly as a man who has finished a drumstick.

It wasn't until the body hit the ground, blood splattering out, that the man pulled himself together enough to turn and run. The beast's yellow eyes glittered in the green murk of the forest, and with a predator's instinct to pursue it bounded after him.

"Get it!" Porter cried as the beast slipped between him and Brandt, and the two of them struck.

Neither man was courageous. Nor did they have anything but contempt for those who were. But if their long career had taught them anything, it was a respect for the vicious gamble. They were unhesitating in their attack, and when they struck it was with a street fighter's instinctive grasp of his enemy's vulnerability.

Brandt swung the heavy blade of his two-handed sword with the powerful, hunch-shouldered sweep of a peasant with a scythe. The arc of the blade was in a perfect angle to slice off both of the beast's hind legs at the joint above the fetlocks.

Porter, his own sword little more than a two-foot-long stub, got closer in. Close enough to take a stab upwards into the dung-matted fur that covered the beast's belly.

Against a cavalryman the attack would have been crippling. But the abomination before them was something more than that. Even as the two men closed in it twisted with an effortless, drunken grace, then bunched the mighty muscles in its hind legs and leapt upwards. For a moment Porter and Brandt found themselves looking stupidly into each other's faces as the beast which had been between them jumped high into the air. Then they were moving, their own wiry bodies blurring with the gutter acrobatics which had kept them alive for so many brutal years.

The beast howled with rage, and struck at them both at once. It sent the dull metal slab of its axe down towards Brandt, who was sent spinning away by the impact of

the last quarter-inch of the curved blade. Meanwhile it turned with a liquid grace that was more feline than equine, and snatched at Porter with the talon of its back legs.

The man turned, and for a moment thought that he had avoided the attack. But then the talons closed with a rib-snapping suddenness, and he felt the air squeezed from his lungs even as he was pulled back and spun around. He felt his sword whiplashed out of his hand and he cursed himself for a fool as he was smashed into the ground, then crushed beneath the beast's weight.

He scrambled at the iron-hard knuckles that held him, and the green murk of the forest was suddenly tinged pink as the beast brought more of its weight down on him. His hands slipped from the knuckles then down to his belt. Nothing there but empty scabbards, and a ladle. And a small, wooden box.

The beast snarled in triumph and lifted the blade of its axe. Porter, suffocating beneath its weight, clicked open the brass clasp of the spice box and hurled it upwards.

A cloud of pepper burst from it as it hit the beast's snout. It paused, grimaced and made the mistake of breathing in. Then it sneezed, the explosion of mucus spattering down into Porter's face, and blinked. Tears soaked into the fur around its muzzle, and its nose wrinkled up some more, but it had recovered from the surprise and lined up another blow.

There was a *chunk* of steel biting into flesh.

The beast leapt forwards, shrieking with pain, and Porter felt the glorious, delicious rush of air into his lungs. He scrambled to his feet as the beast galloped away, blood splattering from the long, bone-deep wound in its hindquarters. It paused only to snatch up the body of one of its victims before barrelling away through the undergrowth, apparently impervious to the vicious barbs of the thorns.

Brandt, his greatsword black with blood, grinned down at his comrade.

"It's run off," he said.

"Never mind," Porter said, unbuttoning his shirt and examining the bruising on his chest. "I don't think even the lads would have eaten that without complaint."

"Not without plenty of pepper, anyway," Brandt agreed and Porter, despite the agony from his bruised ribs, laughed.

They made their way cautiously back to the path upon which the company still remained. By now the attack seemed to be over. Here and there bodies lay amongst the undergrowth, dark and broken in the gloom. Men wailed as they were tended by their comrades. Other voices were jagged with hysterical laughter, the men still half-crazed with the rush of combat.

"Looks like we've won," Porter said, stepping over a corpse to inspect the dent in the huge brass kettle that lay amongst the remains of the company's rations.

The same thought occurred to Erikson. He was still breathless from the attack, and his sword was chipped and bloodied from the six-limbed monstrosity that had hit his part of the column. It lay across the track, its fur matted with blood and its body a butcher's block of stab wounds and hacked flesh.

“I don’t think they knew we were here,” Sergeant Alter said. His sleeve had been cut away and, as he spoke, Dolf was sewing closed the gash that ran down his biceps. The beast had caught him with the edge of its crude spear.

“You could be right,” Erikson agreed. “They could have been hunting deer. Even so, I want to get a move on.”

“It’ll be difficult without the guides,” Alter said, and for the first time Erikson realised what had been bothering him about the fight. The riflemen had vanished, slipping away so quietly that he hadn’t even noticed their disappearance in the face of the charge.

“What a bunch of cowards,” Dolf said, grimacing as he bit off the thread and knotted the last inch of Alter’s wound. “Will they be hanged for desertion?”

“That’s the way it would have been in the regiments, lad,” Alter said and inspected the youngster’s handiwork. “Not bad stitching, that.”

Dolf beamed with pride as he turned to find more of the wounded to practise his skills upon.

“That lad’s the best bloody drummer I’ve ever seen,” Alter said with an avuncular air.

Erikson just grunted. Now that he had noticed that their guides were gone, he was starting to notice other things too. Things such as the way that the beams of light that pierced the canopy were slanting to the east as afternoon wore on to evening. And the smell of blood. The humid breeze was slow but steady, and there was no telling to which hungry nostrils it would carry the scent.

Most of all, Erikson noticed that they were lost in the tangled heart of the forest. Even if they turned back now, and even if they could follow their trail back towards where they had come from, night would catch them before they could escape.

“Shall I give the order to start back, captain?” Alter asked. Before Erikson could answer a voice rang out.

“I should say not,” it said cheerfully and Freimann emerged from between the trees.

“Where the bloody hell have you been?” Erikson barked at him.

Freimann’s grin stayed on his face, but his eyes hardened.

“Making sure none of them escaped,” he said.

“How very heroic of you, sir,” Alter said sarcastically, and this time the smile did fade from Freimann’s face.

“Yes,” he said. Then he unslung the satchel which he wore around his shoulder and upended it. The contents clicked together as they tumbled to the forest floor, the gloom making them seem as green as everything else in the forest.

“We always take the tip of the left horn,” he explained, his tone still chill. “For the bounty. But perhaps you would like to check that these are fresh?”

So saying he reached down and lifted one of the hacked-off horns towards Alter. Flies were already gorging themselves on the dark gore which smeared the bone.

“Not at all, sir,” Alter told him as he took a step back. “Wouldn’t dream of doubting the word of an officer.”

“That’s settled then,” Erikson said. “Now I suggest we put the wounded on the horses and carry on to that water you promised us.”

Freimann shook his head.

“No, the wounded are no good to us. The enemy will be able to smell their blood for miles around, and we need stealth. I’ll send two of my men to lead them back to the town. They’ll be there by morning.”

Erikson caught Alter turning to hide the neatly stitched gash on his arm, and winked. A drop of blood wasn’t going to do them any harm, and over the last few weeks he had come to rely on the old soldier.

“Very well, then,” he said. “Let’s see who we have left.”

Only a few score of the company remained unscathed. Although they had only suffered three fatalities, many more had been wounded in the ferocity of the beasts’ onslaught. Gunter was one of the worst off. He had received a deep claw-wound across his already unlovely features, as well as a snapped arm and three shattered ribs.

“How are you doing?” Erikson asked him as he watched one of Gunter’s company strapping the man’s arm to his torso.

“Blessed by Sigmar,” Gunter told him without the slightest trace of irony. Porter, who was counting the cost to his food stores, sniggered behind him. Everybody pretended not to notice.

“I see what you mean,” Erikson said, and as so often was the case when dealing with the faithful, felt himself at a complete loss.

“My injuries will heal, and during that time I will learn the lessons from this combat,” Gunter explained patiently. “Attack from below seems to be the best way to deal with these beasts. Take them in the belly.”

“I had a wench like that once,” said Porter.

“Have you assigned a man to carry that kettle yet?” Erikson snapped, and Porter was suddenly no longer there. Turning back to Gunter he said, “I’m going to have to send all the wounded back. You will be in command of the column. That is, if you think you are strong enough?”

“With Sigmar’s help,” Gunter told him, “we are all strong enough.”

“Good,” Erikson said. “You can take my horse. Just try not to get in any trouble on the way. I want you fit. Freimann has been kind enough to send two of his men back with you. They’ll have you back in no time.”

Freimann nodded. He had been strolling through the company, an expression of vague satisfaction on his face as he studied the blood-soaked bandages and crudely bound limbs.

“They’ll see you clear,” he said. “Now, Captain Erikson. If you are ready, we should make haste.”

“Good luck,” he said to Gunter, then turned away, and Sergeant Alter bellowed the order to march.

Within minutes the unscathed members of the company had left their wounded comrades behind them, swallowed up by the gloom of the forest.

Even though the track had widened and they now travelled mostly downhill, they found the going hard. The day’s march combined with the exhaustion of battle had

put lead in their feet, and it was with a feeling of genuine relief that they eventually arrived at a river.

It cut cleanly through the murk of the forest. The light that sparkled on the clear waters was almost blinding in its brightness, and the mayflies that flitted through the rainbows of mist shone like jewels.

“Have you really never been here before?” Erikson asked Freimann as he watched his men splash forwards to quench their thirst and wash the slime of sweat and crushed bugs from their faces.

“Not here,” Freimann said. “But me and my regiment have made the forest our own. We can follow its tracks almost as well as the enemy, and if we don’t have their senses we have the intelligence to make up for it.”

“Your tactics seem to work,” Erikson allowed. “But how can you match their ability to smell?”

“We don’t match it,” Freimann said. “We use it. The smell of blood, especially. It carries for miles, and when they smell it, it does something to them. It shuts down their thinking and blinds them to everything else so that they must follow it. It’s like a drug to them.”

“It seems to make them damned powerful, though,” Erikson said. Freimann just shrugged.

“They can be as powerful as they want, as long as they go where we lead them. Attack where we want them to attack.”

He turned and gave Erikson a long, cool look.

“Our injured...” Erikson began, then felt his mouth go dry. He had been seized with a sudden, nauseating suspicion. “They will be all right, won’t they? Your men will lead them to safety?”

Freimann turned away and looked down the river.

“If we have time, we will set some snares before we leave this place,” he said. “Your villain of a cook can make us some stew.”

“But the injured,” Erikson persisted. “Your men are going to lead them to safety. Aren’t they?”

“One of my earliest memories is of a snare I set one winter,” Freimann continued as if he hadn’t heard the question. “I must have been about five or six. Something like that. I’d set the snare in a hare run, but I caught a fox instead. It was a skinny thing, all fur and ferocity, but it was ablaze with life,” Freimann said with admiration as he gazed sightlessly into the trees on the other side of the river. “When I approached, it snarled and snapped. Then, as I watched, it began to gnaw at its own paw. It seemed to take an age to chew through the joint, but eventually it did.”

He trailed off, lost in the memory. Erikson listened to his men laughing and complaining and arguing as they refreshed themselves in the sunlit waters.

“The blood on the snow was the brightest red I’ve ever seen,” Freimann said at length. “I let it go, limping away on three legs. It must have died soon after, but right then it deserved to live because it understood life. It understood that life is cruel and cold and merciless, and the only way to survive is to be even crueller and colder. Even more merciless.”

“But my men,” Erikson said, trying to drag Freimann back to the point. “They are all bleeding. If the beasts can smell as well as you say they can... I have a responsibility.”

Freimann blinked as if awakening from a dream. When he spoke next it was with his usual carefree insouciance.

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” he said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m sure they will be fine.”

This time Erikson saw past Freimann’s easy charm to something that lay behind it. Something that looked a little like blood on the snow. He suppressed a shiver.

“We have to finish this job and get back,” he decided.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Freimann said. “Let’s fill our canteens and get going. I want to find a hilltop to camp on tonight. And I’m suddenly hungry.”

They made the rest of the day’s journey in silence.

## Chapter Eleven

Gunter's column of wounded men had covered barely five miles when dusk caught up with them. The forest gloom had deepened into an endless shadow that lay beneath the trees, a darkness that seemed almost a physical thing.

"Rifleman," Gunter called out to the guide in front of them. "What is your name?"

"Franz," the rifleman said without turning.

"It is time to call a halt for the night, Franz. The men are weak, and they need rest and to tend to their wounds."

"We're not stopping." Franz, who had been leading the column, let his horse amble on even as he turned in the saddle. "The horses can find their footing in the darkness, and it is dangerous to lose mobility."

"Most of the men don't have horses," Gunter told him. Speaking had reopened the claw-mark that sliced down his face, and blood started to flow again. He ignored it just as he ignored the constant pain from his broken arm and shattered ribs.

"That is their misfortune," Franz said with a shrug. "In the forest, the weak must fend for themselves."

"But in the eyes of Sigmar," Gunter said, "all men are brothers in battle. And look, right here is where yonder stream has made a clearing. We will stop here for the night and continue in the morning."

For a moment it seemed that the rifleman was going to argue, but all he did was shrug again.

"As you wish," he said. Without a backwards glance he dismounted, and led his horse to the trickle of water to drink.

Slowly, limping on their own two feet or clinging to one of the few horses, the rest of Gunter's shattered command entered the clearing. It was little more than a narrow strip of land that some flash-flood had cleared of undergrowth. A narrow strip of sky ran like a ribbon above the stream, and the men looked up at it with the same hopeless yearning with which they had looked out of the bars of the gaol. Already they had learned to hate the forest.

Gunter, his stern features as composed as always beneath the dark creases of his wounds and the bright tears of fresh blood they wept, moved amongst the men. For the first time he learned that two of them had not made it even this far, and had been left on the trail behind them.

They spent the last dying hour of daylight building up a store of firewood, and as the darkness between the trees grew complete, the men lit the first of their watch fires.

The riflemen were unhappy.

“That is not wise,” Franz told Gunter, who was now sitting patiently whilst one of his colleagues rebound his bandages. “You must tell your men to extinguish the fires. The smell of woodsmoke will carry even further than the sight of the flames.”

“The men are cold and exhausted,” Gunter argued. “And many of them need all the comfort and the warmth they can get. Anyway, with the light behind us we can fight whatever comes from the forest.”

“If you fight the things that this fire will bring,” the riflemen said, “you will be slaughtered.”

The man who was retying Gunter’s bandage let the knot slip through his fingers, and the fractured bone flared with a brittle agony.

“Then so be it,” Gunter snarled, his composure slipping in the moment of pain. “We are Sigmar’s sons, and if that is our destiny then so be it.”

Franz opened his mouth to reply, but his companion tapped his arm and shook his head.

“Then I can’t persuade you to extinguish those fires?” Franz asked.

“No,” Gunter replied, and swallowed his pain as the bandage was tied again.

When he awoke, Gunter had no idea what time it was. The fire had burned low, and even as he stumbled to his feet he muttered a prayer of contrition for having allowed himself to lapse into unconsciousness before posting a watch.

Still muttering, he went to the fire and fed it with dried brushwood that they had found on the banks of the stream. Soon it was crackling happily away. Gunter finished his prayer and looked around the camp. The flames lit the trees that loomed over them, as hard and unforgiving as the bones of some vast skeleton, and revealed the bats and moths that flitted between them.

The men all seemed to be sleeping, bundled in their bloodied and tattered clothes like so many rag dolls. Gunter stalked amongst them. Occasionally he would stoop to shake a man out of a nightmare or to examine the dressing of a wound, but for the most part he let them sleep.

It wasn’t until he went to check on the horses that he realised that their two guides had gone. The deserters had taken their mounts and their bedrolls with them and vanished as silently as mist before the dawn.

Gunter ground his teeth in anger at their treachery. Taking comfort from the fact that rage is one of Sigmar’s greatest gifts, he returned to the fire to nurse it. He checked his weapons, and gazed into the flames. They danced hypnotically and he caught himself falling back to sleep.

He jerked awake, and suddenly saw the hungry glitter of eyes in the darkness amongst the trees.

“Who’s there?” he growled, rising to his feet and stepping towards them. The eyes vanished before he had taken half a dozen steps, blinking out as suddenly as they had appeared. But now that he was peering into the darkness Gunter could see that his sleeping company was being appraised by a whole constellation of glittering eyes. They glowed in the reflected firelight as they studied Gunter’s sleeping men.



Gunter regarded the men too. They were broken, bled out, exhausted. Of those who could still hold a weapon, there were few who would have the strength to wield it, especially against such beasts as they had fought today.

As if summoned by the thought, the stealthy calm of the forest was torn asunder by a sudden rush of crashing undergrowth and pounding hooves, and with a final crash of falling timber the ancient depths of the forest gave birth to a nightmare.

It bounded into the firelight, and Gunter's first blasphemous thought was that it was magnificent.

It towered above the sleeping men, and in the firelight it seemed to glow with an almost holy aura of power. The muscles which writhed across its arms and chest were as perfectly defined as those of the stone statues that guarded the baron's palace, and the horns which curled from the thick bone of its forehead thrust upwards with a terrible potency.

Like the beasts they had fought today, this one's torso melted into the body of a quadruped, but it was like nothing Gunter had ever seen before. It glittered with the bright green scales of a poisonous serpent and stood upright on powerful hind legs. Its pose was perfectly balanced by taloned forelegs and a thick, meaty tail that tapered back into the darkness behind it.

And yet of all these details the one which froze Gunter was the expression on its malformed face. There was hunger there, yes, and the marking of a terrible rage. But there was also a sadness, a melancholy so deep that it showed even through the fury of bloodlust.

"Sigmar guide and protect us," Gunter intoned as the men scrambled to their feet around him, their cries echoing through the claustrophobic confines of the clearing.

"Sigmar be our light in the darkness and our shade in the desert," he continued, not letting the first guillotine sweep of the beast's axe distract him. It caught two men in the same blow, splitting them open as easily as gutted fish. The beast roared, and the sound was so deep that Gunter could feel it vibrating through his bones.

"Sigmar be our strength and our courage," Gunter continued, ignoring the rush of air as the beast's tail whipped above him as it turned on fresh victims. These men had abandoned their weapons and were running for the forest. The muscles in the beast's hind legs bulged and it leapt after them, ending their lives with the rip and tear of sundered flesh.

"Sigmar flow through us and over us." Gunter felt the familiar bliss seize hold of him. The pain left him as it re-knit his injuries and washed away his exhaustion, and even as the beast fell upon another knot of men he was smiling.

His god was with him, and when his god was with him there was nothing to fear.

"Sigmar be our hope and our boast and our war cry," he completed the catechism and, with an easy grace which belied the speed of his movements he cast off his sling, unsheathed his sword with an arm that was no longer broken and roared his challenge.

"Be gone from this place, abomination!" he roared, foam flying from his lips and his eyes bright with holy fire. "Begone or be cast down as was the foul Morkar before you."

The beast turned and regarded him. It had deep, liquid eyes, as beautiful as a deer's but conscious with a human understanding. It cocked its head to one side, and

watched Gunter as he stepped forwards and lifted a brand out of the fire with his left hand. The beast regarded the fire and the steel, and with a roar that seemed almost mockery it launched itself at the man.

Gunter moved, feet blurring amongst the debris of the forest floor as he twisted away from the swing of the creature's axe. Then he struck, and as he did so he called upon Sigmar, a single, guttural bark. Power flowed through him, a flood of energy which made his skin tingle and his hair stand on end.

The sword he wielded had been taken from the dregs of the armoury and it was as plain as any other workman's tool. The hilt was leather-bound wood, the crossbar was an unadorned strip of steel and the body of the blade was as shatteringly hard as the edge was bluntingly soft.

But now, in the darkness of this tangled battlefield, it glowed as if made from the finest Tilean steel. The tip punched through scales that were as hard as iron, and the length of it slid into the muscle beneath with a blood-slicked ease that took even Gunter by surprise.

The beast shrieked and leapt away, its bound carrying it high over the fire so that it landed on the other side.

"Stand your ground!" Gunter roared. "Stand, and face your doom!"

He stalked forwards, blood sizzling on the blade which still glowed with some internal fire. Gunter held the hilt with the same calm assurance of a child holding a parent's hand, and as he advanced on the beast the steel glowed ever brighter.

"Surround it," he called out. So far the rest of the men had been as useless as hens trapped in a coop with a fox, but at the sound of Gunter's command some started to edge forwards.

It was to be their undoing. With a terrible ease the beast turned on them in a whirlwind of muscle and steel. Its axe scythed through some even as its tail whiplashed through others, snapping ribs and skulls alike. Some of its victims' twice-broken bodies were flung onto the fire, and they screamed as they burned in the sudden darkness.

But in this moment of triumphant slaughter, the beast met its end.

Gunter had used the distraction to sprint towards it and now, as the fire suffocated beneath the thrashing men, he leapt forwards into the sudden darkness. Without the flames he was blinded by the strangling darkness of the forest, but that didn't matter. The sword in his hand was alive with the power of his god, and it found the heart of the enemy as surely as a compass needle finds the north.

With a final cry Gunter thrust it forwards. The impact of steel against bone jarred through his arm so hard that he felt it snap again, but by then the steel was buried to the hilt in the beautifully muscled torso of the beast's chest.

It died silently. The breath caught in its throat as it fell to the ground with a bone-jarring thump, the sword still deep in its chest. The only sounds were the cries of the survivors as they stumbled through the darkness, wounded and terrified and lacking the faith that had slain the beast.

Gunter ignored them as, with a final prayer of thanks, he kicked a heap of embers together and groped through the darkness to find fuel. Soon the fire was blazing again, and although the scene it lit was one of absolute carnage, Gunter exulted in it. He knew that, in the darkness of this place, he had built the flames of victory.

The stone was not much to look at. It stood hunched on a small hill, a blunt, moss-covered thing that thrust upwards like a solitary fang.

“How do we know that’s it?” Erikson asked as Horstein bustled happily amongst the barrels of blackpowder and lengths of fuse.

“This is where the baron said it would be,” Freimann said. “Anyway, look around you. Even the forest draws back from the power of the thing.”

Erikson looked, and realised that it was true. The trees cringed away from the stone, the few branches that groped towards it stunted and leafless. Despite the sunlight that poured through the gap this left in the canopy, there was little undergrowth around the stone. Just brown grass and dust and, now that he looked more closely, the dimpled remains of countless hoofmarks.

“Still,” he said, “it doesn’t look that dangerous.”

“Neither does a foxglove,” Freimann told him. “But try eating one.”

“Won’t take long to set this up,” Horstein said as he pushed past the leaders and led half a dozen men to the stone. They set down the barrels of blackpowder and Horstein, his spectacles flashing with sunlight and excitement, set them to digging.

“We’ll topple the stone,” he explained as Erikson wandered over. “Then pack the explosives around it and beneath it.”

“Can’t you just blow it up and have done with it?” Erikson asked.

A pained expression crossed Horstein’s face and he tutted impatiently.

“Of course not,” he said. That would dissipate the force of the explosion. “This way the stone will take as much of the force as possible, and KABOOM!”

He bellowed the last word loud enough to startle a covey of partridges that had been hiding in the nearby undergrowth. It was loud enough to startle Erikson, too. Over the last couple of days the men had fallen to speaking in hushed tones, as if reluctant to let the forest hear their voices.

“Keep that noise down,” he snapped, then turned to Freimann. “We should post sentries while he does this, and be ready to go as soon as he is finished.”

“My men are already in place,” Freimann said, and Erikson noticed that the other riflemen had indeed vanished into the undergrowth.

“Very well,” Erikson decided. “The rest of the men can...”

But before he got any further there was a chorus of yells from the men who had been assigned to dig beneath the stone.

“What is it?” Erikson asked, but nobody was listening. Instead they were scrabbling at the base of the stone with the enthusiasm of dogs at a rabbit hole.

Then, when the first man lifted his prize and the others saw the gleam of gold, there was a stampede. Porter, who had been safely out of the way of any manual labour, led it. Brandt was close behind him. Within minutes the turf around the stone was being torn up as the men fought for the treasure that lay beneath.

“Can’t you control your men?” Freimann asked.

“Never get between a dog and its bone,” Erikson replied. “And anyway, I promised them loot. Don’t worry, though,” he winked at Freimann, “we’ll divide it up afterwards, and you’ll get your share.”

“Not sure that I’ll want all of it,” the rifleman replied and gestured to some of the debris that had been uncovered. As well as coins and bracelets and jewellery there were human skulls, gnawed bones and an endless supply of teeth. They piled up amongst the clods of earth the men were throwing behind them.

Nobody realised the stone was falling until it was too late.

It moved with a sudden, predatory speed that took them all by surprise. One minute it stood as still and unmoving as it had for centuries, the next it was falling, the base tearing itself free in a gout of soil and debris and crushing down onto the men below.

Most of them saw the movement in time to spring clear but two, struggling with a bronze tore that had become entangled in a tree root, were not so lucky. The dead weight of the stone caught them with a sickening crunch that came so suddenly that they couldn’t even scream.

Three other men, who had not been quick enough to drag their legs clear, were a lot more vocal. They cried and yelled and whimpered, none of which had any effect on the stone which now bit down on their trapped limbs.

“You men, get clear,” Erikson called. “Stand back behind that branch. Move. Right, I want six volunteers. Yes. Yes, you six. The rest of you, give them your spades and stand there until I tell you to move. That means you too, Porter. Now, you six, come over here and dig your mates out from under the stone. Careful, now.”

As they dug Erikson studied the stone. Some of the moss had been scraped away from the top, and the lower third of it was as bare as the root of a pulled tooth. He bent over to study the patterns that seemed to have been carved into the stone. As he examined them they started to move, wriggling around like worms, and he took a step back.

“Hurry up, there,” he told the men as they dug their comrades out. “And keep a hand on the stone to make sure it doesn’t roll. No, don’t touch it there, just on the mossy part.”

Soon the last man was freed. Erikson took a last fearful glance at the carvings that squirmed through the stone. There was something mesmerising about the way they moved. Something as mesmerising as the shriek of prey, or the destruction of buildings, or the sweet, sweet taste of hot blood spurting from a mouthful of living flesh.

Erikson blinked and tore his gaze away.

“Right, get on with it, Horstein,” he told the engineer, knuckling at his eyes as he stomped away.

“But I need to dig down to put a couple of barrels beneath,” the engineer complained.

“No. Set your fuses and we’ll go. That thing... it isn’t right.”

“You don’t mind disturbing your men’s grave?” Freimann asked him.

“Lying beneath that thing is no grave,” Erikson told him grimly, and as Horstein set the explosives he gathered the gold they had found, packed it into an empty grain sack and handed it to Sergeant Alter.

“Look after it,” he said and watched Horstein, who was humming a cheerful tune, finish tying off the fuses. After giving them a last, critical look, he produced a tin of sulphur-tipped matches.

“If you would all stand back a hundred yards or so,” he told the men, “I will light the fuse.”

“You heard him,” Erikson told his men. “Start back down the way we came and wait a hundred yards or so away. Sergeant Alter, you lead off.”

“Yes, sir,” Alter said and, swinging the bag of gold over his shoulder, marched off. Erikson watched them go, then turned back to Horstein, who was fiddling excitedly with his tin of matches.

“Are they clear?” the engineer asked. “I don’t want the same trouble as last time.”

“What happened last time?” Erikson asked him.

“Oh... nothing,” Horstein said. “Right then. Get ready to run.”

So saying, he struck a thick sulphur match and lit the frayed end of the spider’s web of fuses that he had wrapped around the barrels. They faltered into life, hissing and crackling with chemical fire, and with a last, loving look at his handiwork Horstein turned and sprinted back down the forest path.

He moved with a surprising speed for a man of his shape and size, and Erikson found that he was struggling to keep up with him.

“How long until it explodes?” he shouted as he followed the engineer back into the gloom of the surrounding forest.

“Four seconds,” the reply came back as Horstein darted from the path and disappeared into the woods as swiftly as a rabbit into its burrow.

“What?” Erikson cried, and turned back to look at the barrels that were packed around the stone.

“Four seconds,” Horstein said as he hunkered down behind a tree.

Erikson swore, caught a last, fleeting glimpse of the burning fuses and rolled himself into cover behind a boulder.

Four seconds passed. Then four more.

A minute later Horstein clambered back to his feet, squinted through the thick lenses of his spectacles and swore.

“Sorry about this,” he said, and looked shamefacedly at Erikson. “The fuses must have been damp.”

So saying he scurried forwards eagerly, a bag of tools in his hand. Erikson was watching him leaning down over a fuse that appeared to be extinguished when, with an explosion so loud that it vanished into silence, the blackpowder detonated.

Erikson felt something whizz past his head, and ducked back. Meanwhile the world around him disintegrated into a hailstorm of splintered wood, steaming mud and shattered stone. Even as the world shuddered beneath him some of the debris, red-hot with the force of the blast, started smouldering amongst the detritus of the forest floor.

Erikson struggled to his feet as Freimann appeared. His mouth was opening and closing, although Erikson had no idea of what he was trying to say. The buzz that rang in his ears had turned into a high-pitched hum, and for the first time he began to

worry that he might have been deafened. Then he saw where Freimann was pointing, and he suddenly had other concerns.

The first of the fires had already broken out, a yellow blaze that was burning merrily within a brown mass of withered ferns. Following Freimann's lead, Erikson pulled off his tunic and rushed over to beat the flames back, but they had already climbed up a ladder of ivy into the desiccated leaves of the canopy. They blossomed into an orange blaze, the heat of which was strong enough to send Erikson stumbling back.

His hearing came back with a pop, just in time for him to hear the excited voices of the men and the hungry crackle of another fire which was burning behind him. As he watched, it too spread to the canopy, and the forest became an arc of flames that flickered between him and the crater where the stone had been.

"Retreat!" he cried, staggering back from the heat. "Retreat!"

"No, don't," Freimann shouted, his skin already blistering with the heat of the fire he was fighting. "The forest is too dry. We'll never outrun this."

But it was too late. The men were already blundering back down into the forest, running from the smoke and the heat with the same dumb panic of the other animals that were now fleeing from the flames.

"Come on," Erikson told Freimann, then turned and sprinted after his men.

Behind him the first tree collapsed in an explosion of sparks which drifted up on a slight breeze, twinkling merrily as they floated towards whatever tinder-dry thickets awaited them.

They had gone barely a hundred yards before Erikson skidded to a halt, narrowly avoiding stepping over the body that had been left on the path. Despite the warmth on the back of his neck and the sting in his eyes he rolled the body over and swore when he recognised that it was Sergeant Alter. The man was still breathing but his eyes were closed and blood seeped from the wound on the back of his head. When he noticed that the bag of loot Alter had been carrying had vanished, Erikson swore again.

"I must have been mad to recruit these villains," he said and, with a grunt of effort, he hoisted Alter up and swung him over his shoulders. The man was heavier than he looked; in the weeks since he and his fellow prisoners had been freed from gaol they had eaten better than many of them had eaten for years, and the training had sheathed them all with fresh muscle.

Erikson took no comfort from the condition of the man as, hunched beneath his weight, he barrelled forwards. By now the smoke was everywhere, and he blinked back tears as he zigzagged along the path and tried to avoid falling over roots.

But although he ran fast, the fire was faster.

Hofstadter hadn't planned on deserting. Not after he had seen what that bastard Erikson had done to Minsk. And especially not after he had seen what he'd done to Traudl, leaving him out in the stocks like that. How he'd screamed!

The problem was, Hofstadter considered as he ran sweating through the forest, although he hadn't planned on deserting he never really planned not to either. That

was why, when he'd seen his chance, he'd leapt at it with a mindless instinct born of a lifetime of thievery.

He had seen the panic. He had seen Alter struggling beneath the weight of the loot. And he had acted. A blow to the back of the head, a quick grab of a wonderfully heavy bag and away he'd been, a bag of loot on his back and freedom in front of him.

It had taken mere seconds for him to realise what a mistake he had made, but by that time it was far, far too late. He was already lost in the forest as he sprinted away from his former comrades, and the acrid stink of smoke seemed to grow stronger by the moment. With a quick glance behind him he paused, wiped the sweat from his forehead and took stock.

This far from the path the undergrowth had closed in around him like some sort of vast, endless snare. Yet although its thickets and thorns were now tangling every step he took, they did nothing to slow the fire which seemed to be pursuing him. Far from it. Even as he struggled to catch his breath in the thickening smoke he could see the first flames lapping eagerly up a not-too-distant tree trunk.

"What have I done?" he moaned, and looked back towards the path. At least, he thought that he was looking back towards the path. He suddenly wasn't so sure.

The crash of a falling branch brought a scream to his lips and he was running again, blood seeping through the tears in his breeches as he crashed through the forest. The smoke and exertion started to burn his lungs, but he ignored the pain and pressed on until, suddenly, he was falling.

The edge of the ravine had been hidden by the undergrowth. Hofstadter dropped the bag, which burst open with a heartbreaking clink of lost treasure, and clawed at the sheer mud of the slope. It came away in his hands, great clumps of it, but he carried on scrabbling until he finally hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud.

It was cool down here, and darkly shadowed. A stream gurgled beside him, and no doubt it was responsible for this deep, trench-like ravine.

Hofstadter got to his feet, and his heart quickened as he saw the gold scattered amongst the pebbles. He was already scrabbling around after it when it hit him that he could go back to the company. At least if he could find it.

He didn't think that anybody had seen him. Alter certainly hadn't. He had made damn sure that the sergeant had been looking the other way before he'd whacked him. If he left the gold, he could find his comrades again. Perhaps he could even escape from the burning hell of this forest.

Slowly, scarcely able to believe that he was doing it, he dropped the coins and the chains he had been collecting. Even in the shadows they gleamed, but Hofstadter just turned away and started following the river towards what he hoped was the east.

Then he paused and turned back. Surely one little keepsake wouldn't cause any harm. Would it?

As if in answer to the thought, he saw a flash of silver in the stream. He stooped to pick it up, and found that it was a fine silver chain which held a pendant of some green stone. He wasn't sure what the stone was. It was too opaque to be an emerald, but too hard to be jade. It looked... fascinating.

The sudden realisation that he had no time to waste struck him and, with hardly a thought, Hofstadter looped the pendant around his neck and raced off in search of his comrades.





## Chapter Twelve

It took them four days to reach the edge of the forest. Four days of sweat and exhaustion and terror. Four days of empty bellies and burning muscles and sleepless nights. Four days in which the fire had played cat and mouse with them.

And during these four days Erikson lost a further half a dozen men.

The three who had been caught beneath the falling stone had been the first to go, dying in the night in fits of screaming agony that seemed to bear no relation to their physical wounds. A couple more had fallen too far back. By the time Erikson had realised and returned for them they had been devoured by the fire. Their bodies had been as black as burned pork in the glowing embers. One man had fallen in a stream they had fled across, cracking his head open on a stone before drowning, and another had simply vanished.

All in all, Erikson told himself as they finally emerged from the forest, it could have been worse. At least he still had Sergeant Alter, and young Dolf. And Porter, of course. The man seemed to be as indestructible as he was cheerful. Even now, he was whistling over an open fire, heating stones upon which to bake the company's flatbread.

"I'm looking forward to this," Erikson told him. "It feels like a lifetime since we had any kind of meal."

"Won't be much of one I'm afraid, captain," Porter told him as he turned to a leather bucket in which he mixed the dough of flour, salt and water. "We don't even have any lard left to go with the bread. And there'll be no gruel until we get another cauldron."

"We'll replenish our stocks when we get back to Nalderstein," Erikson reassured him.

"In the meantime," a voice behind him said, "find a spit for these."

Erikson turned to find that Freimann had materialised behind him with his usual stealth. He carried half a dozen game birds, and Porter seized them eagerly.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said. "I always did say you were a scholar."

"Where the hell have your lot been?" Erikson asked him. "You disappeared as soon as we were clear of the tree line."

"We've been busy," Freimann told him with a carefree smile. "Doesn't it feel nice to be back out in the open?"

"Yes," Erikson had to agree. "It does. I've never seen a place as close as that damned forest. I feel like I've spent the last week underground."

"It's not so bad once you get used to it," Freimann told him. "By the way, the rest of your men seem to have made it out, too. Most of them, anyway. We found their spoor."

“That’s fantastic news,” he said, and slapped the rifleman on the shoulder. “I was worried that they might have been caught by the enemy.”

“Yes, it’s odd.” Freimann’s forehead creased. “I thought they would have been too. The forest is usually swarming at this time of year.”

Erikson chose to ignore the callous disregard Freimann showed for his men. After all, his company had survived, there was hot food on the way and they were finally in the clean warmth of a sunlit field.

“So why aren’t they swarming now?” he asked. “Could they have fled from the fire?”

“No, the fire didn’t start until a day after I sent the wounded off. They must be somewhere else. And Sigmar help whoever else is there.”

“Well, at least it’s not our problem. Porter, get somebody to help you with those birds. I’m hungry enough to eat them raw.”

Nobody noticed Hofstadter. Four days ago he had slipped back into the column without anybody even noticing he had gone. Now he sat hunched over the weight of his pendant, leaning forwards so that his head rested in his hands.

The company were so exhausted that this was hardly unusual. What was unusual was the look of animal hunger that crossed his face at the mention of raw meat, and the rope of drool that spilled out from between his bared teeth. But if anybody noticed, they didn’t give it another thought.

\* \* \*

“Wake, up.” The voice was low but insistent. “Erikson, wake up!”

Erikson rolled out of his dew-soaked blanket and stood up, buckling on his sword belt even before he was properly awake. He blinked sleep out of his eyes and, in the chill of predawn, recognised Freimann. The man was wide-eyed in the darkness.

“What is it?” he asked, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the men who were sleeping around him. Sigmar knew, they needed as much rest as they could get.

“It’s Nalderstein,” Freimann said. “We can’t return there.”

“Why not?” Erikson asked. “I thought we were set to reach it this afternoon.”

“Tell the captain, Hendrick,” Freimann said, and another rifleman loomed up from the darkness.

“Me and Mihael reconnoitred the area yesterday,” the man said, his voice as soft as the wind which rustled through the wheat that grew around them. “I found the town in precisely the location we had calculated, but by the time I’d closed to within two miles I could see the extent to which it had been invested.”

“Invested?” Erikson snapped. “You mean besieged, I take it. By whom?”

“By the enemy,” the scout replied simply. “We estimate a force of three to four hundred, including some larger beasts, although the proximity of the forest makes any realistic estimate difficult. After due consideration we advanced further, using the prevailing wind and the wheat that surrounds the town as cover. We got to within perhaps half a dozen bow shots before a change in the wind forced us to retreat, covering our tracks as we did so.”

“And did you see anybody in the town?” Erikson asked.

“We did see a human presence behind the stockade,” the scout said. “Although we couldn’t detect any regimental standards or uniforms. They could well have been the remnants of your own company.”

“Not that that makes any difference,” Freimann interjected. “If four hundred of the enemy are visible, we can count on at least another two in ambush. You did well to get so close, Hendrick.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hendrick said. “Although we did have to do a bit of garrotting on the way back out.”

Erikson was no longer listening. During the last few weeks, the economic imperatives of his situation had receded, replaced with the day-to-day business of keeping the company united and alive. Now, suddenly, he was reminded of why he was here, risking life and limb in a war which had nothing to do with him.

“We will have to get them out,” he decided. Although he had been speaking half to himself, Freimann didn’t hesitate with his contradiction.

“We are not going anywhere near that place,” he said. “There is nothing we can do anyway.”

“We have to,” Erikson said. “I can’t afford to lose half the company. Not already. I need another month’s bonus just to recoup my original investment.”

Freimann’s sickle of a smile was as cruel as Morrslieb’s.

“I see,” he said. “I applaud your lack of sentimentality, captain, but your financial losses are your own affair.”

“It’s not just that,” Erikson snapped guiltily. “These are my men. I can’t just leave them.”

“You have to,” Freimann said. “Think of it like any farmer would. His cattle may be his livelihood, but he would hardly throw his life away defending them.”

“That,” Erikson said, “would depend on the farmer. And anyway, I have no intention of dying.”

“Ha!” Freimann’s bark of laughter rang out across the camp. He seemed genuinely amused. “Then how will you free them?”

“I’ll break through and help them to withstand the siege.” Erikson decided. “You, meanwhile, will tell the baron that we have lured a few hundred of the enemy out into the open for him. Do you think he’ll come for them?”

Freimann shrugged.

“Maybe. The biggest problem with these damned things usually is getting them out into the open.”

“Good,” Erikson said.

“Wait, I said usually. This year, they seem to have... changed. They aren’t behaving as they usually do. And I don’t know if the baron will even have the men to send out here. And even if he does, what will you live on until they arrive?”

“We’ll manage,” Erikson said.

Freimann sighed.

“This is all nonsense,” he said. “There is no way you would be able to break through the enemy’s lines and reach the town. My lads are artists in stealth. Hunters from birth. But your gaggle of thugs? No offence, but they’re about as stealthy as a

pig with its nuts caught in a meat grinder. They won't get within a mile before they're spotted."

"No offence taken," Erikson said. "But there must be a way. There must be."

The men stood in a thoughtful silence and watched the sun rising into a blue summer sky. As it did so the breeze picked up, rustling through the high, dry stalks of the wheat which covered the land in an endless sea of husk and straw.

This had been the most glorious summer Kathgor could remember. It was not just that he had finally fought his way to the leadership of his herd. Nor was it the sweet torrent of blood that had flowed ever since, a heady, maddening draft that had thickened his fur and bulked up his muscle.

No, it was something more than that. Somehow the world, even outside the fastness of the forest, had begun to beat in time with his own pulse. The rhythms of nature throbbed through the land like the greatest war dram, and the warmth of the earth beneath his hooves nurtured him and his herd even as they repaid it by destroying the shackles to which humanity bound it.

Such a shackle lay before them now. It was a maddening blasphemy of straight lines and dead wood. Even the land around the town had been broken and tamed, the forest cleared and replaced with a sickening, endless uniformity of wheat.

But no matter. The new power which surged through the land had given him the strength to wait until his lord Gulkroth, the terrible and the divine, had sent him enough reinforcements to take the town. And so Kathgor, as patient as the hawks that hovered above the wheat, had waited.

This morning, he had been rewarded. Another hundred had arrived, thick-pelted and armed with mighty axes. There was no scent of submission about their leader, a giant called Hruul who stood eight feet tall. Fortunately there was no scent of challenge either. Kathgor was glad of it. The beast would be a great ally in the slaughter to come.

Now, with the stench of his brothers' bloodlust greasing the air and the delicious smell of fresh, soft man-flesh within the town, Kathgor prepared to give the order to attack. To crush the town like the shell of a snail so that he might suck out the juicy innards.

But even as he prepared to end the agony of waiting, he caught the first, sharp scent of smoke on the wind. At first he ignored it, telling himself that it must come from within the town and that it would soon be extinguished with blood.

"Fire coming," Hruul barked. He loomed above Kathgor, tall enough to cast a shadow over his nominal herd leader.

"I don't fear fire," Kathgor barked back. He could feel the fur on the back of his neck starting to rise in challenge, and fought to keep it down. There would be blood enough for both of them soon.

Hruul gazed down at him, and the insolence in his eyes brought a growl to Kathgor's throat. He swallowed it.

"We attack now," he decided.

"No," Hruul said. "Wait for the fire."

This time the impudence was too much, but before Kathgor could snarl his challenge a gaggle of skinny runts tumbled into his presence, their eyes bloodshot and their fur singed. Even as they began to chatter Kathgor realised how strong the smell of burning had grown. And how strong and how quickly.

“Fire!” the despised creatures jabbered. “Fire in the east. In the wheat. Coming at us with the wind!”

“How... how big is it?” Kathgor struggled to think through the storm of rage and impatience that surged through his consciousness. Already the world was starting to look tinged with red.

“Endless,” one of his scouts bleated. “It’s all in the wheat.”

Kathgor looked in the direction the creature was pointing towards and yes, there it was. A great waterfall of white smoke reversed up into the clear blue of the sky. And could he smell the singe of fur in amongst the reek of burning grass?

Kathgor struggled to think, but already it was too late. His herd was already disintegrating in the face of the racing fire. They fled towards the dank safety of the river and the forest beyond. As they ran so they drew others with them, and soon the entire army began to stampede.

“Make sure your herd stays intact,” Kathgor barked at Hruul. “We will return for the humans after this fire has burned itself out.”

“Yes,” said Hruul and, neither wanting to be the first to run, the two leaders slowly followed their herds back into the shelter of the forest, there beginning to terrorise them back into order.

“Come on, lads!” Erikson roared, lifting his voice above the furnace roar of the flames. They were devouring the wheat in front of his company with a terrifying speed, and he tried not to think of what would happen if the wind changed.

“You heard the captain,” Alter shouted from down the line. The company was spread out in a long, single rank behind the fire, each man hugging it as closely as he could. As well as driving the beasts away, it would camouflage their advance.

Unless the wind changed.

Erikson felt the heat burning up through the soles of his boots. The skin of his face already felt red and raw, and as he glanced towards Dolf he saw steam rising from the lad’s clothes.

“Don’t get too far ahead,” he told the youngster, who just smiled up at him.

“I follow you, captain.”

Erikson smiled back. He did follow him, too. Of all the company, Dolf was the most loyal. The most fearless. It almost seemed a shame to be leading him into the trap of a siege. That is, if they ever made it. Even as he slowed the fire slowed too, the wind that drove it seeming to pause uncertainly.

“The wind’s changing!” somebody cried, and Erikson rounded on him.

“Hold your ground!” he bellowed. “It’s slowed, that’s all.”

The men around him looked unconvinced, and he could hear Sergeant Alter subjecting somebody who had started to retreat to a torrent of abuse. All eyes turned to the flames. They danced beneath the shifting veil of smoke above them, as playful

as a cat which has cornered a mouse. Then, mercifully, the wind picked up and drove them forwards once more.

Erikson tried to keep the relief out of his voice as he ordered the men forwards once more. By now his eyes were streaming from the heat and the smoke, and soon he was coughing along with the rest of his men.

Should I have risked this, he thought?

He tried to push the thought away, but sweating through the furnace heat of the fire it nagged away at him. The problem was that there was no bold stroke he could make, no cunning stratagem or wild charge. All he could do was trudge along behind the fire, hoping that the wind didn't change.

Again the wind paused, and again the line staggered to a breathless halt. Erikson ground his teeth together and rubbed a smear of sweat from his forehead. Above the ravenous crackle of the flames he could hear a man sobbing, and he turned just in time to see another edging back from the line.

"Hold your ground," he called out, but his voice was so hoarse from the heat that it barely carried.

When the wind lifted again and the fire started to march away, the line stayed where it was. Sergeant Alter, his own voice hoarsening into silence, berated the men. Still none moved, unless it was to shift burning feet or slosh water over blistering skin.

"Dolf," Erikson said. "Sound the advance."

"Yes, captain," Dolf said, and the rolling thunder of the company's drum added a beat to the crackle of the racing flames.

Once more the men moved forward, but by now they were as reluctant as cattle being driven to the slaughterhouse. As the drumbeat rolled through the flames and towards the town and forest beyond, Erikson prayed again that the wind wouldn't change.

Kathgor watched the advancing wall of fire as it stalked through the wheat. Although he could not help but feel a certain joy in the destruction of the crops, it was outweighed by the fang-grinding frustration. He had kept his herd balanced on the edge of a glorious precipice of destruction for so long that they were mad with anticipation. He could almost taste the sweet, sweet flesh of his prey. He wanted it. He needed it.

Then he heard the drumming.

At first he thought that it was no more than the blood which pounded through his arteries, pulsing with the terrible energy of his barely contained rage. But no. No, he had heard that noise before, and it was unmistakable. But how could a human drumbeat be coming from behind the fire?

A fleeting suspicion of sorcery raised the hackles on the back of his neck, but he dismissed the idea. Humans were as weak against the shamans' blessings as they were against the warriors' steel. Then understanding dawned. His muzzle drew back to bare fangs, and he turned to bellow a summons to those of his herd who waited nearest to them. Then, without waiting to see how many would follow him, he bounded away, following the tree line.

It didn't take him long to pass the line of fire which was already nearing the town. Kathgor wondered if it would burn those high timber palisades too, but only in passing. The drumming grew ever louder, and even though the smell of smoke blotted out their smell he knew that prey was nearby.

Turning to make sure that none of his followers broke from the cover of the forest too soon, he pressed on until he was past the line of fire. And yes! Yes, there amongst the blackened husks of burned wheat and the smouldering remains of rats which hadn't been quick enough, were the men.

Crouching down in order to stay hidden for as long as possible, Kathgor led his herd out of the forest and into the shallow river that lay between him and the rear of the humans' line.

"Keep it up, Dolf," Erikson said, although the lad had little need of encouragement. Since taking the drum he had learned to play it so well that it had become almost a part of his body, and he could beat out a rhythm with a tireless consistency that they had all learned to march to.

Even now the company was instinctively holding to a straight line, every man in the single long rank adjusting himself to the whole. Erikson admired their formation and, after casting the thousandth worried glance at the progression of the fire before them, looked back to see there really were no stragglers.

There were.

His face hardened and, despite the sting of heat and smoke in his throat, he roared at them.

"Get back into line," he bellowed, disappointment lending fuel to his outrage. "That's right. Double time it, you... you..."

Erikson trailed off and blinked the tears from his eyes. At first he had only seen a couple of figures but, as soon as he had called, a dozen more had stood up and started running towards him. Then another dozen. Then, with a horrified realisation that hit him like a punch in the stomach, he realised what they were.

"Oh Sigmar," he said, and in that moment he almost froze.

Almost, but not quite. Men who froze didn't survive for as long as Erikson had on the battlefields of the Old World. Although he had never expected to be in such a predicament, and although they were trapped as neatly as skillets in an oven, it took him a heartbeat to formulate the best plan that he could. Then he was bellowing orders at his men.

"Form ranks," he cried, his vocal cords feeling as though they were on fire. "Form ranks. Dolf, drum the command."

Dolf was already doing so. As the other men turned and yelled in confusion the lad had taken his place by his captain's side and started beating the order. Slowly, painfully slowly, the wide line of men began to draw in and Erikson marched back towards the enemy in order to give them enough room to form up behind him.

Not all of the men obeyed the order. A couple of those at the ends of the line tried to flee, desperately scampering away between the closing jaws of the fire and that of the beasts. The rest straggled into the square as, with a terrifying speed, the enemy closed in on them.

If the beasts had looked terrifying on the green fields before Hergig then here, amongst the smoking ruins of the flame-harrowed fields, they looked daemonic. Bloodshot eyes burned with reflected fire, and the animal roar they made as they charged had an elemental power to it. The flaming heat seemed to grow even more unbearable in reply, so that the men's armour and sword hilts stung wherever they touched skin.

Erikson heard himself bellowing a challenge as the enemy fell upon them. He could almost feel the ragged formation around him shudder with the impact of the charge, but this time he was sure they would hold. Hemmed in by the fire behind and the enemy in front, they had no choice but fight or die.

Within seconds they were doing both. In between the blurred exhilaration of his own combat Erikson caught snatched glimpses of blades punching through hides, axes smashing through bone, fangs bared and bloodied. He didn't let the images distract him. He didn't let anything distract him as his world shrank to the sphere measured by the reach of his sword.

He killed the first of the beasts by throwing himself to one side, bouncing off the body of the man next to him and then slicing down into the arteries inside the hard muscle of its goat legs. The creature squealed as it sprayed blood, and Erikson used its falling body as cover for a backhanded slash towards the throat of the next. This one was quicker. It dropped its head so that the sword bounced off the iron hardness of its horns.

Erikson felt the impact of the jarring sword all the way up to his shoulder, and for one terrified instant he thought that the blade was going to be knocked from his numbed hand. He staggered back, but in the press of bodies there was no retreat, and he raised his sword to parry the axe that chopped down towards him with a terrible whiplash of power.

This time the sword was knocked from his hand and pain burst amongst the bones of his wrist. With a grunt of triumph the beast swung its crude weapon back for another blow, but Erikson was already moving. He hurled himself forwards as, with a practiced manoeuvre, he flipped the dagger in his left hand from the downward defensive position into the upright position of the killing stroke.

His shoulder hit the oak-hard muscle of the beast's torso, and before it could shift its grip on its own weapon he stabbed the dagger into its belly, sliding the blade between bands of muscle and then pressing down to put all of his weight into the twist.

When he withdrew the dagger it released a spool of blue intestines and a reek of methane. As the creature shrieked and clutched at its stray innards, Erikson rolled around the stinking bulk of its lice-infested body and sought his next target.

Before he could, his next target found him. Its shoulders bulged as it sent the misshapen iron of its axe head in an arc that would have smashed through both of Erikson's knees had he not leapt up. Fear made him as agile as a cat dropped onto a hot stove, and he avoided the next stroke by spinning around the now kneeling body of his last opponent.

He looked at the warrior beside him, desperate for help until he could find his dropped sword, but the thing that looked back at him did so with yellow, goat-pupilled eyes. It lunged at him, fangs slashing towards his throat, and Erikson



stabbed with his dagger, popping into the jelly of one of those hellish eyes. The scrum of bodies pressed closed around him and he let himself be carried back towards the flames. His armour was becoming a stove with the heat, but he was beyond caring. If he was going to be eaten, he decided with a hysterical wit, then he might as well be cooked first.

“Captain!”

At first Erikson ignored the voice. Amongst the screams and cries and the crackle of the fire which waited for them it was just one more distraction to be ignored.

“Captain!”

This time he did hear it. It sounded like Gunter. No, it didn't sound like him. It *was* him.

Erikson turned and saw the miracle. Although the fire he had set still burned in a wall behind him, a gap had appeared in the flame and, through this gap, his men were already pouring.

“Captain,” Gunter's voice called again. “Withdraw!”

Erikson felt the press of bodies behind him slacken as the men disappeared through the flames and there, glinting in the burned grass, was his sword. He stooped to pick it up, ignoring the blistering heat that cooked his palm, and let the company tumble away behind him.

The enemy showed little appetite for following them. The first of them, the strongest and hungriest, were either dying or busily gorging themselves on the flesh of those they had killed. The others shied away from the flames that still spread out on either side of Erikson's company, fluttering like the wings of a phoenix. Erikson watched them as he backed away, and suddenly they were gone, vanished beneath a sudden wall of flame.

“This way,” Gunter said, and Erikson felt a strong hand grip his shoulder. It dragged him through the heat, between the two gateposts of fire, and through into the blinding smoke beyond.

“Now run,” Gunter bellowed. “Run!”

Overwhelmed by confusion and doubled up by a fit of coughing, Erikson allowed himself to be dragged along. Seconds seemed to last for hours as they slipped through the inferno, but finally they were clear. Through streaming eyes he saw that the fire was behind them. Ahead, a wide swathe had been cut through the wheat towards Nalderstein's gates. His men staggered along the fire break. Most of them were as singed and disorientated as he was himself, and they were being herded towards safety by men who looked nervously towards the forest.

“Gunter,” Erikson wheezed as the two of them trotted along behind the rest of the survivors. “Well done.”

“Sigmar provides,” Gunter told him as he bundled him towards the gates. “And anyway, you did come to save us.”

Erikson looked at the burned and choking gaggle of survivors who stood around him and started to laugh. Then he began to choke, and even as he doubled over to hawk out great gobs of soot and phlegm he wondered if Nalderstein's walls would be proof against the flame.

## Chapter Thirteen

Gulkroth brooded amongst the blasted remains. By now he was getting used to the stink of shattered stone and burned blackpowder that hung around the desecrations of the herdstones. He had visited several himself and every day messengers came to him with fresh reports of new blasphemies.

No matter how many of these sites he visited he would never get used to the hungry, gnawing emptiness a destroyed herdstone left behind it. He could still feel the energy which pulsed and writhed through the ground, but the centuries of power which the stones had bound left a terrible void in the world as they dissipated.

It was the same here as it had been everywhere else. The herd which had worshipped the stone stood amongst the steaming soil and splintered timber of their defiled grotto. Although they had fed well this summer they had a shrunken, defeated look.

Their shaman, a wall-eyed ancient who had served Gulkroth well over the summer, was crawling around on all fours amongst the ruin. He mewed like an infant as he gathered up the shards of stone that lay about the earth. Some of them still glowed with power, but they were no more than embers from a once-mighty pyre of energy.

“Do we have the scent of those that did this thing?” Gulkroth asked the shaman.

“They are dead,” the ancient hissed. “We caught them as they tried to flee.”

Gulkroth felt the rage building up inside him, ripening like some terrible fruit beneath a burning sun.

“We will reap such a revenge for this,” he said, stalking up to the herd so that he towered above them. “We will tear the humans asunder and gorge on their blood until we are as fat as ticks.”

There was no response. Tails remained curled up between legs. Eyes remained downcast. Some crouched on the floor, arms wrapped around their legs as they rocked back and forth.

“Shaman,” Gulkroth said, turning back to the ancient as he scabbled about the ruins. “What can we do to restore your herd’s pride?”

“A new stone can be planted,” he muttered without looking up. “In time it will grow in power. In time.”

“Then a new stone will be planted,” Gulkroth decreed. “Where will we find such a one?”

For the first time the shaman looked at Gulkroth, and the lord was pleased to see ferocity in his eyes.

“We must take it from the humans,” he hissed through bared teeth. “Tear it from one of their cities and baptise it with rivers of their blood.”

Gulkroth rumbled his assent.

“The time is coming,” he promised, raising his voice so that the thunder of it lifted the fur on the back of the beasts’ necks. “Even now the Chaos Moon grows fatter, growing pregnant with power. When it is full we will be gathered, I promise you that, and we will fall upon the humans in a storm of blood and victory.”

“And of vengeance,” the shaman added.

“And vengeance,” Gulkroth roared, and despair turning to rage, the assembled herd roared back at him.

“It’s quite out of the question,” Viksberg said, his voice echoing around the cavernous expanse of his office. It lay in the depths of the baron’s palace, an ancient expanse of vaulted stone, and he never grew tired of listening to the acoustics of the dank place. They made him sound so authoritative.

Freimann, who was slouching in a seat he hadn’t been offered, didn’t seem to notice. He hated being stuck in Hergig, let alone inside the cold, airless depths of the palace. Even more, he hated the officious functionaries that inhabited it.

This Viksberg was a prime example of his breed. Below his watery eyes and weak chin he wore a uniform that could have graced the Emperor himself. Silvered armour gave way to silk brocade and slashed velvet breeches. Despite the fact that it was high summer outside, he also wore a cape lined with ermine, and a hat bristling with feathers lay on the desk in front of him, and sewn and embroidered and encrusted throughout the costume there was an entire menagerie of heraldic animals.

Freimann, who had spent his childhood as a trapper, wondered how much this fop’s vestments would be worth if he were caught in a snare and stripped. Then he realised that the fool was talking.

“...so as you can see from the map, we have no reserves to spare for any but the direst of emergencies.” Viksberg waved at the map which graced the wall behind him. The coloured pins which represented the enemy swarmed across it like hornets.

“The beasts have been grinding us down throughout the barony,” Viksberg continued, enjoying how knowledgeable the parroted analysis made him sound. “We have lost towns, hamlets. An entire regiment was swallowed up on the way to Lerenstein, and we haven’t received a single message from the new settlements within the deeper forest for weeks.”

“Precisely,” Freimann said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“We can’t afford to lose any more men. Erikson’s band are a bit scruffy, but they fight well enough. Got guts, too. You should have seen how they got back into the town.”

“In that case I’m sure they will be able to rescue themselves,” Viksberg said. “Now, if that will be all...”

“Besides,” Freimann ploughed on, “I was talking to the captain of a cavalry squadron while I was waiting. He said he’d be happy to do it.”

“I’m sure he would, but that’s beside the point. These were just militiamen,” Viksberg said and, horrified at the wheedling tone in his voice, he cleared his throat

before continuing. "As the provost marshal's assistant, I can't justify sending a valuable unit to save a few dozen criminals and an arsonist."

Freimann smiled.

"So you know them," he said.

Viksberg swallowed and looked down at the parchments which covered his desk. Every single one of them was a requisition for firewood. For some reason, the provost marshal wouldn't let him handle anything else. Just firewood. It was only through the most excruciating bribery that he had persuaded the heralds to send any enquiries regarding Erikson's accursed company his way.

"Because if you do know them," Freimann continued, the smile never leaving his face, "it would be most unfair of me to ask you to make the decision."

"No it wouldn't," Viksberg said.

"Ah, but it would. Torn between affection and duty, how would you be able to sleep tonight?"

"I will be able to sleep just fine," Viksberg said.

"No, I won't burden you with this. I'll take it up with the provost marshal himself instead."

"You can't," Viksberg squeaked. "He's busy."

"Then the baron," Freimann lied. "I have a briefing to deliver to him anyway."

"All right," Viksberg said. "All right, if it will save you from bothering the baron, I will send a small detachment to bring them out."

"You will send that cavalry captain in at once," Freimann said. "The sooner he and his men can leave, the better."

"Fine," Viksberg slumped back in defeat. "And these men are at Nalderstein you say? Very well. Now, if there is nothing else I can help you with, I must get on."

Freimann bowed, turned and left the room.

Behind him Viksberg slumped behind his desk. He had absolutely no intention of sending anybody to rescue Erikson's militia. On the other hand, what if Freimann checked? There was something disturbingly insistent about him.

His eyes fell on the cylinder of red wax that lay next to his quills and ink. He had no seal. The provost marshal, curse him, had just laughed when he'd requested one. But he did have a ring. In fact, he had several.

He slipped it off his finger and just had time to take a steadying swig of schnapps before the door burst open and a cavalry officer bounded in, all puppy-dog eagerness and idiot courage. How Viksberg despised him.

"You have a mission for me, sir?" the cavalryman asked.

"Take a seat," Viksberg told him as he started to write. "I am to give you sealed orders which you are not, under any circumstances, to open until you reach the great crossroads to the west."

"Understood," the soldier said and watched as Viksberg, turning to the map for a final check, wrote the order which would send him and his company in exactly the opposite direction to Nalderstein.

"I don't like it," Sergeant Alter said.

He was standing beside Erikson on the platform which leaned behind the stockade. The smoking ruins stretched away like a desert on all sides, only stopping at the dark green wall of the forest beyond.

“What’s not to like?” Porter asked. “I know they can’t carry a rhythm, but they can certainly belt out a tune.”

The men turned back to the forest from which the enemy’s beating drums had been pounding out their discordant rhythms ever since daybreak.

“Is it ‘Little Brown Jug’?” Brandt asked, his brow furrowed in concentration. Laughter broke out around them, and was instantly silenced by his glare.

Alter looked at Porter, his expression unreadable. He had known men like this back in the regiment. Know-it-alls. Loud mouths. Troublemakers. What really annoyed him about the Porters of this world was that, more often than not, they had the makings of the Empire’s best soldiers.

“Have you drawn up a rationing system yet?” Alter asked him. Porter nodded smugly.

“Of course. We have also pooled our resources with the townsfolk’s,” he said, smiling as he thought about the store of grain he had so effortlessly requisitioned. With any luck they would break out in time to carry a good portion of it back to Hergig, where prices must be going through the ceiling by now.

What a life it is to be a quartermaster, Porter thought, and burst into song.

*Gertrude’s a girl who knows more than she ought to*

*And of more she’ll get the hang*

*Coz although she’s only the gunner’s daughter*

*She knows how to make a bang*

Those who knew the tune started to clap in time, and soon the town was echoing with the rhythm. For the first time in hours the drums from the forest were silenced beneath the company’s own rough music, and soon another of the men offered a verse.

*Molly’s a wench who does as she pleases*

*And please a lot she will*

*Just ask the sergeant where he lost his breeches*

*After he’d had his fill*

The men roared their approval. This was an old song, and its words were never the same twice, but it was no less beloved for that. Dolf caught the beat and started drumming out the percussion, and soon the clapping had spread from the company to the civilians who stood with them behind the stockade. As it did so Porter caught sight of Gunter, the only man unmoved by the rhythm.

*Young Gisela was raised down in Stirland*

*And she’s been raising ever since*

*And makes a change from his tired right hand*

*Says our own dear warrior priest*

Further down the barricade Gunter looked bemusedly at his hand and the men around him cheered raucously. By the time they had quietened down one of Gunter’s own men had composed a verse of his own.

*After skinny Lynn tumbled the quartermaster*

*She counted on growing fat  
But it was only gruel that he gave her afterwards  
And she had to pay for that*

Porter grinned at the compliment, and let another man take the next verse as he thought about the sergeant who stood beside him and how far his sense of humour might stretch.

As the song grew louder and more bawdy, the drums in the forest beyond fell silent. None of the men noticed. The enemy had been forgotten as they sought to rhyme insults with names, or just contented themselves with clapping and cheering.

It wasn't until the enemy emerged from the woods that the song died.

They swept towards Nalderstein with the unstoppable speed of the cloud shadows which raced them across the expanse of the smouldering fields. Voices which had moments before been raised in laughter now fell silent or barked out orders and warnings. As the men who lined the walls saw the enemy that was upon them, one even began to sob. Alter could be heard snarling at him, but as he did so the pitiful sound was drowned out beneath a roar that emerged from hundreds of bestial throats.

It was a single, wordless cry of rage, and suddenly the approaching beasts looked less like the components of an army and more like the limbs of a single, vast predator. A monstrous beast which had been bred for no other purpose than the destruction of humanity.

As the nightmarish horde drew nearer Erikson told himself for the thousandth time that, after this war, he was retiring. He didn't feel the grin that spread across his battle-scarred features.

After Kathgor had fallen to the humans' blades, Hruul had welded the herd together under his own command. The burns he had suffered hadn't weakened him any more than the slices in his hide. After the summer's glut of blood he was strong, and his flesh was re-knitting even as he dispatched the single beast foolish enough to challenge his new position.

It was only then, with his position secure, that he had made up for his predecessor's idiocy. Last year it wouldn't have occurred to him, but after a summer spent in Gulkroth's company the way he thought about things had started to change. It wasn't that he had any less contempt for calculation than before. Far from it. It was just that the urge to destroy had been sharpened like a fang upon a stone.

That was why he had spent the following day urging the herd to chop and clean dozens of trees.

They didn't like the work. The shaman who lurked amongst them didn't help, either, the old mutterer. Sorcery or not, Hruul had almost been tempted to tear the senile old creature to pieces, but he had restrained himself. There would be time for that soon enough.

The herd had worked into the night, using their crude axes to chop the tree trunks into the right length and to chip notches in the timber. As day had dawned the drummers speeded their brothers' work by drumming out a promise of slaughter to come. Only when the last of the makeshift ladders was ready did Hruul lead the herd out of the forest.

And now, finally, after an agony of waiting, the time for slaughter had come.

Hruul felt the ground trembling beneath his hooves as his herd charged forwards, the lengths of timber carried between them. He could see the humans' heads poking over the sharpened stakes of their stockade. Pale, sneering heads, devoid of horn or hide. How he hated them.

Lips peeling back in a snarl, Hruul quickened his pace, thundering ahead of the rest of the herd. Through the pounding of his own pulse he heard a quickening chorus of zips and whines. Then he felt the bite of a mosquito. He swatted at it absentmindedly before realising that this was no insect but an arrow which had buried itself in his hide. He snarled as he pulled the gory shaft free, and the scent of his own blood washed away the last of his reserve.

With a howl of pure, animal rage he hurled himself at the stockade. The ladders behind him were forgotten as, axe haft held in his jaws, he clawed and clambered his way up the crude carpentry.

More arrows punched through his hide as he dragged himself up towards his prey. He ignored them, barely feeling them in the terrible euphoria of the moment. He climbed higher and looked up in time to see the rock that plummeted down from above. With a twist of his neck he caught it on one horn. There was a snap and a dull, bone-deep flare of pain as the rock and the tip of his right horn cracked away and fell below him.

More arrows, and then the first bite of the steel blades which lined the parapet like teeth. This time Hruul snarled with agony as well as rage. As he clawed his way up the final few feet, the steel bit deeply, slicing through muscle and grating against bone.

Then he was over and free, and the blood misted the air as he swung his axe through the cramped ranks of the defenders. He could smell the stink of their terror, and then the rotten, intestinal perfume of their severed bodies as he cut low, dragging his blade through bellies and ribs. Some of the men fought back but, maddened with blood, he was beyond feelings of pain now.

In the midst of this carnage Hruul felt an odd peace. His world had shrunk to a glorious, pink-tinged womb of slaughter, and as the tops of his herd's makeshift ladders crashed onto the stockade around him he showed no more mercy to them than he did to the enemy. Those who could avoid him did. The rest ducked and dodged, lunging away from their leader through the scattering of men.

It was only when he found himself bereft of victims that Hruul realised that they had taken the stockade. He blinked around him. There was suddenly nobody left but torn bodies and the last scurrying shapes of his followers as they chased their brethren into the slaughter below.

Pausing only to snap off a couple of the arrows which remained buried in his muscle, he leapt down, goat legs bunched beneath him as he plummeted down to land in the midst of panicked townsfolk.

As the slaughter continued he lost himself in the perfect joy of a creature doing what it was built to do. Any attempt to direct the battle was long gone, but that no longer mattered. Over the wall and amongst the panicking humans his warriors no longer needed direction. All they needed was the instinctive savagery and the sweet, sweet taste of man-flesh to drive them on.

“We have to pull back,” Erikson shouted above the din of battle.

“What’s that, captain?” Alter bellowed, turning briefly from his efforts to kick the survivors into some sort of formation. After the onslaught which had pushed them from the stockades, barely two-thirds had managed to form up in the town square. The rest were scattered amongst the chaos of the enemy’s assault, or lying amongst the dead.

“I said,” Erikson repeated, “we have to pull back.”

From the melee in front of him Gunter emerged, leading the bedraggled remnants of his section. In one hand he carried his sword, which was red and dripping, and in the other he was dragging one of his injured men along by the scruff of the neck.

Beneath the spattered gore that freckled Gunter’s face he was grinning. It was a terrible sight.

“Get in formation,” Erikson called to him, waving him forwards. Gunter nodded his assent and loped towards the company. Behind him beasts rampaged amongst the townsfolk, ignoring the warriors as they sought easier meat.

Erikson had formed the men up just within the gate. The enemy had ignored it and concentrated their assault against the southern wall, where he hadn’t been expecting them. They’d also used ladders. He hadn’t expected that, either, but he should have.

I’m getting too old for this, he told himself, then growled as he suppressed the defeatist thought. There would be time for recriminations later. Now all he had to do was save his company.

“How many of the men do we have?” he asked Alter as Gunter’s section bundled past them and into the formation.

“Maybe three-quarters,” Alter said. “Are we going to charge them when they come into the open?”

“There is no open,” Erikson said, watching as a fleeing woman was brought down by two goat-legged horrors less than twenty feet away. She screamed and screamed and then fell mercifully silent.

“Three-quarters will have to do,” he continued, watching as the woman was dismembered. “We are going to make a tactical withdrawal. Dolf, sound the—”

“Wait,” Alter said, horror etching new lines onto the wrinkled leather of his face. “We can’t flee. Who will defend these people?”

“They are past defending,” Erikson said with the cold, emotionless tones of a merchant discussing some minor commercial loss. Alter and Gunter stared at him, shocked.

“It is our duty to defend this town,” Gunter reminded him.

Erikson shook his head. “We have failed to do so. We must go and report our failure and await new orders.”

“No, we must try,” Alter said. “And besides, where is there to flee to? Better to fight here than be torn down in the open.”

“They won’t chase us,” Erikson told him with a grim certainty. “They will stay here for a while yet. Look.”



The men looked. The beasts had fallen upon the stout wooden doors of the stone granary which stood opposite them on the other side of the square. Inside were those too old or too young to fight. The crude rectangles of the enemies' blades hacked into the ancient wood, and soon the splintered carpentry was disintegrating beneath their enthusiastic attack. From within, the screams of babes could be heard.

"They will..." Erikson began, then coughed as he felt the words choking him. "They will be distracted while we make our..." Again, the words caught in his throat. "They will be distracted while we make our escape."

"No," Gunter said.

"We will stay and fight," Alter agreed.

"You will do as you're told," Erikson told them.

As the men watched, one of the women from inside the granary launched herself at the beasts who were burrowing in. She wielded the scythe with a wild desperation that sent them leaping back in momentary surprise. Then they fell upon her, squealing with glee as they tore her to pieces.

"If we're going to run, then at least we will take their children with us," Alter said.

"He's right, captain," another man said from behind Erikson.

"We can't leave the babes."

Erikson turned. He had long since learned to ignore the sufferings of those around him, especially if they were civilians. It was how he had survived for so long and on so many battlefields. A man who didn't learn how to do that would soon be driven mad by war and its attendant horrors.

But the men behind him, the cut-throats and poachers and lunatics and thieves, they hadn't learned that lesson. They had never had to. As he looked into their pinched and villainous faces he envied them.

"Very well," he said, knowing it was madness, but unable to resist. "Gunter, your section holds the right. Alter, yours the left. Porter, your lads make sure the back stays solid."

Erikson realised that Gunter was grinning as he organised the assault. He realised that he was grinning himself.

By Sigmar, he thought, these men have driven me mad after all.

"We go to the barn, we take whoever we find there and we escort them from the town. Now. Follow me."

The company's drum sounded the advance, and the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig advanced towards the mass of twisted horrors that swarmed around the barn. As they did so it occurred to Erikson that, for the first time in his life, he was fighting as a soldier and not a mercenary.

Before he could wonder at that a scream of alarm snapped him back into the present as, from the left, a second wave of the enemy crashed against their formation.

Freimann had been given pride of place in the baron's council chamber, sandwiched in between the provost marshal and the baron himself. Next to their armour and finely cut cloth the rifleman looked as drab as a hen amongst the peacocks. Even the

sunlight that streamed in through the narrow windows failed to find a single brass button or metal buckle on his garb.

The rest of the men who were gathered around the table with them were scarcely any more presentable. Riflemen and rangers stood amongst hunters and trappers, and the assembled woodsmen wore perhaps the drabest collection of clothes the great hall had ever seen. They wore no decorations, either, instead counting their scars and bandaged wounds as sufficient badges of honour.

Not that it mattered. Now, as they stood leaning over a great vellum map of Hochland, their lack of finery was as irrelevant as their lack of formal rank.

“What about the three stones above the Great Falls?” the baron asked, pointing at three squares that had been pencilled onto the map.

“All gone,” one of the trappers told him. “We lost two of the parties, but they did the job before they were caught.”

“How do you know?” the baron asked, fixing the man with a piercing blue gaze.

“Saw them myself,” he replied. “Went alone to make sure.”

The baron held him in his gaze for a moment longer. Then, satisfied, he gestured to the provost marshal, and watched while he drew a small, neat cross through each of the stones.

“Thank you, Steckler. Now, what about this one, south of Hammerstein?”

Silence greeted the question.

“That was the one we assigned to Hendrick’s group,” the provost marshal said.

“I see,” the baron nodded and stroked his chin. “That’s a shame. What about this one, east of Nalderstein?”

“That was mine,” Freimann said. “It went up along with the engineer who destroyed it.”

“Good,” the baron said, and watched while the provost marshal crossed the stone off the map. “Now, how have we been doing in the south? I know we destroyed that stone near the junction of the Stirland road. That was one of yours too, wasn’t it, Freimann? Freimann?”

But Freimann had already gone, slipping away from the meeting with the same effortless stealth with which he had slipped through the forest.

“Shall I have him called back?” the provost marshal asked.

“Never mind that now, Steckler,” the baron said, turning back to the map. “Now, what about these two? Who did we assign there?”

The meeting went on until the servants came in to light the braziers which lined the walls. As the remaining woodsmen filed out to find their dinners and to tend to their animals and men, the baron and the provost marshal remained behind, alone in the echoing vastness of the great hall. The braziers cast their shadows across the flagstones, and the occasional draft sent them fluttering about like ghosts.

They weren’t the only ghosts in the room.

“We’ve got rid of more than half of the stones,” the provost marshal said. “Or at least, half of the stones we knew about.”

“Yes,” the baron said as he peered out of the slit windows into the darkness of the night.

“Do you think it will be enough to bring the enemy to battle?”

“We shall see,” the baron sighed. “It’s at times like this that I miss Ganamedes. He always had an idea, even if it was the wrong one. I knew him ever since we were boys.”

Steckler said nothing. Ganamedes had died soon after he had told them what he knew, his heart giving up whilst he was still strapped down in the dungeon.

“Poor old Ganamedes,” the baron said, talking to himself. “What could he have been thinking of?”

“And yet,” Steckler offered, “if we do drag the enemy to battle, and if we can defeat them there, then we will have Ganamedes to thank for it. Without his knowledge... his blasphemous knowledge... the enemy could have gnawed away at our strength until there was nothing of us left.”

“All over Hochland men are fighting, dying, scraping together what courage they can,” the baron said. “I wonder what the witch hunters would say if I told them that, by following his heretical studies, Ganamedes was one of the most valiant of them?”

Steckler didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. Baron or not, he knew exactly how the witch hunters would react to such blasphemy.

The baron treated himself to another moment’s peace before sighing, turning on his heel and going to read through the day’s scouting reports.

It was midday when Erikson realised that they were being followed.

They had been double-timing it ever since they had fought their way clear of Nalderstein, jogging through the night despite their hunger and exhaustion and the weight of those that needed to be carried.

He had counted on getting clear before exhaustion took them but now, as the ragged column stumbled to a halt at his signal, Erikson knew that the gamble hadn’t paid off.

“Halt,” he called back down the line. “We will take five minutes’ rest. Finish your water.”

His followers collapsed with mindless relief. In amongst the soldiers there were the refugees they had rescued. There were pitifully few of them.

Perhaps a dozen women, each with at least one infant strapped to their backs. A score of children. A couple of old crones.

They were all that had remained alive by the time the company had reclaimed the barn.

“Dolf,” Erikson led the drummer to one side. “Look back there. Can you see anything?”

Dolf looked back, eyes unclouded by years. For a moment he gazed into the blue distance, then he caught his breath and his eyes widened.

“Are they the enemy?” he whispered.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” he said, “but I suppose they must be. We didn’t leave much else alive behind us.”

The two of them squinted, so intent on the line of figures that they jumped when Gunter spoke up behind them.

“Work left undone always finds its doer,” he intoned.

“Do you have a point, corporal?” Erikson asked him. “I’m too bloodied, too hungry and too exhausted to worry about riddles.”

“That is no riddle, but one of the great truths from the ballad of Sigmar Heldenhammer,” Gunter replied with a limitless patience. Although he had fought as hard as any man, he seemed remarkably untouched by their predicament, and through his irritation, Erikson was grateful for that.

He also knew exactly what the man was trying to say.

“You are right, of course,” he said. “The question is, how do we finish this job?”

Porter, who had appeared to be out of earshot, spoke up.

“When we were on the leg we always used to split up as soon as possible,” he said. “Don’t let the watchmen know who to follow and you’re halfway free.”

“These aren’t watchmen,” Erikson told him. “And anyway, all that means is that they will catch the slowest.”

“So?”

“So what was the point of taking them with us in the first place?”

Porter opened his mouth to argue, but before he could he saw a toddler chase a butterfly through the wheat, laughing uproariously all the while. The child fell and Porter, instead of pressing his point, just lay back and sighed.

“Then what do we do?”

“It’s obvious,” Gunter told him.

“Tell us,” Erikson said, and so Gunter did.

Hruul ran through a world which was ablaze with a thousand maddening tastes and smells. He could sense the life in the rodents which scuttled through the hip-deep sea of wheat that stretched away to every horizon. On the back of his neck he could feel the bright, lethal gaze of the raptors which circled overhead and, stronger all the time, he could smell the terror of the fleeing humans.

Although he and his followers had been working and fighting for days, they ran with the exuberant energy of foals. While the red harvest they had reaped within Nalderstein had pushed some of the herd into a stupor, it had the opposite effect on him and his twenty followers. It had filled them with a daemonic energy which pulsed through their ripening muscles as they ran, full-bellied yet ever ravenous.

The sun cast their shadows out before them, and the dark shapes clawed towards the fleeing humans. Every hour they had grown nearer and now, when they were less than half a mile away, Hruul bellowed a challenge.

He was disappointed to see that most of the men had outstripped the panicking mob ahead. Only a dozen or so warriors remained with their young. They broke into a pathetic attempt at a sprint as Hruul and his followers thundered into a charge.

Somewhere deep beneath the pounding of his hooves and the eternal thunder of his heart, Hruul sensed something in the wheat. Something new. But before he could register what it was he saw the soldiers ahead turn and fall back into a single rank, their weapons glittering in the sunlight. As their young continued to scurry away a drumbeat started and the men advanced towards Hruul’s charge.

Almost at the same time a series of grunts and screams broke out from behind him. Hruul turned, snatching a glance back over his shoulder, and realised

immediately what he had sensed moments before. The rest of the soldiers hadn't fled. They had been hiding, lying flat in the furrows between the endless rows of wheat. And now they were amongst his followers.

Hruul saw the first of his herd go down, its tendons sliced neatly through. He staggered to a halt, confusion boiling up as he regarded the charging line of the soldiers in front and those who had appeared in their rear. With a roar he abandoned the effort to reason and followed his rage towards the nearest of the enemy.

It was a wiry little runt of a man, and he looked small enough to be crushed in a single paw. Hruul grunted and slashed at him. His axe severed a shower of wheat but there was no satisfying thunk of steel on bone. Instead the rodent of a man rolled away.

"Brandt," Porter squeaked, twisting as he slipped through the wheat. "Where are you?"

Hruul ignored the creature's chattering as a more worthy foe appeared in front of him. Behind the man he caught a glimpse of the confusion of bodies which struggled through the wheat, men and beasts lunging and slashing at each other.

Then he felt the deep, hard bite of a blade into the banded muscle of his thigh.

He screamed with rage and surprise and staggered away from the blow.

"Sigmar's balls!" Porter snarled as he ducked back away. "The sod took my blade with him."

Brandt didn't waste time in debate. He was already swinging his heavy, double-handed blade at the beast. The steel bounced off its ribcage and he bellowed in frustration as the momentum carried him off balance.

Hruul, instinctively recognising the danger of fighting two enemies at the same time, turned and bounded clear before pirouetting back to find a new target. As he did so the second group of soldiers burst into the combat. The solid impact of their line pushed the swirling melee back, and although a couple of them fell beneath the axes of the herd even more beasts were slaughtered.

Hruul realised that he wasn't the only one whose enthusiasm for the battle was waning. It was one thing to face your enemy with steel and muscle. It was quite another to find him on every side of you, cutting you off from your herd and snapping at your heels.

A flash of pure, blinding aggression washed through him. Partly it came from the surfeit of human blood upon which he had gorged. Mainly it came from the twisted, ever-burning depths of his bestial soul.

"Fight!" he roared, lifting his axe as though it were a battle standard. "Stand and..."

Death found him like that.

It came silently and unseen. For a moment he stood in a moment of perfect, mindless calm. Then he was falling, plunging into the swirling darkness that led from this world to the next.

He fell even before the distant report of the rifle reached him. More shots rang out, the distant volley sounding like little more than the popping of kernels in a fire. But although the weapons spoke with a soft voice the bullets punched through the beasts like needles through cloth.

One of the beasts was caught in the shoulder, and the bullet exploded outwards along with a pink shrapnel of bone and a spray of arterial blood. Another was hit in the stomach, the lead ball punching through its intestines to shatter its spine and leave it flopping on the ground as helplessly as a gutted fish. A third was shot in the eye, a perfect piece of marksmanship that killed it before it could blink.

Hruul had barely started cooling before his herd, the meat sickening in their stomachs and their fury giving way to terror, turned and ran. Erikson's men made no move to pursue them. Instead they stood amongst the trampled wheat and corpses and wondered at the fortune which had spared them.

"Get down!" Erikson told them as the distant reports of gunfire volleyed on. "Give 'em a clear shot."

The men hunched down and watched, cheering each time one of the enemy was felled. It wasn't until the fleeing beasts were far out of range that the gunfire stopped and, appearing out of the wheat on a distant slope, a figure stood up and saluted with a wave of his bedraggled cap.

"Freimann!" Erikson grinned, and realised that he did like the man after all.

## Chapter Fourteen

Kapriwar enjoyed the lashing of the undergrowth against his flanks, and the kiss of the occasional thorn which punctured his hide. The pain acted as a distraction from the throbbing in his head, and he needed any distraction he could get. He had been galloping for what felt like a lifetime, the days and nights blurring together as he had crossed mountains and rivers and endless forests. And over those days the agony of the words had become almost unbearable.

The pain was such that the first he knew about the herd was when he burst in upon them. They turned on the intruder, fangs bared and axes raised, but before they could attack a withered old beast growled at them and they lowered their weapons.

“You come with a message?” he asked. The messenger just looked at him dumbly, his flanks heaving beneath the foaming of sweat and blood. The shaman nodded. He had a message, all right.

“Bring food,” he told one of the herd. Although the beast stood half as high again as the shaman, it reacted with an alacrity that spoke of respectful terror.

“Now,” the shaman said, stalking forwards and carefully taking the messenger’s head between his hands. “Rest a while, eat a little, and we will see what you have to say for yourself.”

The messenger garbled something, but his words were crushed between those that throbbed within his mind. The shaman ignored him. He would wait until the beast had recovered before finding out what he had to say.

Time passed. As the messenger feasted on deliciously putrid lumps of man-flesh, the Chaos Moon crawled up over the horizon and chased the sun from the sky. The patterning of light and darkness which had lit the forest during the day was replaced with the dull green glow of cancerous moonlight.

The shaman waited until the Chaos Moon hung overhead before he began brewing the potion. His cauldron was fire-blackened, and although the inside was crusted with unnameable remains he made no effort to clean it. Instead he merely slit the throats of the rabbits the herd had brought him and filled it with their blood. Pausing only to swallow a few mouthfuls of meat, he took the fever bark from a sack and started chewing, grinding the material between his teeth and then spitting the pulp and brown juice into the cauldron.

By the time he had finished, the fever bark had sent the first twitching hallucinations beetling through his vision. He ignored them. There were more important things to see tonight.

After the blood and the bark came the mushrooms. They had congealed into a mildewed mass at the bottom of one of his leather pouches.

His nostrils wrinkled at the smell as he scraped them out and dropped them into the cauldron. They bubbled and hissed when they hit the blood, and although there was no fire beneath the ancient iron the contents began to steam.

The shaman chuckled to himself as he caught the smell of his concoction. With the moon so full he knew that it didn't need to be so potent, but once he got started on a brew he found it difficult to stop.

The mandrake root was the final ingredient. It twisted and squirmed between his fingers like a worm about to be put on a hook. It took all of his dexterity to hold it still enough to slice off the single piece he needed. Ignoring the scream, he dropped it into the cauldron, and tiny tongues of fire started to dance in the steam that rose up from it.

"Messenger," the shaman said, his muscles straining as he lifted the bubbling cauldron towards the beast. "Here. Drink. Drink deeply."

The messenger moaned as he caught the smell of the concoction. There was no mistaking the terror on his twisted features, or the fact that he recognised the smell. But although he shied away he soon came back, drawn to the concoction as irresistibly as a suicide towards the edge of a cliff.

He bent his forelegs and leaned forwards, gripping the sides of the cauldron and drinking deeply. Although a chorus of strangled noises came from his throat he continued to guzzle the foul brew until the cauldron was empty. Then, with a belch that shimmered with green flame, he collapsed sideways onto the forest floor. There his great body twitched and spasmed, rolling and bouncing as muscles loosened and contracted. His six limbs thrashed through the detritus like those of some horrible insect, and noises started to emerge from the frothing lips. As yet the broken shards of sound were incomprehensible.

"Now," the shaman growled, beckoning to the herd who lurked amongst the trees. "Draw closer and listen to the voice of your lord."

The beasts did so, ears twitching uncertainly and tails curled up in fear. They had seen enough of the shaman's work to regard it with suspicion, and already something seemed to be happening.

As the messenger's dreadful fit subsided his vocal cords unfroze and a voice emerged from his body. It was the voice of Gulkroth, and at the sound of it even the strongest of the herd felt their bladders loosen.

"The humans are defiling our land," the voice said, and each word seemed to be whispered directly into the ears of those who listened. "They tear down our holy places with foul blackpowder, and shatter the herdstones that lie within."

The herd growled, echoing the rage they heard in their leader's voice.

"The stink of their meddling pollutes the world, but the time when they can hide behind it has gone. When the Chaos Moon waxes full and wrathful, then we will march to their greatest city. There we will fall upon them, and there we will annihilate them."

The herd roared its approval, and it seemed that at the words the moon above flickered brighter, bathing them in the promise of the victory to come.

"Come to the gathering of the Great Herd. Come with me to victory."



And to victory it would be, there was none who had any doubt of that. Even as the shaman collected his noisome possessions the first of the herd had already made off, racing through the night in their eagerness to reach the gathering of the great herd.

In the morning the messenger awoke with a burning stomach and a mouth as dry as ash. He staggered to his feet and found a stream to drink at. After slaking his thirst he sniffed at the air.

The pain in his head had faded to a dull throb, but he knew that the relief wouldn't last for long. The words which pounded within his skull still beat as insistently as ever. Soon they would begin hitting the inside of his skull with iron fists, demanding release.

With a shudder the messenger squinted up at the sun, took a deep sniff of air and bounded away in search of the next herd. He had a message to spread and, as sure as dandelions seeds float in the breeze, he was going to spread it.

“Hofstadter.” Sergeant Alter’s voice rang out above the hubbub of a company preparing to march. “Get out of your blankets, you lazy devil. We’ve got a full day’s march ahead of us if we want to reach Hergig by nightfall.”

Before he realised what he was doing Hofstadter snarled beneath his blankets. Luckily the noise around him was loud enough to drown out the defiant sound, and he pulled back his frayed blankets and peered out at the world.

It looked sort of... strange. His comrades didn't seem to have any expressions on their flat faces. Neither did the women and children who walked amongst them, although they did look delicious.

Hofstadter found that he was drooling, and stopped himself. It must be the fever that was making him think this way. It made it difficult to think of anything apart from how much his bones hurt and how hungry he was.

How hungry for nice, red meat.

“Hofstadter, on your feet or we leave you,” Alter barked. This time Hofstadter responded, rolling up his few possessions in his ragged blanket and tying it into a pack. When he was sure nobody was looking he opened the top of his shirt and peered down to make sure that it was still there. He had known that it was. Over the past few days the warmth of the stone against his chest had started to throb in time with his own heartbeat. Still, he thought as he looked at the faint green glow, it was good to be sure.

“Leave those fleas alone and get a hold of this,” Porter said, and thrust a sack into Hofstadter’s arms. Again a growl came unbidden to his throat, but this time his tormentor heard it.

“Here you go.” Porter smiled wickedly. “You can carry the bacon, too.”

Hofstadter glared at him and tried to say something, but somehow the words wouldn't come.

“Problem, quartermaster?” Brandt grumbled as he loomed up behind Porter. With a bark of disgust Hofstadter slung the weight of the provisions over his shoulder.

Despite the feverish pain in his bones the load felt surprisingly light as he joined the column which Sergeant Alter was forming up.

“Next time I have to give an order twice, I’ll kick your arse,” the sergeant said, not without a trace of good humour. Hofstadter turned his head away and bit back on the murderous rage that welled up inside him.

The sergeant frowned, then called out to Erikson.

“Ready for the march, captain.”

“Company,” Erikson called back from his place at the head of the column. “March!”

After the desperate haste of the past few days, the column now moved at an easy stroll. It gave Erikson time to talk to Freimann. The rifleman walked beside him even though his men had already disappeared off into the wheat.

“Tell me again how these things work,” Erikson said, gesturing to the weapon that Freimann carried in the crook of his elbow.

“Ah, the long rifle.” Freimann smiled and patted the stock. “They are the latest, the very latest, invention. Some say the secret of them comes from Nuln. Others credit the dwarfs of the Worlds Edge Mountains. But wherever they came from, they are ours now. With one of these one of my men can put a shot wherever he wants to within half a mile.”

Erikson regarded the weapon. Despite the earlier display he remained sceptical.

“And all it fires are little balls of lead?”

“Eight ounces a shot,” Freimann agreed.

“Well, even if it won’t work against armour it did a hell of a job on those beasts.”

Freimann raised one eyebrow.

“It’s a shame that cavalry squadron I sent your way didn’t turn up,” he said. “They could have told you how useless our rifles are against armour.”

“I wonder what happened to them?” Erikson mused. “Three days across open ground. They should have been here before you.”

“That’s war,” Freimann shrugged. “For all I know the idiot I spoke to sent them to the wrong Nalderstein. Your villains are hardly the most fragrant men I’ve met, but even the most villainous is worth a dozen of that perfumed ponce. Viksberg, he was called. What?” Freimann paused as he saw Erikson’s expression. “Have you heard of him?”

“Oh yes. He had some sort of run-in with one of the lads.”

“Did he now?” Freimann said, and the two of them fell into a silent contemplation that lasted until they saw a plume of dust rising in the distance. It hung in the still, heat-baked air ahead of them.

“Maybe that’s your cavalry now,” Erikson suggested, but Freimann shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It’s probably a single rider, or at least no more than two or three. His horse is tired, too, even though he isn’t carrying much armour.”

“How the hells can you know that?” Erikson asked as, in the distance, a dark shape appeared from beneath the column of dust.

“Magic,” Freimann winked.

“I’ll tell that to the witch hunters,” Erikson grinned, and Freimann barked with uncomfortable laughter.

“You can feel the way the horse is running through your feet. The ground’s hard enough. And the column of dust, it’s too straight to come from more than a couple of riders. And please, don’t joke about the witch hunters. They’ve been even more twitchy of late.”

“Sorry,” Erikson said, and he meant it. It was easy to forget the fiery-eyed fanatics and the power they wielded. For one uneasy moment he even wondered if the approaching rider might be one of the accursed creatures, but soon he was near enough that they could see the plume bobbing on his helmet and the glint of sunlight on a polished cuirass.

“Halt!” Erikson said and raised his hand. The men watched as the rider galloped towards them. He led a second horse on a halter behind him, and when he reached the column he leapt off the one he had been riding and started unbuckling her saddle as he talked.

“I am Falsmir, herald of the baron of Hochland,” the man explained, the grandeur of his title an odd contrast to the peasant skill with which he changed his saddle from one horse to another.

“And I am Captain Erikson, leader of the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig,” Erikson said. Freimann said nothing, merely slouching in the shadow of the other man.

“The Gentleman’s... You’re the prisoners, aren’t you?” Falsmir asked as he adjusted his saddle on the second horse, and suddenly, beneath the sunburn and stubble, he looked a lot younger than Erikson had first thought. “The ones who fought the minotaurs at the Battle of the Gates? You’re heroes!”

For a moment Erikson had no idea what the man was talking about. Then realisation dawned.

“The Battle of the Gates. Yes, that was us.”

“Then I am glad to find you alive, sir,” Falsmir smiled, all of a sudden finding the time to stand to attention and salute. “Rumour has it that you were wiped out in the forest.”

“Rumours of their deaths have been somewhat exaggerated,” Freimann said.

Falsmir looked at him for the first time, his eyes skittering over the hunter’s ragged garb in search of some medal or token of rank. When he found none he dismissed him and turned back to Erikson.

“The baron will be pleased you’ve made it,” he said. “The enemy are on the march. Coming to have another crack at us, apparently. That’s why I’m out here, spreading general field order seventeen to any straggling units.”

Erikson decided not to ask what the previous sixteen general field orders had been about.

“General field order seventeen,” Falsmir said, taking a moment to check the strap beneath the saddle of his fresh horse, “is that all men, companies, regiments and other formations are to assemble before the gates of Hergig with immediate effect. Captain Erikson, do you accept this order, as given to me by the baron himself?”

“Willingly,” Erikson said.

“And yourself... sir?” Falsmir asked Freimann, who tilted his head in what might have been agreement.

“Good,” Falsmir said. “Then I’ll be off. Have you seen any other formations around here?” he asked, swinging into the saddle.

“Only the enemy’s,” Erikson told him. “You would do well to stay clear of the forest, Falsmir.”

“Wouldn’t we all?” The herald grinned, his teeth gleaming white in the sunlight. “Fare thee well, captain. And may Sigmar be with you!”

“With you too,” Erikson said. The company watched as the herald galloped past them and back towards the forest.

“Well, well, well,” Erikson mused after he had gone. “So we’re the heroes of the Battle of the Gates. Should be worth a bonus.”

Falsmir spent the rest of the day following the path Erikson’s column had tramped through the wheat. He had been riding for days, pausing only to snatch a few hours’ sleep in the darkest part of the night, but although his muscles ached and his skin was desiccated by the dry winds that played across the wheat fields, he had no desire to slacken his pace.

The baron himself had given him his orders, and even now the great man’s confidence in him made him glow with pride. If he was worthy he would soon join the pistoliers, just as his brother had before him. If he was worthy.

The sky bruised with the onset of night, and Falsmir slackened his pace as Morrslieb rose. It cast a sickening glow over the land, and Falsmir made sure that he didn’t look directly at the cursed orb. That way madness lay. Madness and worse.

When the horses began to stumble he dismounted, slipped off the saddle and hobbled them. Then he gave them both a quick rub down with his shirt and let them drink from the leather bucket. He was thirsty himself but he allowed himself only a mouthful before corking the canteen. There was no knowing when he would find water again, and the horses must come first.

After that he settled them down, lay against the warm bulk of one of them and slipped into an instant sleep.

When he awoke he found his blanket damp with dew and his horses staggering to their hooves behind him. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stood up, squinting around in the grey light of the predawn. There was nothing but the endless expanse of wheat, and for a moment he felt a childish terror at how completely alone he was out here.

He angrily pushed the feeling away. He was seventeen, by Sigmar, and a herald of the baron himself.

The horses whinnied miserably, and danced within the confines of their hobbles. It occurred to Falsmir that if he hadn’t hobbled them they would have bolted. He made sure that they were back in harness before untying their hooves and swinging into the saddle.

“Hush,” he soothed the beast as it danced nervously beneath him. Then, as his senses cleared of the last traces of sleep, he smelt that which had so frightened the beasts.

There was no mistaking the ripe aroma of bestial musk and decayed meat that wafted towards him. Even when the wind changed and the air cleared Falsmir could still smell the stink. He knew it from the Battle of the Gates, and so, it seemed, did his mounts.

“Hush now,” he told them, and stroked the neck of his horse. After she had settled he nudged her forwards with his knees, and walked her up to the top of the nearest slope.

In the distance the black line of the forest cut across the horizon, lethal and inscrutable. The first few raptors hovered in the air above, wings working to maintain their altitude as they waited for the heat of the day to lift them. Rodents, still emboldened by the fading night, scampered greedily amongst the wheat. That was all.

Falsmir shifted in his saddle, blinking towards the east as the sun finally rose above the horizon. Suddenly the world was glowing with sunlight on golden wheat, or black with the dark shapes of the clouds which raced above it.

That was when he saw it.

It was half a mile away, and at first sight he took it for a rider, but only at first sight. Even at this distance there was no mistaking the creature’s curled horns, or the way that the almost human torso melted into a quadruped body.

“Hush,” Falsmir told his horse as the thing approached, although this time he was speaking more to himself. As it drew closer he saw that it moved with an undulating grace, more panther than horse, and he found himself loosening his sabre in its scabbard.

His orders were clear. His mission was to round up as many stray formations as possible. It was not to engage the enemy. But did this count as the enemy? There was only one of the things. A straggler, perhaps, or a messenger like himself.

“And if it is a messenger,” Falsmir whispered to himself, “then it is my duty to stop it.”

As pride kept him standing on the top of the hill the creature looked up and saw him. Although it was still perhaps half a mile away, he could hear its strangled cry of rage and see the muscles that rippled beneath its pelt as it turned to charge towards him.

“Too late to run now,” he said, and drew his sword. Then he unhitched the tether of the second horse. He would need all the freedom of manoeuvre he could get. No sooner had he done so than he realised how fast the beast was approaching. It had already covered half the distance, and he could see the froth on its lips and the glitter of sunlight on the tip of its crude spear.

“It’s got talons instead of hooves,” Falsmir said wonderingly as it bounded up the slope towards him. His horse whinnied beneath him, and he took the hint.

“Come on, girl,” he said, digging his heels in. “Charge!”

She leapt forwards beneath him, her anxiety lending a wild strength to her movements, and soon the ground beneath him was blurring as he charged down towards the enemy. He could feel the pounding of his own heart merging with the pounding of his horse’s, the whisper of the cool morning breeze on his face, the weight of his sabre as he held it ready.

It was good to be alive, he thought, and suddenly the enemy was upon him. With an explosive roar it thrust its spear at his belly, the razored steel blurring with the speed of the movement. Falsmir twisted as nimbly as a trout beneath a heron's bill, grabbing hold of the haft of the spear as it punched past him and catching it under his arm.

"Up!" he cried, reinforcing the order with his heels, and his horse obeyed, rearing up on her hind legs. Falsmir kept hold of his enemy's spear, using the momentum of his rearing mount to twist it free of the creature's grip. For a moment he thought that he was going to lose it, but then the slashing fore-hooves of his horse connected with a crunch of shattered bone. The beast fell back, disarmed and bleeding, and Falsmir threw the spear away as he turned his mount to line up a sabre thrust.

But although she turned quickly, she didn't turn quickly enough. The bloody damage her hooves had done to the beast had not been enough to blunt its rage. Far from it. Even as it caught the bone-jarring impact of Falsmir's blade on the disc of its shield, its taloned forelimbs were raking at the horse's flesh.

She screamed with agony and jolted away, but not before the beast had torn through a bundle of her tendons. She screamed again as she fell, and Falsmir, reacting with the blind instinct years of riding had beaten into him, leapt from the saddle. He landed neatly on the balls of his feet and took a step back as the beast, its talons still buried in horse flesh, lunged past him.

He slashed at its fetlocks with the same mindless instinct which had saved him from being crushed beneath the horse. Satisfaction surged through him as he felt bone shatter beneath the heavy steel of his sabre, but before he could strike again the beast was upon him.

It had moved with a terrifying speed. At first Falsmir had taken it to be an obscene fusion of horse and man, but now he knew better. No horse could have moved with such fluid grace, especially one with a broken leg. Unarmed, the beast threw its shield to one side and grabbed hold of him.

Falsmir abandoned the slashing sabre cut he had been lining up and instead lunged blindly forwards. His steel punched through the beast's belly just as it closed its fangs on his neck.

Pain wrapped them both in the same embrace. Blood spurted, pulsing in time with their hearts then slowing to a trickle. Man and beast fell to the ground, locked as closely together as lovers as death took them.

Falsmir tried to ignore the horror of the thing whose fangs remained buried in his flesh. Instead he looked east towards the blinding rays of the rising sun and the clouds that drifted indifferently past above. It was a lonely place to die, he reflected, shock robbing the thought of much emotion.

Then he looked into the eyes of his enemy, growing dull as its pierced heart fell silent. There was still some life in that yellow, slit-pupilled gaze. Falsmir got the impression that it was trying to tell him something, but all that came from its blood-flecked lips was the eye-watering stink of its final breath.

As the day rolled over the corpses of the two messengers the buzzards came to feed. By the time they had finished, the jumble of bones were indistinguishable from each other, so at least Falsmir was no longer alone.

Nor was his passing to be left unnoticed.

On the third day, when the sun had started to bake his bones, the enemy came across Falsmir's remains.

The first to find them were a pack of thick, shaggy pelted things which walked with the grace of wolves but the swagger of fighting dogs. Razor-tipped horns erupted from their fur and their eyes glimmered with a permanent red glow.

When they came across the remains they sniffed, circling the bloodstained grass, then started to crunch the bones between their powerful jaws. Soon femur and vertebrae and skull lay shattered on the ground, and the beasts slurped out the marrowy goodness within with their long red tongues.

When they had finished they padded off, and as they did so the bone-jarring tramp of countless hooves could be heard following them. The beasts which came next were legion, a nightmare of fur and steel and horn and tusk which stretched over the wheat fields like the black blight. Falsmir's shattered bones were kicked aside or stamped into the mud as, for over an hour, the vast herd flowed past him.

Then came beasts who neither carried weapons nor needed them. If the creatures who had cracked the bones open had been vaguely lupine, these things were more a mixture of daemon and boar. Their tusks were longer than a man's arm, and although they bore filthy manes of black, bristling hair the rest of their hides were naked.

Muscle and bone flexed as their ravenous eyes searched the ground ahead of them. When they found the bones they rushed forwards with eager squeals, snarling at each other as they gobbled up the brittle remains before ploughing on, snouts wrinkling as they sought out fresh delicacies.

When the final phalanx of the army came to Falsmir's resting place, there was little left. Even so, sharp eyes and nimble fingers found their reward in the coins that lay scattered about. The creatures who squabbled over the metal discs looked more like men than beasts, although there was no humanity in their yellow eyes.

When they had followed the rest of the army all that was left of Falsmir was dried blood in the trampled earth. And sometimes, on summer nights when the wheat was high, another lonely voice to whisper in the wind as it blew across the vastness of the fields.

## Chapter Fifteen

“By Sigmar, we’re invincible!” Dolf said, eyes widening as he saw the host arrayed beneath them.

“Don’t say that,” Erikson said, and spat for luck.

Dolf looked at him, then turned back to the army below. It was camped outside Hergig’s walls, and from this distance it was possible to see the order which had been imposed on the seething mass of men. There were perhaps ten thousand men and almost as many animals. Great warhorses grazed next to scrawny sheep and solid little pack mules. Hounds scrounged amongst the heaps of fly-blown waste and chickens squawked and fluttered within cages or clucked through the grass with the children who had been assigned to look after them.

But it was the soldiers who struck Dolf dumb with amazement. Hundreds of standards fluttered in the breeze. They ranged from the silken glory of the knights’ banners to the homespun canvas sheets of the city guards to the ancient, bloodstained glory of the state regiments. The men beneath them were an equally eclectic mix. The state regiments formed the core of the gridiron, the neat lines of their camps edged with sturdy corrals and covered latrine pits. From this solid centre the rest of the army spread out like frayed edges of torn blanket.

Ragged groups of peasants, armed with forks and scythes, intermingled with crudely armoured thugs from various aristocrats’ personal guards. Ragged cavalry units of farmers on plough horses jostled for space with broad-shouldered woodsmen and gangs of bargemen armed with viciously sharpened boathooks.

Fanatics also prowled through the soldiery, their icons and weather-beaten holy books held aloft in deification. Some preached but most, lacking such coherence, merely mumbled or ranted or stared blindly into the distance.

And behind them all, serene behind the sharpened pickets and hard-faced guards, rested the artillery. Even Erikson couldn’t remember seeing such an array of firepower before. There were cannons, mortars, rocket launchers. Even a monstrous contraption which he took to be one of the fabled helblasters.

“I suppose we should report to the provost marshal,” Freimann said.

“You’ve got that right,” Erikson said. “Where Dolf saw a mighty army he saw a queue of people waiting to get paid, sheltered and fed. We’d be honoured if you’d set up camp with us, Freimann. Sigmar knows, we owe you one.”

“Thanks anyway,” Freimann said, “but me and my lads are going to find somewhere away from the city. This place is a cholera outbreak waiting to happen.”

Erikson shrugged.

“Suit yourself,” he said. “I wouldn’t fancy being out there when the enemy turn up.”



“We seem to do all right,” Freimann said. “Anyway, if you’ll excuse me, I have to find the rest of my patrol and report to the baron. He’ll be wondering where we got off to.”

“Thanks again,” Erikson said, and the two men clamped their hands around each other’s wrists.

“Anything for the heroes of the Battle of the Gates,” Freimann told him, winked and set off on his own. His riflemen had been flanking the company for the past couple of miles and, after bidding their own farewells, they set off after their leader.

“Captain,” Sergeant Alter said as he took Freimann’s place beside Erikson. “What are we going to do about the survivors from Nalderstein?”

Erikson turned to look at them. They were scrawny and exhausted, hollow-eyed with grief and exhaustion.

“I’ll ask the provost marshal,” Erikson said. “I’m sure there is somewhere they can go. In the meantime, form the men into a square and let them rest. I’m going to find the provost marshal and see what I can squeeze out of him. Sigmar knows, he won’t be the first man to have hired more soldiers than he can pay. Porter. Porter! Ah, there you are. Come with me, will you? You’re the quartermaster. While I see what I can get from the baron, I want you to take a couple of men and buy a week’s worth of food.”

He counted out six gold crowns into Porter’s grubby fist.

“And I do mean a week’s food.”

“Yes, captain!” Porter snapped off a perfect salute and tried not to rub his hands together.

“That includes rations for our guests.”

Porter’s good humour slipped, but not much. A lifetime of fencing stolen goods had given him a gift for bartering, and combining that skill with Brandt’s fists he was going to make a tidy profit. Especially with so much stray horse meat about.

“Leave it to me,” Porter said. “Leave it to me.”

“And you say that you are Captain Erikson?” the guard said.

“Yes,” Erikson said, trying to keep his temper in the press of bodies that jostled behind him. It seemed that everybody in Hochland wanted access to the baron’s palace.

“And you say,” the guard drawled, dragging his finger down a scroll and frowning at what he saw there, “that you’re from the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig?”

Erikson, who had spent the last five minutes saying just that to the man, merely glared at him. He responded by tutting regretfully.

“No, you can’t be,” he finally decided.

“What do you mean, I can’t be?” Erikson snapped.

“Erikson and his company are dead. Says so right here.”

The guard held up the parchment and pointed to where Erikson’s company had been. With a stroke of a quill somebody had done what the enemy had failed to do and wiped them out.

“We are not dead,” Erikson said, and fought the surreal sensation that dealing with military bureaucracy so often gave him. “I mean, do I look dead?”

“Precisely,” said the guard. He was tired and he was bored, and he was sick and tired of being pushed around by officers. “You look perfectly alive. And as Erikson is dead, you can’t be him.”

“Get out of the way,” somebody further back down the line shouted. “We are in a hurry.”

“Silence!” Erikson roared, venting his frustration on the man. He had lost out to enough bankrupt employers in the past to know that getting payment was the hardest part of being a mercenary leader, and he was damned if he was going to wait his turn for it.

He took a deep breath, ran fingers through his hair, and turned back to the guard.

“Perhaps you should stand aside,” the man said helpfully. “The provost marshal is not to be disturbed with any non-military business.”

Erikson resisted the urge to hit him. Instead he smiled, as wide and white as a wolfhound. The expression didn’t reach the glitter of his green eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “In that case I demand to see the provost marshal immediately. I bring him much-needed reinforcements.”

The guard tried to smile back, but beneath Erikson’s horribly cheerful expression his own effort melted.

“I told you, you’re marked on the list as dead.”

“The Erikson on the list must be a different one,” Erikson said. “As you can see, I am alive. And I bring reinforcements.”

The guard opened his mouth then closed it again. For a moment he considered letting this big lug through, but then he changed his mind. If the man didn’t have the courtesy to offer a bribe then he could suffer.

“Sorry,” he said. “I am not in a position to deal with recruitment. Perhaps if you come... ah.”

Erikson, still smiling in an expression that was starting to look quite psychotic, had leaned in close enough to slip the edge of his dagger beneath the guard’s breastplate. He angled it down a touch.

“Are you going to let me in?” he grinned.

“Through you go, sir,” the guard said with barely a change in his tone of voice.

“Thank you,” Erikson said and swept past the man into the high-vaulted hall beyond. Once there he grabbed the nearest messenger.

“I need to see the provost marshal,” he said.

“I’m busy,” the messenger said.

“Me too,” said Erikson and pressed a coin into the man’s hand. “Now, lead on.”

“I doubt if he’ll see you.”

“Let me worry about that.”

The messenger shrugged, pocketed the coin and led Erikson up a flight of steps that led to the levels above. They spent five minutes navigating through a confusion of corridors before emerging into a wide gallery. It was crowded with courtiers and servants, and at the end a dozen men in bright armour stood to attention in front of a door big enough for a city gate.

“The provost marshal will be in there with the baron,” the messenger said, and gestured towards the door.

“Lead on,” Erikson told him impatiently. In his imagination he could see the provost marshal handing out the last of his gold to the man in front.

“Nobody is admitted without permission. Good day.” The messenger bowed and slipped away amongst the throng. Erikson considered chasing after him, then caught sight of a line of servants carrying platters towards the forbidding guards. He slipped his hat off, lowered his head and lifted the platter of cut meat from the hands of the last servant in the line.

“Hey!” the man said, but Erikson just winked at him.

“Don’t worry,” he said, throwing him a slab of beef. “I won’t tell.”

The man hesitated as he examined his prize, then was swallowed up in the crowd. Erikson lowered his eyes and tried to keep the swagger out of his step as the great oaken doors swung open and he followed the servants into the great hall beyond.

The baron didn’t look up as the servants trailed into the room with the afternoon meal. He and his officers were too deep in thought. The servants stacked their plates on side tables then turned and left. Erikson made to follow them, holding back until the last of them had left the room, then slapped his cap back on and sidled to one side so that he could peer over the assembled officers’ shoulders.

And yes. Yes, there he was. The provost marshal in all of his chit-signing, warrant-issuing, gold-paying glory. But before Erikson could cut the man from the herd, the baron looked up, sighed and said: “Gentlemen, we have a problem. Reports have started coming in that the enemy are not doing what we want them to.”

“Not all heading off to sort out those damned Stirlanders then?” one of the officers said.

“What?” the baron looked at him.

“It was just a joke,” the man said, turning brick-red. “I mean, it was nothing, sire.”

The baron held him in his gaze for another agonising moment, then released him and continued.

“We have been successful in bringing them to us. Those scouts who have returned speak of a gathering of the foul creatures, a great herd which we can slaughter in one fell swoop.”

“Sigmar willing,” one of the men added, and this time the baron joined in the murmur of agreement.

“Sigmar willing indeed. But first we have to pin the damned things against a city’s walls, and that’s where the problem appears to be. We were sure that they would come to meet us here. That’s why outside these walls we have every man in Hochland able to carry a weapon. The problem is that they are not moving against Hergig. They are going for Barwedel instead.”

“Barwedel!” one of the officers exclaimed. “That’s as far from the forest as it’s possible to get. Why would they risk crossing so much ground that we can cover with cavalry and cannon?”

“It would seem,” the baron said, “that they are attacking where we least expect it. It was no coincidence that most of the scouts who returned were those who reported the earlier manoeuvres that would have brought the enemy here.”

“But sire,” another officer said, “these are beasts. Surprise, misdirection, selectively killing scouts... How could they know of these finer points of war?”

“I would imagine,” the provost marshal said, speaking for the first time, “that General Count von Brechthold asked himself the same question shortly after losing our first army.”

The room lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

“So, gentlemen,” the baron said to rouse them. “Suggestions?”

“We can meet them from behind cover,” an officer with the black uniform of an artillerist offered. “Give me time for half a dozen volleys and the horse boys can mop up the remains.”

“If by horse boys you mean the honoured regiments of knights,” a man in full plate armour bristled, “then you have a point. I hardly think we need rely upon your fireworks, though. Nor do we need cover. It’s space we need, and lots of it.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” a colonel of state troopers interjected. “Both of your efforts will be appreciated, but it is the grind of the foot regiments that will win this battle. Let us meet them anywhere but in the forest. There my men can cut through them like the teeth of a saw through rotten wood.”

Erikson listened as the argument grew more heated. He had heard it before in countless councils of war. Most professional soldiers, and all aristocrat ones, regarded all other regiments as no more than auxiliaries to their own.

The knight and the artillerist were squabbling about a battle which had happened fifty years before and three hundred miles away when Erikson realised that the baron was looking at him.

“You,” he said, and the others fell silent as he spoke. “I don’t remember inviting you to council.”

“No, sire,” Erikson said, and executed a perfect Tilean salute. When he had risen back to his feet he had found the words he wanted. “I have just arrived back at the city, and, upon hearing that my regiment was counted amongst the lost, I raced here to reassure the provost marshal that we are still part of the muster.”

“Frightened you’d be taken off the payroll, hey?” the provost marshal asked.

“My only concern is victory,” Erikson contrived to sound offended, “although we do need to resupply.”

“What’s your regiment?” the baron asked.

“The Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig,” Erikson replied with as much pride as if it had been the Empire’s oldest regiment of knights. “And we remain at your service.”

“Thank Sigmar for that,” the artillerist said. “We’re saved.”

The baron ignored him.

“Then as you seem to have invited yourself to council,” the baron said, “perhaps you could tell us what you think should be our strategy?”

All eyes turned to Erikson. He met them with a level green gaze.

“I think that it would be a mistake to start racing around the countryside looking for the enemy,” he decided. “Even if your forces didn’t end up becoming separated, I doubt if the enemy would meet you anywhere other than on ground of their own choosing.”

“We wouldn’t leave it to the enemy to decide where we meet,” a knight said impatiently. “Our horses are as fast as the beasts. We can outmanoeuvre them.”

“Perhaps you can,” Erikson nodded. “But what about the troopers and the artillery and the baggage train? No, if you go chasing after them they will devour you one piece at a time.”

“So?” the baron asked.

“So let them reach this town, this Barwedel. Give them time to surround it. Then you can do to them there what you were planning to do to them here. Hammer them into the anvil of that city’s fortifications and have done with it.”

“Anybody disagree?” the baron asked, and as soon as they heard his tone those who had been about to do so closed their mouths. All apart from the provost marshal.

“The problem is that Barwedel may not be so much an anvil as a clay pot. In fact, sire, we have a full two-thirds of their town guard camped outside our own gates.”

“That’s war,” the baron said. “Gentlemen, prepare your men. We leave on the morning after next. Dismissed. Oh and Steckler, see that Captain Erikson is paid, will you? I seem to remember that he was one of the heroes of the Battle of the Gates.”

“Yes, sire.” The provost marshal bowed as the baron made his way out of the chamber. When he looked up Erikson was smiling at him.

“I’ll come with you now, provost marshal,” he said. “Before you forget.”

“Oh it isn’t the coin I’m thinking of,” Steckler smiled. “It’s how you’re going to earn it.”

Whilst Erikson was counting each coin into his money belt and calculating his profit so far, Porter was busily pursuing his own entrepreneurial efforts.

“I’m not saying that the pony is going to die of the flux, Walder,” he said reasonably and gestured towards the animal in question. “Nor am I saying it will die of malnutrition despite the intestinal worms it looks like it’s carrying. Or even of old age, although judging by the look of it I’d say it’s on borrowed time.”

“You’re quite right,” Walder replied. “It is a healthy specimen. I wouldn’t have been doing my job as regimental quartermaster if I bought anything but the finest animals.”

“And a fine job you did,” Porter allowed, and winced as he bent down to inspect the animal’s hocks. “But how many years since the beast was in its prime?”

“One or two,” Walder lied easily and patted the pony on the rump. “We feed them the best in the state regiments. Keeps ’em going forever.”

Porter hissed through his teeth and turned to his companion.

“What do you think, Brandt?” he asked.

“You shouldn’t be able to fell a pony with a single punch,” the big man rumbled.

Before he could stop himself, Walder had taken the bait.

“You couldn’t fell a pony like that with a single punch. Not with the strength it’s carrying. Although,” he hastily added, “come to think of it...”

It was too late. Brandt, who knew the value of a sucker punch, had already lined the blow up and before Walder could finish the sentence his fist blurred through the air. He turned his entire body as he struck, putting every fibre of muscle and ounce of weight behind the fist as he drove it into the soft tissue behind the horse's jaw. There was a snap and the beast collapsed with a grunt and hit the floor like a slab of stone.

The three men waited for it to get up. When it became clear that it wouldn't, Porter and Walder both started speaking at the same time.

"Just as I thought," Porter said. "It died of old age."

"I'm going to try to save you from the hangman's noose," Walder said. "Given enough gold I could say that I sold it to you."

"For Sigmar's sake," said Brandt, who knew exactly where and on who he was going to spend his share of the money they made by buying horse meat. "Why don't you two just agree on a price and have done with it?"

The two quartermasters turned to look at him, identical expressions of shock on their faces. Porter was the first to recover.

"I'll give you four coppers."

Walder laughed long and hard.

"All right then, five."

This time the other quartermaster said nothing. He seemed to have been struck by a sudden thought, and he was regarding Brandt with a sudden acquisitive interest.

"Six it is," he said. "But tell me, your friend. Can he fight or can he just hit things hard?"

"Five," Porter said. "As for Brandt, he can do both. He's got all the technique of a smaller man, but when he hits something it stays hit."

He kicked the carcass of the horse in illustration, and Walder pursed his lips. Almost as an afterthought he spat on his hand and held it out.

"Five and a half."

"Deal," Porter said and shook. "Though why the interest in my partner? Do you have a job for a man who knows how to use his fists?"

"Not a job, a challenge," Walder said, then looked suspiciously around. "But look, let's not talk about it now. Why don't you ask Brandt to take the pony away before the officers start snooping, and me and you can go back to my quarters and discuss it further."

"Suits me," Brandt said, knotting a rope around the animal's legs and turning to drag it away. "And if you want me, Porter, I'll be at Lilly's."

"Don't drink too much," Walder said, then put a brotherly arm around Porter's shoulder and led him away to a quiet corner.

\* \* \*

"Sergeant," Hofstadter asked from beneath the blanket he had wrapped like a shawl around his shoulders. "Can I have leave to go and find a doctor?"

"A doctor?" Alter asked suspiciously. He knew that many of the men wanted to slip off to the taverns and brothels below, but he was damned if he was going to have

to explain any absences to Erikson when he returned. "What do you need a doctor for?"

Hofstadter bit back on the flash of rage that the question brought. He ground his teeth, ignoring the way that they felt too big for his gums, and spat a mouthful of blood into the dirt.

"I'm sick," he said. "Got some sort of damned fever."

Alter looked at him sceptically, then changed his mind. Beneath the thick pelt of stubble, Hofstadter's skin was as white as chalk, and dark grey rings lined his downcast eyes. And spitting blood was never a good sign.

"If you want to risk a doctor you can," he decided, "although I'd stick to sleep and soup if I were you."

Hofstadter started to say something, but the words caught in his throat. He spat again, and this time Alter saw the pink-stained lengths of the man's teeth. His gums seemed to be pulling away.

"Go on, then," Alter said. "Do you want anyone to go with you?"

"No," Hofstadter said and lumbered off beneath his blankets. Alter wondered how many of the things he had wrapped himself in. He certainly looked bulkier than usual. Before he could wonder any further there was a curse, the thump of a fist into flesh and a roar of encouragement from the men behind him.

He turned to break up the fight, Hofstadter forgotten.

Although the agony in his bones had grown, Hofstadter strode through the encampment below with an easy speed. His nose twitched and wrinkled as he drank in the countless smells of man and beast, and the blood that flowed from around his erupting gums mixed with saliva.

He was snapped out of this appreciation by a sudden chorus of hysterically yapping dogs. He jumped back, turning to snarl at the beasts as they strained at their chains. As he did so he bumped into a man who swore as he pushed him away.

"Watch where you're going, you drunken fool," he snapped.

Hofstadter turned to him. The blanket fell from his head and he bared his pink-stained teeth as he snarled.

"Sigmar!" the man said, anger giving way to shock. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

Hofstadter ignored him, wrapped the blanket back around his head and loped away through the crowd. For a moment the man he had threatened considered giving chase, but only until he realised that that might entail catching the misshapen creature. Then he considered contacting the witch hunters. But no. No, only a lunatic would willingly have anything to do with them.

Eventually he contented himself with a shrug, and walked on.

Hofstadter, meanwhile, had reached the city gates. They were wide open, and the guards were pressed back by the tide of humanity that washed back and forth between them. Soldiers, merchants and refugees pushed and jostled as they fought through to whatever destination the war had sent them to, and Hofstadter let himself be carried along in a stream of people who were entering the city. It wasn't until he was halfway down Hergig's main thoroughfare that he started elbowing his way towards the side streets.

Half an hour later he was alone in the crumbling darkness of a back alley. After taking a last, furtive glance around him, he pulled the neck of his tunic away from his chest and gazed down at the pulsing green glow of the pendant he wore on his chest.

Over the past days the fur that it rested upon had grown coarse and thick, and the muscle beneath it had grown. Perhaps that was why he was so constantly, constantly hungry. His stomach rumbled at the thought and, with a last loving look at the pendant, he began to prowl quietly through the filth and the shadows.

Rats scurried away as they smelled his approach. Dogs barked in distant streets. Hofstadter ignored them. He knew what meat he craved, and it was neither rodent nor canine.

He clambered from the alleyway down into a sewer, slunk through a dozen yards of filth and then back up into the gloom of a forgotten courtyard. That was where he first heard the baby crying.

His ears twitched at the sound and his nostrils flared. With his eyes half-closed Hofstadter leaned back and inhaled the soup of scents that filled the air here. There was stale sweat and cooking food and rotting refuse and jasmine and, yes. Yes, there it was.

The sweet, ripening smell of the sweetest of meats.

Hofstadter followed the scent and the sound of his quarry over to the far wall of the courtyard, and then started climbing. The gaps between the crumbling masonry made it an easy task, as did the effortless strength which seemed to glow within his aching muscles. When he reached the roof he paused, squatting like a blanketed gargoyle on the slate, and listened intently. For a moment he feared that his quarry had fallen silent, but then it started mewling again. It was a low, miserable sound, but even above the other voices of the city it was clear enough for Hofstadter to track.

There was a brief moment, just when he was swinging down from the guttering into the room below, when something twitched in the back of his mind. It made him wince, and as the sobs from within the crib turned to screams he rubbed at his head. The nubs of horns that had started growing there seemed even bigger than they had this morning.

Then he looked down into the crib and saw the soft flesh and wide, frantically staring eyes of his prey. A rope of drool fell from his fangs as he reached down and, with a single twist, snapped the neck as easily as if it had been a rabbit's.

In the sudden silence that followed he felt some nagging doubt pull at him again, but with the aroma of fresh meat filling his nostrils it was easy to ignore.

With a grunt of hunger Hofstadter squatted down over his victim and began to feed. As he slavered over the flesh the amulet he wore about his neck throbbed so brightly that it cast a muted green light over the glistening red that spilled across the floor, but before he could notice a woman burst in the door and started to scream.

That evening was perhaps the most contented time the company had ever spent together. It was certainly the most contented they would spend for a long time.

After handing over their wounded to the sisters of Shallya they had assembled for their first pay parade. Erikson, who was still basking in the warm feeling of being in profit for the first time, had decided to give each man advance payment of a silver coin. Then, with enough for a good two days of drinking in their pockets, the men



had feasted on a rich stew of horse-meat, flatbread and a ration of wine. Porter, ever anxious to make sure that his budget wasn't scrutinised, even gave them baked apples with which to finish the meal.

He had been deep in thought ever since returning from his meeting with Walder, and it wasn't until the guards had been posted and the bulk of the men had made off to spend their money that he sidled over to Brandt. The big man had been in a mood of silent good cheer ever since returning from the brothel, and Porter handed him a tankard of wine and sat down beside him by the fire.

"Walder was impressed by that punch you threw today," he began, poking at the dying flames of the cooking fire with a stick. The air was thick with the smell of a thousand campfires. They twinkled in the ground below them, as bright and numerous as the stars in the sky above.

"Walder." Brandt spat into the embers and made them hiss. "I wouldn't trust that dog an inch."

"Nor would I," Porter agreed. "That's why I told him, unless things are exactly, and I mean exactly, as he says, then the fight's off."

"You're entering a fight?" Brandt asked with feigned surprise.

"I offered," Porter said. "But he said only you would do. Said he'd been looking for a man like you ever since he rolled into camp. Said he'd pay ten gold crowns. More if the audience is big enough."

"You're boxing?" Sergeant Alter asked and sat down besides them. He had a jug of wine in his hand and the hard, hawk-faced lines had softened into something approaching friendliness.

"Sounds like I might be, sergeant," Brandt said.

"Good," Alter said, and slapped the big man on the back. "In the regiments our company always had a boxing champion. You've got a good fighter's build, too."

"I'm still trying to organise something," Porter said, "but I don't know if we'll have time."

"Make time," Alter said. "We've got to help bring the best out of each other. That's what being a soldier is all about. What being a family is all about. I remember my family."

The old man trailed off and he blinked back a tear. For the first time Porter realised just quite how drunk he was.

"Maybe we should get down to the city," he said, but Brandt shook his head.

"No, the sergeant's right. I wouldn't know much about boxing, though. It was all teeth and kneecaps where I learned to fight."

"Don't worry about that, lad," Alter said, his mood swinging back towards the euphoric. "I'll teach you. Used to be a bit of a boxer myself. Handier with a sword, though. We've done some fighting together, haven't we?" he cackled happily. "Just like the good old days."

"That we have," Brandt said, and smiled as Alter collapsed backwards onto the flattened grass and started to snore.

"Right then, where were we?" Porter asked. "Oh yes, I remember. The fight. Right, well it's a bit unusual, which is why it will pay so much."

"Unusual?" Brandt asked as Porter paused to refill his tankard.

“Yes. Your opponent will be muzzled, and chained to one side of the ring.”

“So what you’re saying,” Brandt drank deeply and belched, “is that I’ll be fighting a bear, like that time last summer?”

“No,” Porter hedged. “Not quite a bear.”

“You can’t mean what I think you do.”

“But think of the money!”

“Where did they get it from?”

“Who cares?”

“Wouldn’t it be illegal?”

“Illegal!” Porter scoffed. “Since when have we worried about that?”

“Since you went mad and decided to organise a boxing match against a beastman.”

“Sssshhhhhhh!” Porter hissed, and looked around to make sure that nobody was in earshot. Then the two men lapsed into silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire and Alter’s snoring.

“I’m not doing it,” Brandt said.

“You have to. I already took your advance. Look.”

With another surreptitious look around, Porter reached into his tunic and drew out a purse. He counted out five thick golden coins. They glowed like captured sunlight in the gloom. Both men looked at them reverently.

“If I do it,” Brandt said, “I want twenty gold crowns, win or lose.”

“I might be able to swing it,” Porter said. “Just make sure that you go down when I tell you to. I’ve seen the thing, and there’s no point in you trying to beat it.”

“Oh good,” said Brandt, and helped himself to another drink.

When Sergeant Alter spoke both men froze.

“I’ll put a copper coin on Brandt,” he said as he struggled back up into a sitting position. “Better not to tell the captain about his opponent, though. You know how finicky officers get.”

Porter realised his mouth was open. He snapped it shut.

“Just as you say, sergeant,” he agreed.

“And if the damned thing isn’t properly muzzled, you’ll swing for it,” Alter said as he used Brandt’s shoulder to hoist himself to his feet. “Now, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me I must check the sentries. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, sergeant,” both men chimed and watched disbelievingly as Alter staggered away, beginning to sing as he did so.

“Well, that settles it,” Porter said. “You’ll have to fight now.”

By the time the company assembled for the evening meal the next day, everybody knew about the fight. At Porter’s constant hectoring almost all of them had bet on Brandt winning it. He had wanted to be sure of getting their coin before they saw the creature he was going up against.

Erikson was suspicious.

“Tell me, Porter,” he said as the men lined up for their dinner, “why are you betting against your man winning?”

“Oh, these bets are nothing,” Porter said, surprised that nobody else had raised the issue. “Presumably they were all still too hungover from the night before. They’re just to cover my costs until I can start taking bets against him.”

“I see,” Erikson said and watched as Porter started slopping out the gruel. “And who is he fighting?”

“Just some big hairy lump from another regiment,” Porter said, chasing around in the cauldron for a nice lump of juicy gristle. “He’s got muscle, but no technique.”

“I look forward to watching Brandt hammering him into the ground,” Erikson said. “Where did you say it was?”

“Sorry, captain,” Porter said, glaring at one of the men who looked as though he was going to take an extra flatbread. “No officers. Hosts’ rules, I’m afraid.”

Lying rogue, Erikson thought. What he said was: “What a shame. Still, as long as no harm comes to any of the lads.”

“They’ll be fine,” Porter said and looked at the captain for the first time. “And the sergeant thinks that it will do us good to have a boxing champion in the ranks.”

“Very well,” Erikson said. He had led mercenaries often enough to know when not to interfere with their villainy. “Well, good luck. I’m off to find the provost marshal.”

“We could do with more grain chits,” Porter called after him. Then, glad to see the captain gone, he finished ladling out the food and went to find Brandt. Together they walked over to the fighting pit Walder had constructed. A wide circle had been dug perhaps six feet down into the soil. It was surrounded by a wider circle of standing room and, behind that, the rickety framework of two tiers of bleachers. As Porter and Brandt made their way through the state troopers whom Walder had drafted in to build the arena, the quartermaster himself scurried over to them.

“Where have you been all day?” he asked. “I was afraid you weren’t going to turn up.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Porter told him. “What about your boy? I want to check on his fastenings before the fight begins. Make sure he’s all fitted up.”

“Why not?” Walder said. “You’ve got time. We’ve got some dog fights to get through first, just to liven everybody up. Then it’s a couple of boxing matches. Then it’s you.”

As he spoke, the torches that lined the arena began to flare into life.

“Quite an arrangement you’ve got here,” Porter said.

“Oh, the lads from the regiment don’t mind helping out,” Walder shrugged modestly as he led them towards a covered wagon. “After all, the officers get their cut. By the way, you aren’t planning on taking any bets within the arena, I hope. That’s strictly my racket.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Porter replied.

Walder stopped outside the covered wagon. It was a solid, timber-built construction with iron plates bolted over the joints. A couple of men, both as big as Brandt, stood outside it. They stood to attention as their quartermaster approached. Walder just nodded at them.

“Here it is,” Walder said. “Take a look but try not to disturb it too much.”

With a furtive look around, one of the guards opened the rear doors of the wagon and Porter ducked inside. For a moment there was silence. It was broken with a roar and the wagon, which must have weighed at least two tons, wobbled as Porter bolted back out of it.

“That all seems fine,” he squeaked as he collided with Brandt.

“Check everything well, did you?” Brandt asked, pushing him away.

“Yes,” Porter nodded and looked guiltily away. “Oh yes. Now let’s get a drink and find somewhere to wait.”

“And you’re sure it’s muzzled?” Brandt asked, shouting to be heard above the roar of the crowd around him.

“Muzzled and chained,” Porter shouted back, and slapped Brandt on the hard muscle of his shoulder. He was stripped to the waist for the coming fight, and the torchlight gleamed off his skin. The company stood around him, and they roared impatiently at Walder’s men as they dragged the victim of the last fight out of the ring.

Then Brandt stood up and their roar of impatience turned into one of approval. He basked in their support, bowing low, then he leapt down into the churned earth of the ring. He landed neatly on the balls of his feet, lifted his fists above his head and bellowed a challenge.

It was met by the jeers of the crowd, and then all eyes turned to the wagon that was being backed down an earthen ramp and into the ring. It lurched from side to side, and as the crowd quietened the maddened howls of the beast within could be heard.

“Remember,” Porter said, darting forwards to give a last piece of advice, “cut and run as soon as you like. You don’t need to win this one.”

Brandt ignored him. He could feel terror coiling within him, but he could also feel the berserker joy which had carried him through a lifetime of bloodshed. His fists were bound, but so were the jaws of the beast he would fight.

To the hells with Porter, he decided. He would leave this ring victorious.

The wagon had come to a rest in the pit, and Walder’s men attached ropes to the rear doors. With a last, pitying look at Brandt they leapt out of the ring and jerked the doors open.

The beast blurred into the ring, its hooves tearing up divots of bloodstained earth as it arrowed towards Brandt. The crowd fell almost silent as he leapt away from the beast’s onslaught, and although he was quick he wasn’t quick enough. It caught hold of him and lunged forwards, then tumbled back as it reached the end of its chain.

Brandt tumbled back too, and tried not to think about the panic that fluttered within him.

It wasn’t just that the beast was so big, standing a full head taller than him. Nor was it the powerful bulge of its jaws because, true to his word, Walder had fastened them within an iron muzzle.

No, what scared Brandt was the blind hatred in the beast’s eyes. He could almost feel it burning into him as it strained at the limit of its chain, choking on its collar and making the wagon it was tethered to jump.

The crowd, which had been stunned into silence, suddenly found its voice again. Soon the babble of catcalls and voices resolved itself into a chant, a savage metronome beaten out with stamping feet and clashing weapons.

“Kill it,” the crowd demanded with a single, atavistic voice. “Kill, kill.”

Brandt felt his courage return.

“After all,” he told himself as he lunged forwards, “it’s only an animal.”

And so it was. When it turned it was with the speed of a serpent, and when it swiped him across the face with outstretched claws it felt as though he had been mauled by a lion. Brandt staggered back, blood blinding him in one eye and his ears ringing with the impact.

The beast roared with irritation as the chain once more prevented it from pursuing its prey. It grabbed hold of the metal and turned back to try to tear it free.

Brandt, who had learned to fight in the Empire’s slums, moved with an unerring instinct towards his opponent’s back. He drew back his fist and drove a left hook straight into its kidneys.

It felt like punching an oaken barrel. A man would have been crippled by the blow but the beast just spun around, its chains forgotten in the face of the assault. It lunged at Brandt, fangs gnashing impotently behind the cage of its muzzle, but to the crowd’s horrified delight the same muzzle struck Brandt square on the forehead. He fell, his face a sheet of blood, and rolled aside as a hoof stamped down towards him.

Ignoring the weight of the impact which had been behind the kick, Brandt drove his foot into the tendons behind the beast’s re-curved knee. It grunted and staggered away, and Brandt seized the opportunity to stagger to his feet and stumble out of his enemy’s reach.

This time the crowd were less supportive. As the beast hurled itself against the restriction of its chain, they started hurling abuse at Brandt for his lack of fighting spirit. His comrades hurled abuse back, and there were already some scuffles breaking out in the stalls. In the midst of it he could see Porter waving a white scarf in a signal for him to leave the ring. Beside him Alter, by contrast, waved his fist in encouragement.

Brandt scooped up a handful of dirt. He used it to staunch the bleeding, spat out a tooth and moved back in towards his enemy.

This time, instead of pouncing, he danced around the beast, goading it until he had worked out the exact reach of its chain. Only then did he move in, tapping away at it with fast jabs before jumping out of range. It grunted with frustration as it fought to retaliate, but now that Brandt had got the measure of it he didn’t give it a chance.

He ducked in.

He landed a jab.

He ducked out.

The crowd, its sporting instincts outraged by this unfair tactic, began to grow ever more belligerent. Brandt had just landed a neat blow on the beast’s wrist when the first turf of earth was thrown. It landed between the two combatants harmlessly, but already a new fashion was sweeping the makeshift stadium and suddenly the air was filled with flying debris.

Brandt staggered back to safety, his arms raised against the missiles. His opponent reacted more strongly. When a tossed bottle landed with a crack on its horns it turned, roared with rage and charged the spectators. It leapt up onto the side of the fighting pit and crawled forwards.

The chain tightened again and it fell back into the ring, but by now it no longer mattered. The ferocity of its charge had been enough to start a stampede that spread throughout the gathered spectators with a terrible urgency. Where moments before men had been chanting and jeering and drinking, now they were in full flight.

Darkness added to the confusion and, as a hundred men tried to climb a single ladder at the same time, a torch was knocked into a bale of straw. Soon flames were roaring up into the night, and within minutes the makeshift stadium was ablaze.

The development did little to calm the panicking spectators.

“Come on, you damn fool!”

Brandt swung around, fists raised against the man who had grabbed his shoulder. Then he realised that it was Porter.

“I had him,” he said and Porter, who had begun to fear just that, swept an arm around the flame-lit chaos around them.

“We’ve got more important things to worry about than that,” he said. “Like surviving, for instance.”

Brandt grunted and, with a last look back at his opponent, turned and followed the rest of the company as they made their escape.

“Doesn’t look good, does it, Erikson?” the provost marshal said. Erikson, who had been escorted to the palace by a dozen guards, merely examined the brim of his hat and tried not to think too much about his surroundings. He had never been in the dungeon before, and even though he remained free, the manacles that hung from the walls in this chamber seemed a little more than coincidental.

“Over a dozen deaths in all,” the provost marshal glanced down at the sheet before him, “and a hundred men injured. The fire also destroyed the stores of three regiments, and scattered a corral full of horses that we are still chasing now. Tell me, Erikson. Do you work for the enemy?”

“Of course not, provost marshal,” Erikson said. “Nor do I understand why you have brought me here.”

“Because,” Steckler said, “your company caused this... this devastation. We’ve lost a day’s march because of you. A day’s march! Do you have any idea how important a day’s march can be in a war?”

“Some idea,” Erikson said, his temper rising. “Is it more important than finding scapegoats for accidents?”

“Don’t take that line with me,” Steckler roared and slammed his fist onto a table. “The witch hunters are already in a lather about enemy infiltrators and some killing in the potters’ quarter. Perhaps you’d like to talk to them?”

“Not at all, provost marshal,” Erikson said. “My point is that it is unfair to blame my company.”

“Are you denying that it was them who staged this fight? Are you denying that one of your men, and I can hardly believe this myself, was boxing with a beastman?”

“I’m sure the event wasn’t organised by them,” Erikson said. “Apart from anything else, they haven’t had the time.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard. In fact, Viksberg has collected statements from over two dozen men who will swear that your company was responsible for the event.”

“Viksberg,” Erikson said the name with such disgust that Steckler paused.

“I don’t care what you think of the man, these statements are genuine. I had them checked. And your man was fighting a beast, wasn’t he?”

“I believe it was muzzled,” Erikson began, but Steckler cut him off with a bark of humourless laughter.

“Well that’s all right then,” he said.

Erikson fixed him with a cold glare.

“My men have been fighting the enemy for the past month and more,” he said. “Might I remind you that, before then, they were prisoners in your own gaol, no more than mouths to feed and bodies to guard?”

Steckler met Erikson’s glare with his own. He liked this man. Liked his nerve. He was damned if he was going to let it show, though.

“Yes, about that gaol. Have you told the men that they are only on licence, and that as soon as the war is over they will return to their sentences?”

To his surprise, Erikson felt a shudder of some strange new feeling. It wasn’t fear. Not exactly. Nor was it nausea, or sadness.

“Yes,” Steckler said, seeing that he had made his point. “You do well to look guilty.”

“I was hoping that the men would be freed in consideration of their service,” Erikson said, looking down.

“So I take it that you haven’t told the men their cells are waiting for them?” Steckler twisted the knife, “Or, in several cases, the noose?”

Erikson opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. Understanding dawned, as did disappointment.

“I see. You should have just told me what you were after. I would have offered you a cut, but you didn’t seem the type. How much?”

This time Steckler’s anger was real.

“Don’t insult me, Erikson,” he said, his tone icy cold. “I didn’t bring you down here to blackmail you. Not exactly, anyway. I’ve come here to make you an offer.”

Steckler produced a leather tube, drew a roll of parchment out from within and offered it to Erikson.

“This is a pardon for all crimes committed by you and your company to date, including any involvement you might have had in last night’s events.”

“By Sigmar,” Erikson said, unable to hold back his smile of relief as he read it. “So it is. Thank you!”

“Not so fast,” Steckler said. “You’ll see that it hasn’t been signed yet. That will only happen after you and your men have played your part in the coming battle to my complete, and I do mean complete, satisfaction.”

Erikson ignored his misgivings and nodded happily.

“It will be our pleasure, provost marshal,” he said.

Five minutes later he had come to the conclusion that paying a bribe would have been easier anyway, but by then it was too late.

After feeding, Hofstadter had been overcome with a crippling exhaustion which had laid him low for days. He had found a quiet ledge in a nearby sewer and there he had slept, bloodied and remorseless, as the world above had discovered the horror he had left behind him.

When he awoke the pain in his bones was gone. The only discomfort came from his boots, which seemed to have grown misshapen and ill-fitting. He clawed at the fastenings and tore them off, ripping the stitching apart when they caught on his bone. As he tossed them into the sewer he tapped at his new hooves and realised that he would never need another pair of boots again.

He almost tore off the remains of his clothes too, but some instinct stayed his fingers. The city that squatted down above him was no place for him to reveal his new form. It was full of sharp eyes and sharper steel. He would have to be careful until he was free. Careful and cloaked.

He waited until the beam of light that pierced the crumbling masonry of his hideout faded into dusk. Only then did he slip carefully back out into the city. He had wrapped part of the blanket around his head in a shawl, and the other half trailed into the dirt, its ragged threads hiding the re-knitted bone of his legs and the hardness of his hooves.

Although he stank of fear as well as sewage, the city remained blind to him as he joined its throngs. The acrid stink of countless torches and fires greased the air, and although pressed and jostled by the crowds Hofstadter was just one of a myriad of ragged and crazed refugees. He kept the yellow glimmer of his eyes lowered as he followed the press that led to the city gates, and eventually he was spat out into the encampment beyond.

Here it was even easier to pass unremarked. The campfires barely cast any light beyond the circles of men who huddled around them, and the road between them was an anonymous highway of drunks and thieves and merchants hurrying back to the safety of the city with their day's takings. Hofstadter ignored them as they ignored him, and soon he was approaching the last few clusters of tents that stood between him and the freedom of the land beyond.

That's when he smelled it.

He paused, lifted his head and sniffed the air. The flattened rings of his nostrils twitched as he breathed the foetid air in and tasted it. He didn't have a word for the joy that flowed through him then, nor did he need one.

All he needed to know was that what he could smell was the herd.

With a grunt of happiness Hofstadter quickened his pace and trotted off towards the embrace of his own kind.



## Chapter Sixteen

Even Gulkroth was impressed by the number that had gathered within his dominion. They had come from every dark glade and low canyon and hidden fastness in Hochland, and now that he saw them arrayed before him they seemed more swarm than herd. Individuals were indistinguishable in the seething masses that heaved beneath the putrid luminescence of the Chaos Moon's fattened sphere, and the reek of them greased the air for miles around.

There would certainly be no way for such a throng to find food here. They had already scoured the land for every morsel and that, Gulkroth considered, was a great advantage. He wanted them hungry. No, he wanted them ravenous. He wanted the smell of the man-flesh within the city walls before them to drive them mad with desire.

He watched the walls from the perch he had taken on a great chariot. When he stood upon it he towered above all but the minotaurs, and he could see the defiant lines of the city walls rising above them. Here and there tiny figures of men could be seen scurrying past gaps in the battlements. He fancied that he could smell their terror even through the stink of his host.

When he had arrived at this place his first instinct had been to charge the gates, throwing wave after wave of axe-wielding beasts against it until it had been destroyed. Either that or until the pile of their bodies had formed a rampart.

But then, as a steady stream of scouts brought him tidings of the land beyond, he had reconsidered. The humans' main force was still strong, and he would need the herd intact to destroy it when it arrived. In particular he wanted to be sure of capturing their lord. The shamans had plans for him. Glorious, terrible plans.

And so, instead of the purity of animal aggression, Gulkroth was making preparations. Even now, with the Chaos Moon wallowing back towards the horizon, the forest behind him was alive with the sound of chopping. Thousands of his followers worked there, their war axes covered in sap instead of blood as they built a forest of siege ladders.

It was a blasphemy, Gulkroth knew, but a necessary one. The shamans had assured him that they would make recompense, but it still made him uncomfortable. The humans would pay in full for forcing him to do this, of that he was sure. He had already sent herds out around the walls to make sure that none escaped his wrath.

He was brooding on such thoughts when instinct suddenly made him look up.

At first there was nothing to see against the glow of the night sky, but soon he saw scraps of movement in the distance and felt the aura of the newcomers. He bared his fangs in pleasure as he understood what the creatures were, and bellowed a greeting into the sky.

His bodyguard cringed at the sound of their lord's voice but the winged creatures fluttered obediently towards him. They landed in before him, thudding down to earth in shadowed tangles of featherless wings and scrawny limbs. Although they had the wings of bats and the talons of raptors they had the bodies of women. Moonlight flowed across the smooth contours of their torsos, revealing them to be as lithe and ripe-breasted as any courtesan. Their faces might almost have been human too if it had not been for the bestial expressions they wore and the long, dagger-sharp fangs they sported.

"Welcome," Gulkroth said, and they trembled with delicious terror at the chasm-deep timbre of his voice. "From where do you come?"

"Your messenger found us in the cliffs above the forest, great lord," one them said, its voice a shrill caw. "He bade us come for a great slaughter and so here we are."

"You will feast before the Chaos Moon wanes," Gulkroth told them. "But first you will help to prepare the flesh. You will be my voice in the battle to come."

So saying, he turned and strode through the herd that had gathered around him. It parted before him like a shoal of herring before a shark. His new servants glanced about them nervously as they hopped and scuttled along behind him, their wings folded along their backs. They tried not to look at the beasts which towered above them on all sides. Tried not to notice the hunger and the resentment that glimmered in the dark sockets of their eyes.

"Shamans," Gulkroth called as he climbed to the top of a fire-blasted hilltop. A coven of the beasts bowed low as he advanced upon them, and the most ancient of them stepped forwards.

"My lord," Ruhrkar said, his rheumy eyes aglow with the power of the moon above. In its fell light the withered creature had grown in power, his sorcery blossoming like some terrible fruit.

"Ruhrkar, in the morrow, as we close our claws around the humans, these beasts will carry my voice. Give them the gift to do so."

"Yes, my lord," the shaman said, slouching forwards to touch the throats of the cowering harpies. He was already thinking of the potion he would prepare for them so that they might truly carry the voice of their lord.

"And do it quickly," Gulkroth rumbled. "We attack tomorrow, when the Chaos Moon is ascendant in the sky."

He hadn't meant it as a rallying call, but such was the power of his will that the promise sent a shiver of bloodthirsty joy though those around him. Heads thrown back, they raised their voices in an expanding storm of sound that spread throughout the entire herd.

In the midst of the herd Barwedel's walls shook, and so did the men who cowered terrified behind them.

\* \* \*

"Don't worry," Erikson said. "It's a simple enough job. All we have to do is knock down a bridge."

How easy that seems here, he thought, stood almost in the shadow of Hergig's mighty walls and with the rest of the baron's army quartered around us. But how difficult it will be when we try to turn the ambition into a reality.

No wonder the provost marshal had been sympathetic as he'd explained the mission just hours before.

Alter, Gunter and Porter stood around him, leaning over the makeshift map table that stood in the midst of their camp and examining the parchment critically. Behind them the company, as yet blithely unaware of their next mission, talked and laughed and argued as they sharpened weapons and mended clothes. Their spirits had been high ever since they had cornered Porter and persuaded him that a cancellation did not involve the forfeiture of all bets cast.

As for Porter, if he had been miserable then, he was horrified now.

"I thought you said that Barwedel was under siege," he said.

"Precisely. That's why we have to cut off the enemy's escape before the battle."

"But Barwedel," Porter said, punching the map with a cartographer's zeal, "is only an inch away from that bridge."

"An inch!" Erikson scoffed. "It's at least three miles."

"I can smell the damned things three miles away," Porter complained. "And who else will be there if the enemy do happen to turn up?"

"Nobody," Erikson said. "The rest of the army will be on the other side of Barwedel, right here."

"An excellent distraction," Alter said.

"Distraction?" Porter yelled so loudly that some of the men looked over.

"Yes," Alter said mildly. "A distraction. War's never a safe business, but the baron knows what he's doing."

"And what about when the beasts do turn and run?" Porter hissed. "What will they do when they've swum across the river and found us?"

"The plan is not for the river to stop them completely, but just to slow them down," Erikson said. "That should give the army enough time to chase them down and finish them off completely."

"That's the plan, is it?" Porter asked sourly. "To kill every single one of the enemy before they manage to swim across a couple of dozen yards of water?"

"You've got it," Erikson beamed, and slapped the quartermaster on the back. "Of course, we'll need mounts and supplies to make sure we can take the bridge down in time. Here, take a dozen men to the palace and present this chit. They'll give you whatever we need."

Porter hesitated, torn between greed and caution.

"Well, as long as we don't have to hang about after the bridge is down," he said, and took the chit.

"We'll play it by ear," Erikson promised him. "What about you, Gunter? Any thoughts?"

"As long as we are dying deaths worthy of Sigmar's sons, I have no preference for the location." He shrugged with a sublime indifference. "This place will be as good as any."

The three other men looked at him, aghast.

From below a sudden chorus of trumpets caught their attention and the three men, happy to be distracted from Gunter's morbid enthusiasm, turned and looked towards the city gates. A line of guards had beaten a path from the city and now the baron was emerging at the head of his personal guard. Even at this distance, perhaps half a mile away, Erikson could see the splendour of the baron's gold-chased armour. The steel and gilding had been polished to a diamond sparkle, and the white fox-fur cape that the baron wore fastened to his shoulders gleamed in the sunlight.

Behind him, walking their horses forwards in a perfect column of six, the harnesses of the baron's guard were only slightly less splendid. Then, as the column emerged from the gate, the baron's personal standard bearer raised his banner and the great flag of Hochland unfurled in the warm summer air.

As the red, white and green was lifted in the breeze the assembled soldiers began to cheer the baron, their voices high with excitement as he and his entourage trotted through the army. He stood up in his stirrups, unsheathed his sword and held it aloft, an icon of steel and light to go with that of cloth.

Erikson found that he was cheering along with the rest of them. The voices of the entire army echoed off the walls of the city, only dying down when the baron had passed through the army and the rest of the regiments started wheeling into line to follow his lead. Soon the whole camp was moving, a massive caravan of marching men, walking horses and the pack beasts and wagons of the train.

"Come on, Porter," Erikson said. "I'll come with you. If we don't destroy that bridge in time, then..."

"What?" Porter asked as Erikson trailed off.

"Never mind," Erikson said, and bit back the unfamiliar feeling of guilt. "Let's just do it."

Watching the company trying to ride reminded Erikson of the first time they had tried to stand in rank and file.

A few of them rode if not well, then at least safely. Dolf was a natural. Although he had never ridden before in his life it took him only a couple of hours before he was sitting so comfortably in the saddle that he could even tap out a rhythm on the drum.

Others fared less well. They hung onto the backs of their trotting ponies, clutching at the reins like drowning men clutching at straws. Some abandoned the reins altogether and clutched onto their ponies' necks, while others rode leaning sideways over the saddle like so many sacks of turnips. A few had abandoned any attempt at riding and were running alongside their mounts instead.

At any other time Erikson might have regarded these efforts with patient amusement, but not now. He and the provost marshal had plotted their course on the map, and although Erikson's company had no more of a distance to cover than the main force, they had a heavy workload to get through when they got there. Nobody was quite sure what the bridge was built from, but it had stood for centuries. That was why, as well as taking enough ponies for his men, he had also received a dozen weighed down with tools and rope and tackle.

"Do you think it might be time to give the men a rest, sir?" Alter asked.

Erikson's surprise turned to enlightenment as he saw the way his sergeant sat in the saddle. He was gripping the reins so tightly that he looked as if he was trying to throttle them, and his legs were locked so tightly around his pony's midriff that he might have been trying to ride a greased pig.

"No, no rest yet," Erikson told him. "We ride until nightfall, and start again at dawn. I want to reach the damned bridge by afternoon tomorrow."

"Right you are, sir," Alter said miserably, and clenched his jaw as his horse skipped over a pothole.

"Fancy a race, sergeant?" Porter asked as he trotted up beside them. He was as easy in the saddle as a monkey on the branch of a tree and he was thoroughly enjoying the discomfiture of his comrades.

"Why aren't you back with the supplies?" Alter snapped, then wobbled dangerously.

"I wanted to report that the damned shirker Hofstadter seems to have slipped off," he replied. "Thought the captain might want to know."

"It's a shame," Erikson said, loud enough for the men behind him to hear. "He'll hang for it when they catch him."

"That's all very well," Porter said. "But my point is that I'll need to keep one of these ponies to replace him. He was a surly dog, but he had strong shoulders."

"Never mind that now," Erikson told him. "Just get back and make sure that all the gear is tied on tight. See that forest up ahead? If we're ambushed, we won't be stopping."

He pointed to where the wheat fields petered out into rough pasture before being swallowed up completely by the forest.

"Right you are, captain," Porter said and, with a worried glance at the tree line, rode back to secure his stores.

That night they camped in a wide clearing in the wood. Despite their stiff muscles and aching joints, most of the company slept soundly, snoring like hogs in the sickly moonlight.

Not so Erikson. He stalked around the sentries restlessly, his eyes peering into the dark fastness of the forest around them. It was strangely silent, and apart from the distant calls of an owl he heard no sign of life. Only once did he imagine that he could hear a distant rumble in the east, but if he did it was too distant and too vague for him to interpret.

Dolf, it seemed, also had trouble sleeping. After checking that the sentries had been changed, Erikson saw him sitting up in his blankets, gazing wide-eyed at Morrslieb.

"Try not to look at it," he said sotto voce, and knelt down beside the lad. "They say it brings bad luck."

Dolf looked at the captain, then back up at the moon.

"Alter says we make our own luck, captain," he said. "Although Gunter says there is no such thing as luck, just the will of Sigmar."

"Gunter's a serious man," Erikson said, and found his own gaze drawn upwards. Morrslieb loomed overhead, and for a split second Erikson felt a sense of vertigo as

though he were falling towards it. He glanced away and saw how the trees clawed up towards the Chaos Moon like worshippers before some dark altar.

It was impossible to make out any features on its surface. There were just swirling patterns, a smudged kaleidoscope of dots that might have been created by his own tired eyes.

“Sometimes I think I can see my parents’ faces in it,” Dolf said, and although he tried to keep his tone level there was a terrible anxiety underlying it.

“No,” Erikson told him, tearing his own gaze away. “You can’t. It is a thing of ill omen, and all it shows are lies. No, stop looking at it and go to sleep. That’s an order.”

“Yes, captain,” Dolf said, and rolled over in his blankets.

“Sleep well.” Erikson slapped him on the shoulder, then prowled back out to see how the sentries were doing. And all the while he could feel Morrslieb gazing down at him, its baleful gaze making his skin crawl.

The company awoke at dawn, ate a hasty meal of cold gruel then climbed back into the saddle. Despite their groans of agony Erikson pushed them hard, and by midday they had emerged from the forest onto the ridge that overlooked their target.

The river had cut through the pasture land about half a mile away, and the bridge stood solidly across it. A timber frame stood on granite arches, the width generous enough for the fattest of haywains.

When Erikson saw it he swore long and loud.

“Don’t worry, captain,” Alter said. With the end of his cavalry days in sight, he had become a happy man. “It’s no more than we expected, and once we take the timber down we can tumble the blocks easily enough.”

“It’s not that,” Erikson said. “It’s the river. Look at it.”

The men looked. The banks were covered with dry husks of reeds, brown and withered with the heat of the summer. Between the banks the company could also see what had once been the river bed. It was a hardpan of dried and cracked mud. The same breeze that rustled through the dead stalks of reeds blew dust devils along it, pale puffs of dried earth that dusted the yellowed pasture land around it.

“But this is good news, isn’t it, captain?” Dolf asked. “We’ll be able to get down to the very foundations of the bridge.”

“Not much point now, lad,” Alter told him. “Without the river, what’s the point of destroying the bridge in the first place? The enemy will just walk across.”

Erikson pursed his lips and thought about the pardon that he had claimed to have already won for the company. The pardon that was, as yet, unsigned.

“First things first,” he said. “We follow orders. If the provost marshal wants us to destroy the bridge, then so be it.”

“Seems a bit pointless,” Alter said.

“Ignoring a superior’s pointless orders?” Erikson winked at him. “You’ve been with this bunch of reprobates for too long.”

With that he ended the discussion by spurring his horse forwards. The company reached the bridge a few moments later and, without giving anybody the chance to wonder why they were bothering, Erikson set about organising their efforts.

It was a solid enough piece of construction. Solid enough to have outlasted the river it spanned, anyway. That didn't deter Erikson.

He first set the men to hacking apart the wooden superstructure that carried the road over the muddy trickle that had once been a river. They set about it with axes and cutlasses, a whirlwind of cheerful destruction, and soon the dry river bed was full of the splintered remains of the upper structure.

Then, as one team lashed the timber together into a crude A-frame, another started to loop the heavy rope they had brought around the stone supports. When the frame had been lifted they ran the rope through a block and tackle, tied the ponies into a single, crudely lashed harness, and pulled.

At first it seemed that muscle wouldn't be enough to move the ancient granite blocks but, as the men threw their weight into the effort, the stones reluctantly began to move. They groaned as if in agony, and as the sweat of men and horses flowed and mingled the granite slowly shifted.

When it happened it did so with a crash that made the earth jump. The capstone fell, the only stone to break loose for a second, then the entire bridge collapsed. A great cloud of dust enveloped the men, and the horses tore loose and fled in panic.

"That's it, then," Alter said, coughing as he emerged from the dust to stand beside Erikson. "That is one thoroughly destroyed crossing point."

"Oh, that's not it," Erikson said, his eyes peering through the settling debris to the west. "That's only the beginning."

Alter followed his captain's gaze over the dried-out twist of the river. The pasture rolled on for another mile or so before being swallowed back up by the eternal forest.

"Listen," Erikson said, his voice barely audible above the excited voices of the men and the whinnying of the ponies. Alter listened and as he did so he realised that he could hear other voices and other beasts. Their cries were muted with distance and the intervening forest, but there was no mistaking the ferocity in them. Or the terror.

"We're going to finish the job, Alter," Erikson said, his eyes serpent-green. "Remember Nalderstein? What we can't achieve with water, we'll achieve with fire instead."

"Yes, sir." Alter nodded approvingly. "We set fire to the forest and let that block the enemy's escape."

"Theirs and ours both," Erikson grinned like a wolf. "Before we burn it, we're going through. We will play our part in the battle, Alter. We will play our part. We will play it to Provost Marshal Steckler's unquestionably and undeniably full satisfaction."

And if they ever find out why we have to, Erikson thought, they'll string me up.  
His grin grew even wider as he turned to give the men their orders.

## Chapter Seventeen

Viksberg had sworn never to volunteer to fight again. War, he had decided, was not for him. Unfortunately, he had learned his lesson too late. When the baron had mustered his forces, Steckler, the sharp-faced bastard, had made sure that Viksberg had been given a command and so here he was, wedged in amongst thousands of other poor saps as they prepared to lift the siege of Barwedel.

“It’s in recognition of your heroic efforts during the first battle,” the provost marshal had told him with a nasty smile.

The words still echoed through Viksberg’s terrified thoughts as he sweated within his armour. During the last few days’ march from Hergig he had dared to hope that battle could still be avoided, but that hope was now gone. Now, as the army advanced towards the enemy, all he had left was schnapps and prayer.

Mainly schnapps.

If his new command were aware of the panic which gripped their appointed leader, they gave no sign of it. They were a solid company, well armoured in riveted plate and well armed with axes. Their sergeant, a scarred and bewhiskered veteran by the name of Hobbs, also seemed to know what he was doing. Not that that prevented Viksberg’s hand from shaking when he drank from his flask. He had seen too much of the enemy to hold out much hope for their success.

They crested the last hill before Barwedel and below them, wrapped around the city like a strangler’s fingers, lay the enemy. They seethed around the walls of Barwedel, a seemingly endless swarm of foul and misshapen creatures. Almost as terrifying as the sight of them was the smell. That horrible, cloying smell. It reminded Viksberg of the first time he had met them in battle, although by now the memory felt more like that of a nightmare than of something that had actually happened.

And this time, he reflected as terror caught the breath in his throat, it is even worse.

This time he had no horse upon which to escape nor, he suspected, would he have the opportunity. He and his company were in the first row of formations that were even now being signalled forwards to march towards the enemy.

It was when they were perhaps half a mile distant that the enemy, who until that point had been carrying a forest of ladders towards the city walls, turned and saw them. They reacted with an instinctive, animal fury.

There was little discipline in their attack. Whilst the baron’s army ground forwards like some vast mechanism, the beasts came in a tide of unreasoning rage, a mass of fang and fur and steel above which standards and totems bobbed like flotsam on a storm-tossed sea.



“Come along, sir,” Sergeant Hobbs said, raising his voice above the bestial howl, and Viksberg realised that he had stopped marching forwards. The men behind him shoved none too gently and he rounded on them.

“Hold your formation,” he snarled and, with a last regretful look, put the cork back into his flask.

“Sir, we must maintain the line of advance,” Sergeant Hobbs told him, shouting as the thunder of the enemy’s hoof beats drew ever nearer. “We cannot give the enemy a ragged line to exploit.”

“Yes, all right,” Viksberg said and began to dawdle reluctantly forwards. The regiments on either side had already started to edge ahead of them. More fool them, thought Viksberg as he saw the rush of the enemy.

Ahead he saw that some of the larger beasts had already outstripped their comrades. They looked like boar, these monstrosities, but boar from some fevered dream. Their skin was as raw as if they had been roasted, and the squeals and shrieks they emitted made them sound as though they were being roasted still.

Even at this horribly shrinking distance Viksberg could see the spines which erupted from the rippling muscles that worked beneath their tortured hides. The weapons slashed through the air as they ran, as sharp as porcupine quills but as large as cutlasses. There was no courage in their charge, only the frenzied fearlessness of ravenous bloodlust.

Viksberg fancied that he could see the hunger glittering in the vicious slits of their piggy eyes.

When the creatures were no more than a bowshot away a cacophony of trumpets blared out the order to halt. On either side of Viksberg’s regiment the line rolled to the stop, individual regiments shuffling slightly to preserve the perfect edge of their front.

Only then, with a blare of their own trumpets, did a company of swordsmen advance forwards to meet the porcine fury of this wave of beasts. They marched no more than a dozen yards out from the front of the army when, with a shuddering impact, the first of the beasts hurled themselves onto their prey.

The noise of the slaughter was horrendous. Men roared as they fought and screamed as they fell. The beasts squealed with glee as they tasted blood or shrieked with pain whenever steel found its way past their spines and into their flesh. And all the while more of their kind barrelled into the swordsmen who stood like an island of steel amidst an ocean of savagery. Soon they were surrounded by a seething horde of the enemy.

“Why don’t they fall back?” Viksberg asked, glad that they didn’t. Glad of anything that distracted the enemy from him.

“Wait for it, sir,” Hobbs bellowed, mistaking the quiver of emotion in his supposed commander’s voice. “The greatswords know what they are doing. We won’t advance until the enemy is well and truly stuck to them.”

At that very moment, as if in answer to Viksberg’s question, the swordsmen’s trumpet sounded.

“Charge!” roared Hobbs, and the call was echoed all the way down the line. The rest of the front, which had been waiting with the tension of a drawn bow string,

surged forwards into the flanks and the rear of the enemy, who now completely surrounded the swordsmen.

Viksberg was carried along with the charge, and with a shriek he suddenly found himself crushed up against the enemy. He held his sword out before him in trembling fingers, the gesture more one of supplication than defiance, but it didn't matter. They had caught the foul beasts completely unawares, and most were still trying to join their comrades in feasting on the swordsmen when they died.

All around Viksberg his men's axes rose and fell, beating out a metronome of chopped flesh that filled the air with squeals and a pink misting of blood. Viksberg cowered amongst them, his face a rictus grin of sheer terror, and allowed himself to be shoved ever further forwards.

Eventually they stood level with the swordsmen and the rest of the line straightened out into a new front. Behind them the shattered carcasses of hundreds of beasts lay in the bloodied ground.

"That's how it's done," Sergeant Hobbs said, and slapped Viksberg on the back. The sergeant was splattered with blood, but it did little to dampen the savage joy which blazed on his face.

It was then that Viksberg vomited, earning himself a sarcastic cheer. But even before the jeering had died away the main bulk of the enemy was upon them.

This time there were neither manoeuvres nor tactics. There wasn't room. Instead there was just the lethal crush and the desperate, animal need to survive.

Even amidst the roar of the battle that raged around the city, the explosion was deafening.

Provost Marshal Steckler, who had been hiding behind the weight of a mortar carriage, felt it suck the air from his lungs even as it punched into his ears, silencing the world around him with a high-pitched whine.

A column of smoke and debris towered up into the sky. It carried with it shattered stone and singed earth and other, less distinguishable shards of debris. Ignoring the lethal rain of this detritus, Steckler clambered to his feet and peered through the acrid clouds of dust to the city wall.

"Thank Sigmar for that," he said, although beneath the whining in his ears even his own voice was inaudible.

The hole his engineers had blown in Barwedel's southern wall was as neat and wide as he could have wished for. The only other entrance was the barred city gate which lay on the other side of Barwedel, in the midst of the dark heart of the beasts' horde.

"Come on," Steckler bellowed, waving at the overburdened column of men and horses and cannon who waited behind him. On either side their comrades were fighting a desperate battle with the beasts which lapped around the outside of the city walls, and the longer they dawdled the more desperate that battle would become.

"That's it!" Steckler shouted encouragement as the column began to move. Only the soreness in his throat gave him any idea of the volume at which he was yelling, and he guessed that his engineers, their faces also distorted as they barked orders, were calling out just as loudly and just as inaudibly.

With the column now moving towards the city Steckler decided to leave them to it. The baron had given him the most important role in the battle. It was a simple goal, an impossible goal, a goal which he had every intention of achieving.

“Find high ground and clear lines of fire for the artillery,” the baron had told him before galloping off to lead the southern flank.

Steckler had taken one look at the congested plain of fields around the city and known that there was no such ground. Then he had looked up at the battlements of the city itself and, in that moment, Sigmar had shown him the way.

Now, as he bounded forwards over the rubble and into the city he was already looking impatiently for the quickest way to the battlements on the far wall. His brow furrowed as he looked at the confused tangle of streets his demolition had revealed.

As he tried to decide on the best way forwards a mail-clad guardsman followed by a phalanx of men rushed towards them. The man was red-faced and his mouth was working as he gesticulated towards the ruined wall. As he did so Steckler heard a pop and his hearing returned.

“...curse the lot of you,” the officer was yelling as he pointed to the wall. “You’ve killed us all. How will we defend that from the enemy? Oh.”

The man’s tirade ended as the first of the cannon, the great bronzed bulk of it rattling on its mighty carriage, was dragged into the city. Some of the gunners were busily clearing debris out of the way as, behind the cannon, a mortar was wheeled along, the permanent iron roar of its mouth pointing defiantly up towards the sky. Then another cannon, this one lighter than the first but still big enough to fire a man’s head, and behind that the precise clockwork machine of death that they nicknamed the helblaster.

“That’s how,” Steckler said smugly. “Now then, my good man. I need to get them up onto any walls strong enough to take them. Can you help?”

The officer, who realised his mouth had been open, closed it with a snap.

“Yes,” he said, and although his face was still mottled his eyes were wet with gratitude. “Oh yes, sir.”

“Lead on then,” the provost marshal said, and gave him a friendly slap on the back. “Lead on and let’s get the slaughter begun!”

Gulkroth rode on the chariot with a perfect balance. As it bounced and rattled beneath him he scarcely paid any attention to the movements which had already thrown off one of his retainers. Instead he kept his mind locked on the battle that was raging around him.

So far he had kept his own bloodlust in check. He knew that without his direction the herd’s discipline would evaporate in the joy of battle as quickly as dew beneath the heat of the sun.

But even though he knew it, restraining himself was hard.

When the humans’ army had first arrived he had been enraged by the interruption. His followers had been preparing to seize the city, and although a few hundred of them had fallen to the arrows and bullets of the defenders, thousands more had taken their places in carrying the siege ladders. Then, with the taste of victory in their mouths, it had been snatched away from them by the arrival of the

baron's army. In a single bloody hour the new arrivals had pushed Gulkroth's forces back from the far side of the city and moved out to contest the flanks on either side of it.

At first this had seemed like misfortune, but now Gulkroth was thanking the Dark Gods for the baron's arrival. The open ground around Barwedel's walls was confined on all sides by forest, and there were so many men and so many beasts that there was hardly any room for manoeuvre. Soon the battle had degenerated into a brutal, mindless crush of bodies. And soon after that, Gulkroth's herd had started to win.

It was a slow, bloody, drawn-out victory, but it was turning into a victory nevertheless. Yard by yard the beasts were pushing back their enemies, trampling over the dead and the dying as they did so.

The humans used what tactics they could to make the beasts pay for the ground they took.

Sometimes a lone unit would stride forwards, allowing itself to be enveloped. Only when the beasts who attacked it were blind to all else would the following regiments advance, slaughtering the beasts where they caught them in the rear.

At other times a company would seem to flee and the herd would pour into the gap it left, in the humans' line. When that happened the beasts who pursued the fleeing men would invariably find themselves surrounded by waiting regiments. The steel-skinned warriors would then close in on them in a trap that left their corpses piled high and stinking.

Occasionally perfectly timed charges of knights would punch forwards into the horde, biting out a little island of them that the following regiments could easily chew through.

But even when Gulkroth understood these tactics he did nothing to stop his followers pushing so blindly forwards. He had faith in their purity of aggression and, despite the humans' discipline and stratagems, that faith was being rewarded.

Already he could sense a real panic gripping his enemies. He could smell the delicious scent of their ripening fear and sense the stale-sweated desperation of their increasing exhaustion. Where bloodshed made his followers stronger it drained the humans of energy, and if they were weak now, how much more so would they be when the Chaos Moon rose to cast its blessing over the land?

He was contemplating his victory when the ancient shaman Ruhrkar appeared beside him and tapped him with his staff.

"My lord," the ancient said, rheumy eyes wet with discharge. "We must withdraw and lure the humans back into the forest."

"Withdraw?" Gulkroth snarled, a low, venomous hiss that had the beasts around him cowering on the floor.

"To the embrace of the forest," Ruhrkar repeated. "If we draw the enemy in after us we will destroy them."

For the past three days Gulkroth had been restraining the eternal rage that coursed through his body. He had been forced to by the need to orchestrate the campaign. But now, with victory in his hands, he allowed himself to snap.

It felt glorious, like diving off a high cliff into a deep pool. A feeling of utter bliss came over him as he turned and struck at his tormentor in a single, fluid movement.

The blow would have killed any of his herd, and it should have killed Ruhrkar too. But the shaman, it seemed, was not quite as tired of living as he claimed.

Before Gulkroth's outstretched claw could hit him he flitted to the other side of the gnarled old stick he carried and muttered a word. Green fire flared from the wood and ran along the ancient's withered frame, there to circle and writhe.

Gulkroth roared as he recoiled from the sorcerous defence, and the air was suddenly full of the smell of his singed fur. He held his forearm up to examine the pink skin which had been revealed by the flame, and suddenly his loss of temper was no longer a matter of choice. It was as inevitable as the turning of the seasons or the falling of a stone.

Leaping from his chariot he swung his axe in a blurred arc that plummeted down towards the shaman. The metal shrieked as it hit the fire, and for a second the blade glowed orange. Then it hit its target and there was a hiss and the smell of boiling blood as it bit down through skull and vertebrae and ribcage, cleaving Ruhrkar's body in two as easily as if it had been a log on the chopping block.

Gulkroth could feel the ancient's life leave him, and as it did so a wave of unravelling energy washed over the beastlord. He stood with his arms outstretched, revelling in the wild smack of raw magic, and howled with the savage joy of life.

That was when the cannon ball hit him.

It took him on the shoulder, and as the bone-shattered echoes of the impact spread through his entire frame. Ribs snapped, ligaments tore. He realised that he was spinning through the air a split second before he landed. The ground bounced beneath him, and when the air in his lungs was driven out he saw that it was flecked with droplets of blood.

Around him a terrible howling went up as his guard looked on in despair. Gulkroth ignored them as he breathed, drawing in a lungful of air that felt so sharp that it might have been full of thorns. Ignoring the shards of ribs that moved freely within the muscle of his chest, he clambered back to his hooves and looked around him.

The cannon ball which had struck him had not been alone. Even as he looked towards the city walls he could see the flare of more artillery from gaps which had been knocked in the battlements, and the acrid stink of blackpowder drifted towards him.

Another cannon ball whistled past his ear and crunched into the beasts who stood behind him. He ignored their screams as he clambered back onto his chariot and took stock.

The flow of the battle was already turning. As well as the lethal trajectories the cannon were slicing through his ranks, explosions were also starting to mushroom up as the mortars coughed their own charges into the fray. The packed ranks of the beasts made a perfect target for the artillery, and as he saw the slaughter which was raining down around him Gulkroth felt his anger rising.

This time he kept it in check. His body was already knitting back together as the magic flowed through it. Bones re-knit and sinews writhed back together like bundles of mating snakes.

Ruhrkar, it seemed, had been right. It was time to pull back and draw the enemy into the forest. There, hidden by the canopy, they would be able to do their killing safe from the lethal attentions of the guns.

Afterwards, when the army was gone, they could worry about winking the gunners out of their carapace of a city.

With a raised arm Gulkroth summoned his messengers to him. They swooped down from where they had been circling in the thermals above, their shadows skittering over the battle below.

One by one he took their misshapen heads in his hands, leant forwards and said: "Withdraw to the eastern forest."

When they repeated the message their voices rumbled with the same low, terrifying tones of their lord, and one by one they flapped back up into the air to carry his orders to all corners of the battlefield.

Gulkroth watched the last of them go and, ignoring the sudden cloud of shrapnel and body parts which erupted to his left, told his chariot driver to carry him back to the forest.

He was halfway there when he realised that it wasn't only blackpowder smoke he could smell. He paused and sniffed. Then his eyes widened as, flickering amongst the dark fastness of the forest, he saw the first of the flames.

He had ordered the herd into a forest that was on fire.

An image of Ruhrkar's mocking visage darkened his vision, then disappeared as the racing flames licked up one of the trees. Soon it was burning like a torch, and he could smell boiling sap as well as the thickening pall of smoke.

So it was that, caught between steel and fire and raked with artillery, the herd found itself confronted by the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig.

"Keep together!" Erikson cried, his voice lost amongst the roar of the quickening flames. He had regretted the audacity of his plan almost as soon as he had executed it but now, with the fire they had started out of control, he had little choice but to race it out of the woods and into the rear of the beasts' army.

He needn't have wasted his breath on encouraging his men. The fire was devouring the tinder-dry forest with a ravenous hunger on either side of the company, and the heat was herding the men forwards like a flock of sheep. Even when they started to run, crashing through the undergrowth in something approaching panic, it nipped at their heels, singeing their hair and heating their armour into something you could fry an egg on.

"Run!" yelled Erikson as, just ahead of them, a tree collapsed in an explosion of sparks.

It was another redundant order. The company was already sprinting forwards, armour and weapons clinking as they vaulted over obstructions and shoved each other out of the way.

But as fast as they ran, the fire ran faster. It flew from tree to tree in the canopy overhead, and their path was veiled with showers of burning twigs. Erikson snarled defiance as he rushed through them, brushing away the sudden flashes of scalding

pain on his hands. As he did so a small, wiry shape bolted past him and he watched as Porter took the lead.

Ahead there was a sudden burst of blue through the burning trees and, with a start of hope, Erikson realised that they had reached the edge of the forest. The dense stands of trees gradually thinned out, and as the heat lessened Erikson slowed his pace and stood aside, watching the company as it bolted past him.

He was trying to count them when a cry of alarm went up from the men who had already passed him. He turned, wiping the smearing of soot-blackened sweat away from his bloodshot eyes, and peered through the drifting smoke to where the company had staggered to a halt.

Beyond them the high stone walls of Barwedel.

“Charge!”

And they did. Ragged, dirty and singed, the Gentleman’s Free Company of Hergig burst from the quickening flames and hurled themselves towards the enemy.

Inside Barwedel’s city gates, Baron Ludenhof waited.

Behind him three hundred knights stood in a column of sixes. Their warhorses were so tall and their raised lances so high that the pennants on them fluttered above second-storey windows.

Behind the knights stood almost a thousand men, both state troopers and solid blocks of woodsmen. The sharpness of the woodsmen’s axes was matched only by their hatred of the enemy. Many of these men had lost family to the beasts over this hellish summer. Some of them had lost their entire settlements.

And above this lethal force the sound of artillery on the walls was a constant, rolling thunder. Blackpowder smoke had drifted down so that the streets were filled with the fog of it, and even packed into the city streets the waiting men had heard the change in the enemy’s inhuman calls as the cannon had scourged them. It gave them a feeling of grim satisfaction as they waited in brooding silence.

A messenger appeared from the walls and scurried down to the baron. He was alive with excitement, and the men at the front of the column craned forwards to try to hear what he was saying.

“The entire forest?” the baron asked, twirling the tip of his moustache. “Are you sure?”

“See for yourself, sire,” the messenger said, and the baron nodded and swung out of his saddle. Despite the weight of his armour he landed lightly, and clanked up the steps to the top of the wall with ease.

When he returned to his waiting horse he was beaming. After climbing back into his saddle he turned his horse to address the waiting men.

“Sigmar has blessed us with a fire in the forest beyond,” he said. “We will use it as a wall against which to chop the enemy in two. When the gates open we charge through the heart like a lance through a hog, then turn and hold the foul things as the regiments grind in from either side. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sire!” the men roared, their voices echoing amongst the narrow streets of the city.

The baron grinned wolfishly, signalled for his banner to be unfurled and then gave the order to open the gates.

When they swung open the scene they framed looked like something from the deepest of the hells. The beasts waited in a solid mass outside, an army of abominations whose very existence mocked humanity. The great mass of them swept out, broken here and there with sudden blossoms of shrapnel and carnage, and behind it all a backdrop of flames blotted out the horizon.

The baron didn't hesitate. With a wordless bellow he spurred his horse forwards and, without waiting to see if his men could keep up, hurled himself into the boiling cauldron of the enemy.

They fell before him and his knights like wheat beneath a scythe. As strong as they were individually there was no order in their confused ranks, and the baron's formation sliced through them with a blood-slicked ease.

Even now the cannon maintained their bombardment, shattering any attempt the enemy might have made to organise against this blow to their heart, and caught between fire and steel and the endless cannonade the fringes of the horde began to flee, squirming out between the gaps that still remained between the advancing regiments in front and the fire to their rear.

The baron roared as, with a warrior's instinct, he sensed that the enemy were breaking. It was then that the horde before him parted and, with a rumble that shook the earth, the beastlord charged directly at him on the back of a chariot.

The creatures that pulled it were nightmares of muscle and tusk. Even the beam which ran between them ended in a vicious curved metal spike that arced up to the height of a horse's belly.

The baron didn't hesitate. With a kick of his spurs he let his reins out and bellowed a command to his horse. It responded instantly, bunching the great muscles of its hindquarters and leaping up and over the creatures that pulled the chariot. They squealed with surprise, and a second later the baron felt the impact as the body of his leaping horse hit Gulkroth's axe.

Man, horse and beast collapsed onto the ground, and as the knights surged past on either side the baron struggled free of his mount's broken body. He rolled clear and rose to face the horror that emerged from beneath the carcass of his horse.

"Stand back," he told the knights that swirled around him. "This one is mine."

They obeyed with an alacrity born of a lifetime of discipline. Turning their backs to their lord and the monster he faced, they pushed out to form a cordon around the combat. The beasts that swirled around them also paused, entranced by the sight of their own leader in all of his bestial glory.

As he rose to his feet Gulkroth was magnificent with pure animalistic power.

Thought. Calculation. Planning. His true nature had been restrained by these alien practices for months but now, finally, he was free of them. Now, with the glorious power of a river which has broken free of a dam, the rage which he had contained inside his bulging form erupted. He threw back his head and roared, a howl of unreasoning joy.

There was an elemental quality to the sound that had both men and beasts falling to their knees, there to cower in the dirt. Gulkroth rose above them, and even the dullest of his herd could plainly see the eddying tides of the energy that twisted



around him. He writhed with their Dark God's power, a living herdstone of bone and fang and muscle.

Only the baron found the resolve to rise to his feet. His sword, one of the Empire's fabled runefangs, glowed in his hand. The impossibly straight lines of the weapon's forging were a heartbreaking contrast to the raw, overwhelming power of the beast.

Ludenhof didn't care. The human part of him seemed to have been stripped away by the horror before him, but he still moved, readying himself with the slow, graceless motions of an automaton. When all else was gone he still had the iron bonds of duty and discipline around which he had forged his life, and even beneath the blast furnace of the beast's blasphemous presence it held firm.

He turned and lifted his sword, preparing to lunge forwards with the same cool efficiency with which he practised every morning. But before he could strike he looked up into Gulkroth's eyes.

They burned into him, and in that moment he was undone.

For the first time in his life, the baron forgot his responsibilities. He forgot about the men behind him, and the land he was sworn to protect, and even the need to defend himself.

He forgot about everything but the abyss he was looking into. The horror of it paralysed every thought, every instinct. His breath froze in his lungs, and his sword fell.

Gulkroth kept the baron transfixed as he advanced, the great axe swinging from his grip. Despite his enemy's steel shell and vicious weapons, he was now as defenceless as a rabbit. Gulkroth salivated as he contemplated the feast to come. This one was the lord of all the humans. Once he had devoured him then the land would be his to tear and furrow and to bring back into the smothering embrace of the forest.

Exulting in his victory, Gulkroth was unaware of the ragged band of humans that had emerged from the flaming woods behind him.

Erikson's men had charged into the horde only to find it ignoring them. Most of the beasts were already running, panic and firelight reflected in their eyes. Others clustered dazed and transfixed around a circle of knights who also seemed paralysed.

Erikson, who knew that as soon as the company stopped it would disintegrate, barrelled into the unmoving knot of knights and beasts, and suddenly he found himself crashing through their terrified ranks and into the makeshift arena within.

The first Gulkroth knew of the Gentleman's Free Company of Hergig was the sudden bite of their swords.

Erikson's men lunged at the towering monstrosity that they found before them. They struck with all the vicious courage of those who know that their enemy's back won't be turned for long. They hacked at his sinews with axes, stabbed at his liver with swords, lunged at the muscles in the back of his neck with spears. In the first second they had inflicted a dozen wounds and when Gulkroth turned on them it was with a splattering of his own blood.

He snarled, and the sound echoed through their heads with the same paralysing dread which had inflicted the baron.

But the baron, released from his enemy's terrible gaze, had already seized his moment. He stooped to retrieve his fallen sword and swung his keening blade with a terrible skill. The steel moved so fast that the tip of it blurred invisibly into the flame beyond, and even after it had struck its target it hardly slowed.

Another blade would have thudded harmlessly against Gulkroth's matted hide, or shattered against the oaken hardness of his muscle. But the baron's runefang was as lethal as any weapon in the Old World. Dwarf-forged and ancient, it had carved a path through a thousand armies, and it hungered to carve through a thousand more.

The weapon sliced through the bulk of its foe. Muscle and vertebrae parted beneath its razored edge and, even as the baron was swivelling around for another strike, the great weight of Gulkroth's head swung loose from his shoulders and, tearing loose from the flap of skin which still supported it, fell to the ground.

The terrible light in its eyes glowed for a moment longer then, as the decapitated body crashed into the ground, glowed no more. A terrible keening rose up from the beasts who stood around their fallen lord, and despair spread like a contagion through their tangled ranks. The ground shook beneath their feet as retreat turned into a stampede and the great herd which Gulkroth had assembled tore itself apart.

Erikson, his costume a ragged mass of blood and filth, stepped forwards and placed his boot between the oxen sweep of the horns which adorned the fallen beast lord's severed head.

"My baron," he said, sweeping in a low bow. "Allow me to present the compliments of the Gentlemen's Free Company of Hergig."

## Epilogue

Erikson lay outstretched on the thin mattress that covered the camp bed. For the first time since he could remember he was neither tired nor hungry, nor desperate nor frightened nor enraged. His purse was full of enough gold to buy even the fattest of farms, a jug of wine lay at his elbow and his wounds were bandaged so expertly that he felt no pain.

As he looked idly upwards to the canvas roof of the tent he was a man completely at peace.

The rest of the company's injured lay around him, their wounds bandaged as expertly as his own. In the hours after the battle the baron had insisted that they be given priority, and it was thanks to this that so many had survived.

The dozen men who had died would be mourned in time. Erikson had given Porter, one of the few men to have emerged from the battle unscathed, the mission of finding any of the bodies he could. However, in the aftermath of the battle that had proved a hard task. As soon as the bodies were untangled the men had been laid in one of the great funeral pits and the beasts had been tossed onto great pyres that still roared with burning fat and bone.

Not that Erikson wanted to think about that now.

He listened as, from outside the tent, Sergeant Alter's voice barked out a series of commands. He had pushed the baron's blessings to include a hundred halberds and harnesses from the state armoury, and ever since he had accoutred the men with them Alter had been like a child with a new toy.

"Halt, who goes there?"

Dolf's voice cut through Erikson's reverie, and he sat up on one elbow to see who had come to visit.

"Provost Marshal Steckler," a familiar voice said.

"Pass, friend," Dolf said, and Erikson smiled. What couldn't he do with a few dozen more like Dolf? What sort of company could he build this into?

But no. No, he had retired.

"Captain Erikson," Steckler said as he prowled over to the bed.

"Provost marshal." Erikson nodded as the man pulled up a stool and sat down.

"Thought you might like to keep a hold of this," Steckler said and handed Erikson a leather tube. Erikson popped the cover off one end and slid out the company's pardon. At the bottom, the great flourishing signature of the baron had been written. Erikson returned the parchment to the case, pressed it to his chest and smiled.

"Thank you," he said.

“Don’t thank me, thank the baron,” Steckler said. “He’s even decided to keep your company under arms, so you’d better get well soon. I want you to find enough men to fill out your company to full strength. Say, four hundred men.”

Erikson shook his head.

“Talk to Alter,” he said. “Or Gunter perhaps. I haven’t decided who will take over, but I am retiring. Going to raise nice plump cattle and a nice plump wife. Have sons. Sit in the shade and drink beer and tell lies.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Steckler said. “You can’t retire. The men are under your cognisance for the next three years.”

Erikson opened his mouth to argue, and then decided not to. What was three years anyway? He listened to Alter’s voice and already he was wondering how the company should be organised. There would be three sections of a hundred and twenty apiece, of that he was sure, but who would command them? He wanted Alter as company sergeant, so apart from Gunter who was there to...

“Oh, and another thing,” Steckler said, interrupting his train of thought. “Your friend Viksberg. Seems he’s gone and deserted.”

“Deserted?” Erikson asked. “But why would he desert now? The battle’s over.”

“For the most part it is,” Steckler agreed. “But there are still bands of the beasts straggling back to their lairs. I put Viksberg in charge of a patrol which was to follow them into the forest and hunt them down. It seems his martial spirit failed him somewhere between receiving the order and reporting for duty.”

“Did it now?” said Erikson. “Oh well. The military life is not for everybody.”

\* \* \*

Over the course of the summer the emptied lake had dried into a hard pan of cracked mud. The rotting fish had long since been devoured, and nothing moved across the dried earth but dust.

Dried dust and a single, limping figure.

There was little left of the Hofstadter who had slunk away from his companions all those weeks ago. The nubs which had formed on his brow had sprouted into two thick horns, blunt-tipped and solid. His face had lengthened beneath them and his jaw had grown thicker so as to support the fangs that had burrowed up from beneath his old teeth. His frame, always wiry, had grown more heavily muscled and his legs had grown into those of a goat.

Over time the ragged remains of his clothes had rotted off his frame, although even in this burning sunlight that hardly mattered. The thick pelt of fur he had grown had seen to that.

But if he had changed physically, Hofstadter had changed even more within the tormented dimensions of his mind. The old human chatter of thought and calculation had gone, and in its place was the immediacy of animal instinct.

It was that instinct which had led him to this place. He did not know why he had been chosen. Nor did he care. All that mattered was that the throbbing voice in his head was telling him that his dark pilgrimage was almost at an end.

The stone was black beneath a covering of sunbaked filth. It stood before him like some terrible promise and, as Hofstadter drew nearer he realised that he would die there. The thought didn't particularly disturb him. Even when he drew close enough to see the pulsing green glow of the stone he felt something approaching bliss.

It was the only time he had seen anything as beautiful as the amulet he still wore around his thickened neck.

Soon he felt the light glowing within him, coursing through his blood and muscle and bones and oh, oh the pain.

If his first transformation had been agonising, this was unbearable. It tore at every part of him, a screaming agony as his body melted and re-knit itself. The sun and the moons chased each other around the world. Flies buzzed towards the stone, settled on it, then dropped dead to the ground. Hofstadter noticed none of this. His world had become one of endless, unendurable agony.

Then, on the third day, it stopped and he climbed to his feet, reborn. When he did so he knew two things.

The first was that the voice which had called him here was his own, and had been all along.

The second was that he was going to destroy the world.

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