

The Life of Sigmar



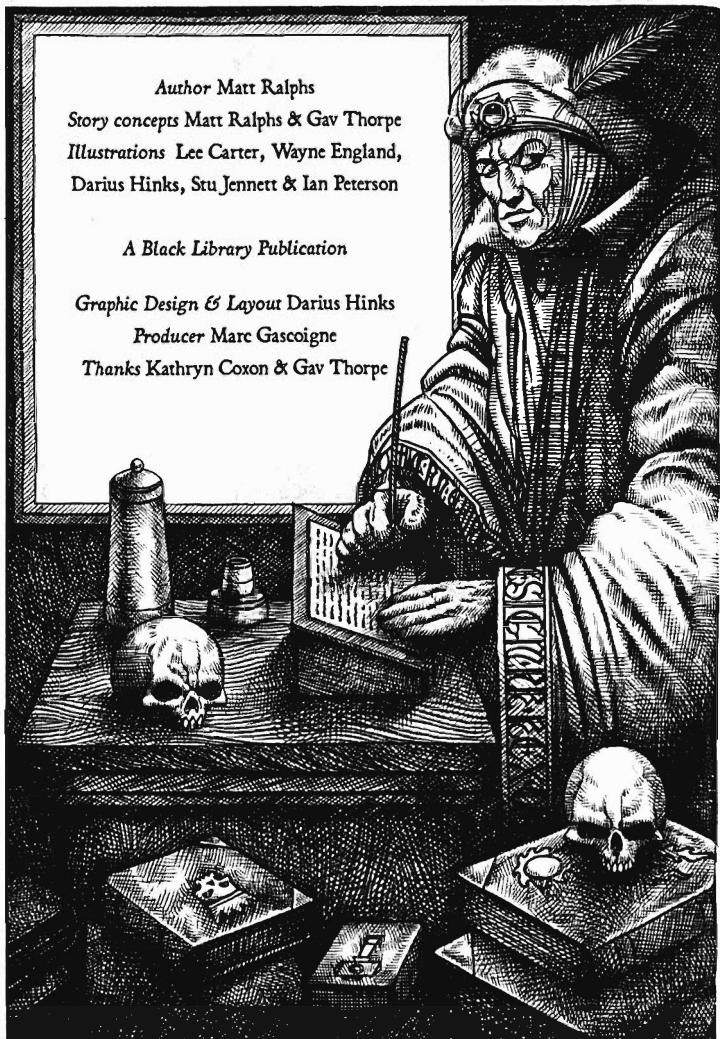
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The Birth of Sigmar

The Life of Sigmar



Black Fire Pass



The Gift



Nagash & Sigmar

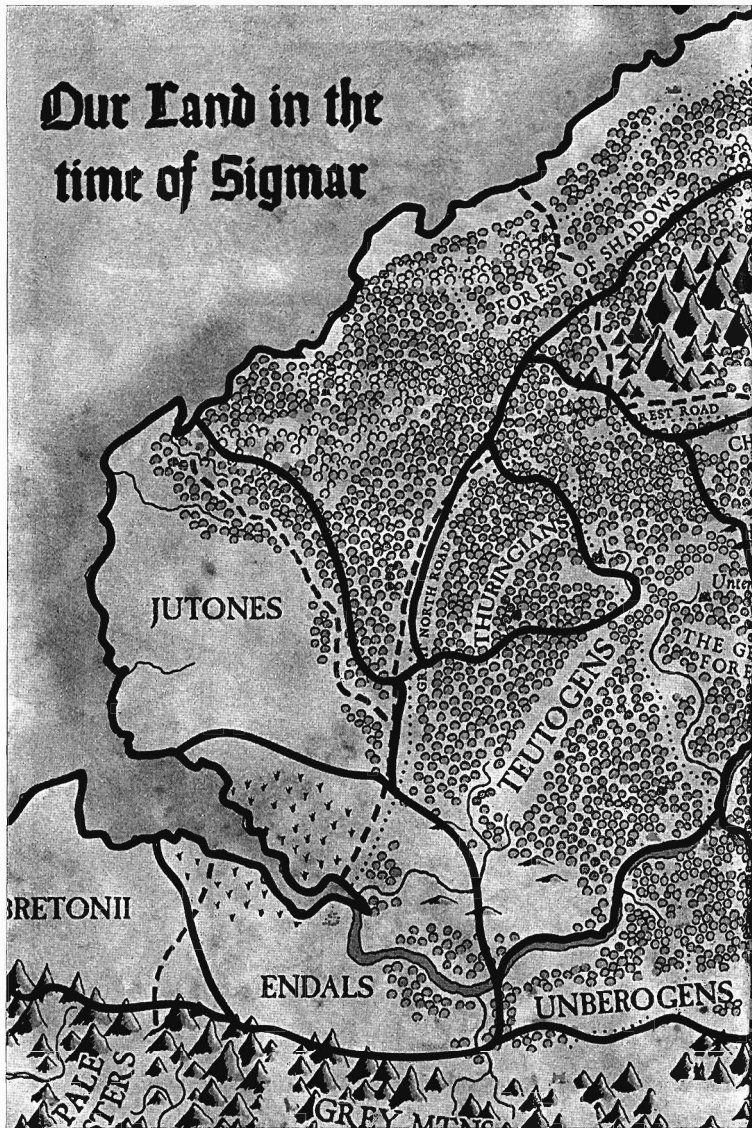


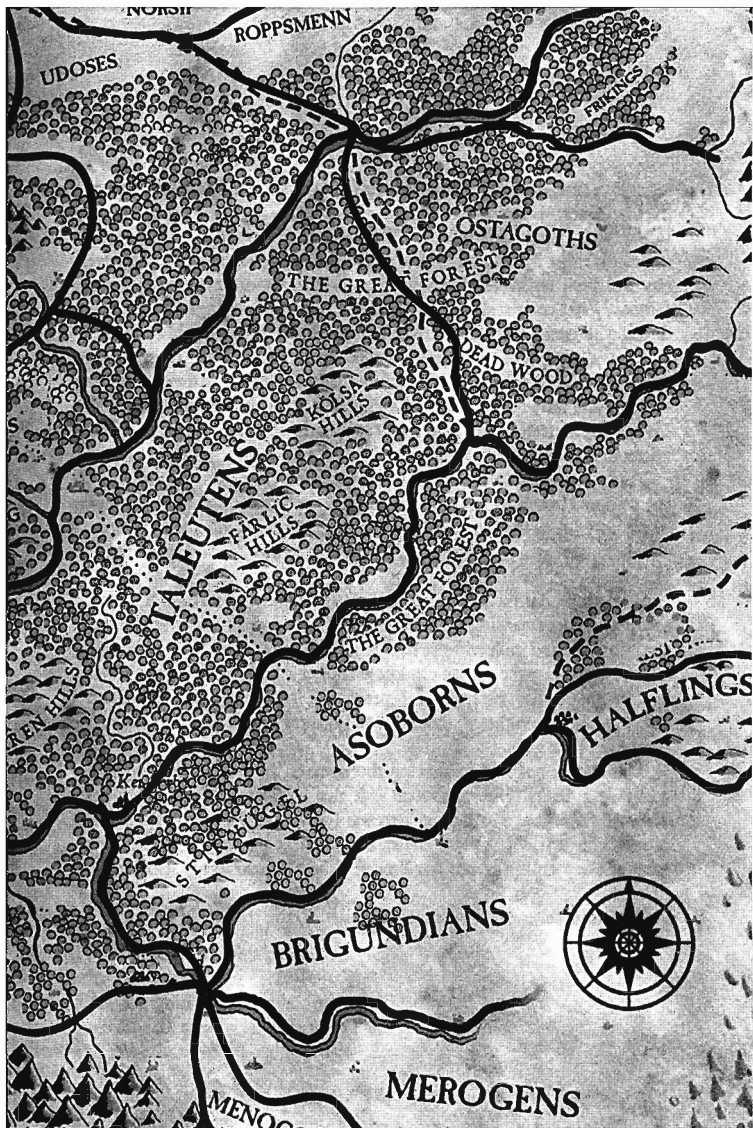
Skaranorak



King Sigmar

Our Land in the time of Sigmar





Printer's Introduction



In 2231, excavations began in the Königsplatz in Altdorf to prepare for a new shrine to our patron god, Sigmar. As the workers dug deep foundation ditches — for with such conceits do the constructs of men stand forever — they uncovered an ancient burial chamber over which our great city had been built. Piled around a tomb were exquisite pieces of bronze armour, jewel encrusted helmets fashioned into the faces of wolves, wooden shields with iron bosses and short-bladed swords that still retained their bite.

It was a glimpse of our race's mysterious past, when men lived in scattered tribes and wild things roamed free across the lands. It was a time of slaughter, darkness and fear. Many scholars have dismissed the denizens of this time as barbarians, scarcely better than the brutal clans who roam the cold northern wastes to this day.

Yet the burial chamber revealed that it was also a time when men were learning craft and metallurgy, a time when ritual and worship were as much a part of everyday life as they are today. The discovery brought our ancient ancestors closer to us and with them they brought our patron god Sigmar Heldenhammer, for He lived amongst them.

Since the burial mound's discovery, there has been a flurry of interest in academic circles regarding the history of this period which was over two thousand years ago and fresh evidence has been uncovered as a result. As each nugget of knowledge is gathered, we can know Sigmar a little more: what He wore, how He fought, how He treated His people. He was a man before He became a deity, so it is fitting that we should know Him as He was, before He joined the pantheon of the gods.

This volume not only collects together some of the many tales of Sigmar — drawn from many different sources — it also brings to life those dark days, when the first glow of enlightenment was beginning to shine on the horizon of men's history. We proudly present this tome for the enjoyment and betterment of every citizen of our fair Empire, which Sigmar forged with steel and strength.

Read these tales and relive times long past. Relive the Life of Sigmar.

The Warrior and the Land

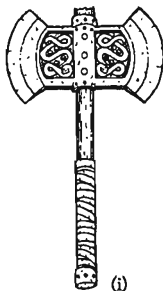
In which the wolves, masters of the wild, seek to lay waste to men's domains, but are thwarted by a great warrior who forever watches over us.

In an age long past, when the land was wilder than it is now and our Empire was naught but a wise man's dream, a wolf threw back its head and from its savage throat let loose a howl that chilled the hearts of all who heard it. The cry echoed amongst trees, through valleys and over hills and briar; the stars quaked at it and the air shivered. Men whispered prayers to their old gods, but the old gods did not listen, and the wolves got closer and running with them was death.

The wolf padded to the brink of the hill and looked over the land. His kin prowled nearby, pink tongues hung from behind dripping teeth and their breath steamed in the night air. In a forest clearing below they saw a group of wattle-and-daub huts, nestling together

as if for warmth. Smoke poured from holes in the thatch and soft light emanated from the rough-cut windows and doorways. Goats bleated, tugging at their tethers and swine snuffled, their hackles bristling. They smelt danger and were afraid. A baby began to cry.

As the clouds fled, the glare of the two moons was set free to swoop over the hill. The malignant glow of Morrslieb — that most wicked of heavenly bodies — reflected yellow in the wolves' eyes.





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These predators were hungry and the smell of prey sent their strong jaws a-champing.

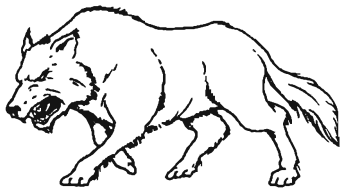
With a bark he bade his kin to follow. Towards the quailing village he sprang, tail up and ears back. Blood flowed fast in his veins, sweat sprayed from his flanks like grey mist in the moonlight and slaver flew from his mouth. His kin barked and snapped their teeth for the smell of flesh was hot in their snouts. Their pace quickened and the air was filled with swift footfalls as they rounded a cutting of trees. Before them the village lay naked, and then the invaders stopped dead in their tracks.

A man stood across the path in front of them. He was tall — taller than most of his kind — and broad across the shoulder. He held a long-hafted warhammer and across his back was a wolf pelt. He was clad in battered bronze armour and his hair was wild. He seemed as solid and immovable as a mountain, as ageless as the earth and strong beyond the limits of mortal flesh. His face was obscured behind an iron helmet, of which the visor was fashioned into the head of a wild boar and through it his eyes shone bright in the dark.

The wolf chief trotted nervously from side to side, sniffing and growling. He barked unhappily with his head cocked. Behind him his kin whined and then fled into the night. The chief backed away and with a final glance turned and ran after them.

A fresh wind breathed, rustling leaves which seemed to sigh with relief. In the village, folk fell asleep, the animals settled and the baby was silent.

The warrior strode up the hill and as his eyes swept the land, a hush descended. The lands of men were safe, for that night Sigmar watched over them.



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The Birth of Sigmar

In which the babe Sigmar's head was wetted with the blood of many orcs and a twin-tailed comet was seen in the skies.

t came to pass that King Björn, chief of the Unberogen tribe, being a man of considerable virility and passion, begat a child with his comely wife Griselda, soon after they were joined in marriage. As the people prayed and made sacrifices to the gods for healthy offspring to be born unto them, Griselda's belly grew round with new life. Oft she would walk in the village and talk to her subjects — for she was a compassionate woman and much loved — and she was grateful for the blessings that were heaped upon her, be they gifts of food or cloth, or just a kind word and a promise to offer a prayer to merciful Shallya.

King Björn ordered feasts to be held in honour of his wife and coming child and there was much merrymaking, but he was scrupulous in his dealings with the gods, offering sacrifices upon their altars. All the

folk were mindful that a child was essential to ensure the continuation of their king's lineage; a man who could not produce offspring was considered weak and not fit to be chief.

Weeks passed and excitement grew. The wise men of the village did gather together to discuss at length the signs and portents they had witnessed.

'On Sun Still day,' said one, 'I heard the cock crow three times as the sun left the horizon and it rained before noon.' This elicited nods of approval for that was a good sign.

'Yesterday morn,' said another, 'I saw a crow land on a branch, hop from one foot to the other, then fly off towards the east. That is a good omen.' All those gathered concurred with this.

'Indeed,' said another. 'I myself saw, on the first day of this month, a cuckoo push an egg from a nest and watch it fall to the ground. But it did not break and when I went there the next day, the egg had hatched and the chick had gone.'



(Plate I)

This elicited gasps of astonishment, because that was a splendid sign.

Yet another old man said: 'On the night of the blessed conception, when our chieftain's sap did rise and his lady's womanhood reach fruition, I saw no less than three stars streak across the night sky over their hall.'

If any gathered there wondered what this man was doing near the chieftain's bed-chamber at that time of night, none gave voice to it.

Another man stepped forward and the others groaned, for he was known not only for his garrulousness and panegyric speech, but also for his habit of embellishing the truth with fancy. It was an agreed notion that King Björn only kept his counsel because his tall stories and magniloquent oratory amused him so much.

'Two days ago,' he said, 'I was walking in the forest when it began to rain. But it rained from the ground up and birds flew overhead making the shape of a fish, but they flew backwards! They spoke to me as they passed in a most euphonious manner, saying that the child will be worthy of praise and will lead his people to many victories. Is that not a mighty good sign?'

'It's a mighty something,' one man muttered.

And so it went on. All the signs discussed, they agreed, were good. But one man kept his own council: Old Drego, the eldest and wisest, shook his head and went to see Björn, for his heart was troubled.

'Sire,' he said, 'I wish to gut the hare tonight.'

'Tonight, Drego?' Björn said, perplexed. 'We do not usually perform that rite until childbirth.'

'I know that, sire, but I must insist.'

Björn relented, for he trusted Drego above all his advisors.

A live hare was brought to him. Drego held it by its neck and plunged a gutting knife into its belly. As the animal struggled, he squeezed and watched intently as its insides spilled onto the table. He cast aside the hare and scrutinised the steaming offal.

'Well, what do you see, old man?' Björn said.

Drego went pale and spoke in a hushed voice. 'The signs are most luculent. Sire, when your lady begins childbirth, she and the babe will both assuredly die. We must make ready at once to set forth into the misty fens of the Brackenwalsch and seek out the Hag-Mother. Only she has the knowledge to save them.'

Björn was most vexed and did as Drego said. They left that night, with Griselda laid in a covered cart and sat Drego next to her. Surrounding the cart rode the chieftain's mounted bodyguard of a dozen men.



When they reached the Brackenwalsch marshes they abandoned the cart because the ground was too boggy. There were few safe tracks in the Brackenwalsch.

'The Hag-Mother resides in the middle of the marsh, by the only tree that grows in this desolate place,' Drego said, pointing east. 'There she practices her arts. Gifts we will have to give her before she will help us.'

'She can have everything I own, to save my maiden and child,' Björn said.

The party set off into the perfidious wastes. Griselda rode upon a pony and uttered not a word of complaint. Björn rode by her side and ever did he watch her.

Usually, no one braved the Brackenwalsch, for it was a place of fear and darkling things and some said its paths led to the Underworld itself. As they left behind the green hills and forests of their land, the world around them changed. The terrain was utterly flat, yet it was impossible to see far in any direction. Pallid reeds and bulrushes stood in serried ranks on the edges of sludgy ponds, swaying in the blood-warm breeze. The paths the party trod meandered through wide lakes of brackish water and treacherous expanses of swamp. The low sky was grey and oppressive.



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Creatures with no given names wallowed in the filthy sink-pools and strange cries drifted on the air. Midges swirled in dark swarms and the men were forever slapping at their arms, legs and faces. The horses fared badly, but they were of a sturdy breed and bore the difficulty without complaint. Onwards they forged into that stygian place.

Björn laid a comforting hand on Griselda's shoulder and she hid her fear under a smile. It was said that the *scrianii* had fled there after Redmane Dragor's great purge thirty years before. The men looked about them, mindful of any movement or sound.

Night fell. It became cold. Gelid mists seeped up from the marshes, drifting like wraiths through the reeds, making clothes heavy with damp.

'Keep to the paths,' Drego said. 'We are close to our journey's end.'

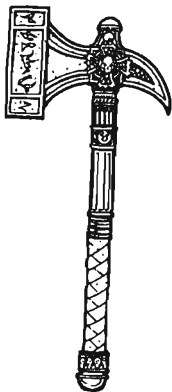
Griselda let out a cry and clutched her belly. 'Husband, our baby is coming. I can feel him stirring in me. We must hurry!'

Björn got off his horse and mounted up behind his wife, taking the reins with one hand and circling her stomach with the other.

'Come, we must ride with all haste to the Hag-Mother,' he said.

They galloped through the bogs, their horses splashing and stumbling over the soft ground, mud spattering their flanks. Björn kept a grip on his wife and he could feel her pain and fear as though they were of one flesh. At last the reeds on either side of them thinned out. They climbed a hill and the ground under them became firm. At the top of the rise an old, bare tree stood, bent like a beckoning finger.

'There is the abode of the Hag-Mother,' Drego cried. He reached the summit first and looked about. A rough shelter of wood and cloth was built about the bottom of the tree trunk, but it was empty. Drego saw a cauldron hanging on a spit and he peered inside. It was empty except for some gruel with gobs of yellow fat floating on the surface. Drego



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started when he saw a bright blue eye staring up at him from the fluid. His heart sank as he noticed chewed bones strewn about the fire: human bones. 'I smell orcs,' he said to Björn. 'They boiled the Hag-Mother in her own pot, it seems.'

Despair struck at them, to have come so far only to be cheated at the end was galling indeed. Griselda moaned and the child stirred impatiently inside her.

'Drego,' Björn said. 'You will have to deliver the child yourself.'

'I will do what I can. Tie her to the tree to aid the passage of birth. Put a cloak over her shoulders and light the fire.'

The night crept on, but its peace was stolen by Griselda's screams. Her pale face was contorted and her legs became streaked with blood. Drego administered to her as best he could.

A shout alerted Björn and one of his bodyguards approached. 'Sire, I can see movement in the marshes.'

'Show me,' Björn commanded.

They went to the edge of the hill and looked down at the swamp. A great many dark shapes were cutting trails through the mist, making their way towards them.

'They look like orcs, sire.'

'Orcs,' Björn cried. 'These foul creatures have been lured back here by Griselda's cries and the smell of blood, curse them. The gods are frowning on us this day. Will my line be ended tonight? To arms, men, we are attacked!'

Swords were drawn from scabbards and axes unlimbered. Some of the men fired arrows, but it was too dark for marksmanship. The men surrounded the tree, facing outwards. All were willing to sell their lives for Griselda and the child. Björn stood in front of his wife, his double-bladed war axe in both hands. They could hear grunts and smell dung and rotting flesh.

A score of orcs emerged out of the mist from all sides, snorting and gnashing their teeth. With guttural roars they leapt forward, waving cleavers and brandishing short-handled spears. The Unberogens readied themselves for impact and when the orcs crashed into them they staggered back, shields raised. Battle cries mixed with orc bellows and the air was filled with the sound of iron ringing on iron.

Björn fought like a man possessed, mindful only of protecting his wife. The

biggest orc, a great brute with yellow tusks and a withered human hand hanging from each earlobe, singled him out. It roared and its stinking breath made Björn gag; he only just managed to duck under the creature's sweeping hammer and he felt it skim his head by no more than a hair's breadth.

Björn saw that the orc was off balance and he lunged with the spiked haft of his axe. The orc's hide turned the blow but it crashed to the ground, dropping its weapon. As Björn stood over it, weapon raised, the orc lashed out with its claws. They bit deep into Björn's thigh and he fell. Pain consumed him and his vision faded.

Everything slowed down. He saw his men battling around him: a greenskin crushing a man's skull in a shower of blood with its bare hands, two men hacking a pale-skinned orc into pieces with their swords, his hunt captain casting about for his severed arm before an orc ran him through with a spear. And in the centre of this turmoil, his wife, eyes wide with fear. Drego was lying on his back before her, his arms over his head. A howling orc stood over Drego. It tugged its cleaver from his belly and then pulled out his intestines. An image of the sacrificial hare flashed across Björn's eyes. With its grisly errand done, the orc turned to Griselda. Björn struggled up, fear clawing his heart, but before he could go to his wife he heard a growl.

Yellow-tusk stepped in front of him, its scarlet eyes glowing with rage. Man and orc — most hated of enemies — launched themselves at each other, weapons raised. At the last moment Björn lowered his axe and ducked under the orc's swing. He drew

his long dagger from the sheath on his hip in one smooth movement and plunged it deep into the creature's neck as he dashed past. The beast gargled on its own blood, then dropped to the ground.

Seeing their warlord die, the other orcs fled down the hill, closely followed by the vengeful men. Björn ran to his wife. The orc that had threatened her lay dead on the ground with a knife in its chest. Slumped over the corpse was old Drego, his thin hands still gripping the hilt.

The fight was won, but the Unberogens had paid a high price. Drego and seven of the men lay dead. Griselda hung limp from her bonds, her wet hair hanging over a lifeless face. Björn wept, pawing at her body.

Something at her feet stirred and a cry split the night. Wallowing in the blood of human and orc lay a baby. Its head was covered in thick black hair and it rested on the birth caul.

Above, a great comet trailing two tails of flame, streaked across the sky, heralding Sigmar's birth, he who entered the world with the sound of battle in his ears and the feel of orc blood on his skin.



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The Hammer and the Mill

In this tale, the boy Sigmar has his Dooming day and listens to the voices of the dead.



here was a time when the Empire, as you and I know it, did not exist. Now we build walled cities with high towers, connected by river and road and we see well tended fields ripe with harvest. Man has laid claim to the land and civilization and order are his markers. But two thousand years ago this same land lay under a pall of shadow. There was nothing but ancient forests filled with beasts and mutants, treacherous swamps inhabited by shrieking marsh daemons and creeping *scri-anii* and untamable steppe, home to sallow tribes of red-eyed *uberklein*, who ate the flesh of their blood-kin. Good folk shivered in their huts and lived in fear.

Men abided then not under the united leadership of an elected Emperor as we do. In that time men watched each other through narrowed eyes and followed their own petty leaders. Chieftain killed chieftain and death

was their constant companion. Scattered tribes lived off the land as best they could and were constantly at war. Revenge lived long in the savage breasts of these men. Into this world would boys and girls like you be born and their mothers would weep, for they would most likely die from want or ague before they reached two summers.

It was into this world that Sigmar was born.

Sigmar was the only son of the chief of the Unberogen tribe, King Björn, who ruled the place that is now called the Reikland, stronghold of the Empire. The Unberogens were a proud tribe of fierce warriors, beset on all sides by other powerful factions.

One summer, on the day beginning his tenth year, Sigmar was sparring with his closest friend, Wolfgart, in the village marketplace. Wolfgart was three summers older than Sigmar and much stronger, but Sigmar fought him anyway.

On this day, Sigmar decided to eschew his sword. He crept into the blacksmiths

and took a smelting hammer. With this, he thought, he would beat his friend. In the small market place, as traders and merchants began to set up their stalls, the two boys sparred. They cursed each other good-naturedly and swung their weapons: Sigmar with his hammer — which was far too heavy for him — and Wolfgart with his blunted sword, parrying blows with wooden shields.

'Swing your toy hammer all you want, young Sigmar, you've yet to best me!' Wolfgart boasted, ducking under his opponent's wild swing. As Sigmar stumbled past him, Wolfgart aimed a kick at his backside sending him sprawling into the mud. Wolfgart threw back his shaggy head and roared with laughter.

Townfolk gathered round, chuckling and shaking their heads. 'Young Sigmar's bitten off more than he can chew again,' they said, as the son of the chief staggered back to his feet, wiping mud from his eyes.

Sigmar saw Wolfgart's unchecked amusement and rage boiled in him. He hefted the hammer above his head with both hands and, with a roar, launched himself at Wolfgart. Sigmar struck the startled boy hard on the elbow and he screamed, sinking to his knees and clutching his arm. A white shard of bone streaked with red poked out from between his fingers.



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At the sound of Wolfgart's pain, Sigmar's rage disappeared like mist defeated by the sun. He blinked back tears of remorse and knelt next to his friend, one arm around his shoulder. The villagers parted as Sigmar's father walked through the crowd.

'Take Wolfgart to the apothecary,' he said. 'And you, my boy, you come with me.'

He led the ashen-faced Sigmar to Warrior's Hill, where Unberogen men were laid to rest. King Björn stopped and looked down at his son.

'All men feel anger, but to become a great leader you must master it. Today you succumbed to rage and vented it on one who did not deserve it. You grow strong, but have yet to grow up. Learn to direct your strength for the good of your people, not for their ill.' He rested his gnarled hand on Sigmar's shoulder. 'It is time for you to walk amongst the burial mounds and listen to the whispers of the dead. Today is your Dooming day and you must offer sacrifices to Morr.' He gave Sigmar a canvass bag and gently shoved him down the path.

Sigmar climbed the hill and as he neared the summit he heard his father say: 'Listen to them, boy. Listen to the dead and learn how to forge your future as king.'

Sigmar wrapped his bearskin cloak closer around his shoulders, for it was cold. A shiver ran up his spine as the breeze cut a swathe through the long grass that lay over the burial mounds; it sounded like many whispering voices. Amongst the resting places of the dead he walked, listening for their words, his breath shallow as the bloody history of his tribe represented in each grave, weighed down upon him.

Sigmar stopped between the two largest mounds. To the left rested his Uncle Berongundan, who was killed by a flesh-harpy in the Middle Mountains. To the right was his father's father, bronze-clad terror, Redmane Dregor, who died on a pile of vanquished ores with thirteen arrows in his chest. The heavy stone boulder had been rolled away from the entrance of his tomb and fragrant smoke drifted out from it. Sigmar entered the portal.

The low corridor ran down into the barrow and Sigmar had to stoop in a posture of respect. His eyes ran as the sweet smoke engulfed him. He passed under a

stone lintel into the burial chamber. Blazing torches guttered in sconces on the walls and shadows danced madly. In the centre of the chamber was Redmane's tomb. Flat stone slabs had been placed on top of one another and each had been carved with images of Redmane's life: his birth, his many victories in battle, feasting with his thanes, and his magnificent death. Sigmar ran his hands over the intricate lines.

Lying on top of the stones was Redmane himself. His bones were clad in finely made armour and surrounded by weapons and treasure. At his feet was a wide dish of



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smoldering coals and herbs. Sigmar knelt before it, opened the bag, lifted out a bull's heart and placed it in the dish. It fizzed and spat blood onto his face. Black smoke filled the room. Sigmar whispered prayers to Morr to accept the bull's heart in place of his own. The ritual done, he picked up his torch and left the chamber.

There was no sunlight in the corridor and with quailing heart Sigmar saw that the stone portal had been rolled back over the tomb entrance. Who could have done such a thing? The gods? Enemies? He pushed against the stone and cried for help, but the rock moved not one inch and there was no answer to his entreaties. The torch guttered and shadows closed in around him. Was his doom to die in the darkness? Sigmar knelt down and prayed fervently to all the gods. He heard no answer so he turned to Ulric, lord of the winter.

'Ulric, lord of the hunt, master of the wolf, give me your strength and I will prove my worthiness to you. Ask what you will of me and I will do it, but do not let me perish unfulfilled.'

A gust of wind blew past him and it seemed to Sigmar that it whispered in his ear. He pressed his palms against the unyielding rock and pushed with all his might. His muscles heaved, sweat beaded on his brow and his great heart strained. Slowly the rock began to move. Shards of sunlight crept around the edges as Sigmar pressed his shoulder against the portal. With a final shove it rolled away and Sigmar felt the sun on his face once more. He staggered away from the tomb, words of thanks to Ulric on his lips. He reached the summit of the hill and shielded his eyes from the sun's glare.

He saw with clarity the realm of his fathers spread out before him. He saw dark forests and scattered villages. Fires knitted smoke into the sky from huts clustered behind rickety wooden palisades.

Sigmar saw frailty and uncertainty and his heart balked. Men huddled together, forever afraid, forever vulnerable. Villages were like islands in the blackest of seas and enemies gathered ever closer. He saw the disparate nature of the sons of men, the inherent weakness born from jealousy, ambition and distrust. He remembered the rage he felt and he recalled the crack as Wolfgart's arm snapped under the fury of his assault. In that act he saw the doom of man. With the voice of his ancestor's ghosts whispering in his ears, Sigmar knew what he had to do.

Sigmar stepped into his destiny without hesitation: to unite the tribes and forge an Empire of men. On that day, the Heldenhammer was born.



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Sigmar & Blacktusk the Boar

Here is the tale of how young Sigmar braved the haunt of Blacktusk the boar and through courage and wit did rid the lands of that bad-tempered menace.

 ing Björn was a wise man who studied the history of his people, for he knew that valuable lessons could be learnt from the past. Many times did Sigmar sit at his father's feet, enraptured by tales of terrible beasts and heroes of old. One such tale was of Blacktusk the boar.

On a cold night in midwinter, with the wind moaning in the eaves and a fire crackling in the grate, spitting as the juices from the boar on the spit dripped into the hungry flames, Sigmar drank in every word his father spoke.

'Tell me, my son, what did we do when we brought this boar back to the Great Hall after the hunt?' his father asked.

Sigmar pointed to the missing hind leg and shoulder on the beast. 'We removed some of the best cuts and offered them to Taal, god of the hunt, to thank him for the bounty.'

His father nodded. 'Aye, lad. We must always remember the gods, for it is they alone that give us our aliment. We are beholden to offer thanks for every ripe harvest, every successful hunt and every victory in battle. Woe betide those who forget the gods.' He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, sucking on his moustache as he did when deep in thought.

'Nigh on fifty years ago,' Björn continued, 'your grandfather's brother, Sweyn Oakheart, led a hunting party into the west of the Reikdorf forest, near the river Skien. They hunted for a full day and truly did Taal favour them. That night the villagers feasted long and heartily, ale poured like spring rain and the smell of roasting meats enveloped the valley. Boar, pheasant, grouse, rabbit and pig were all devoured. Ah, it was a night of merriment and abandon.' He sighed, as if reliving a fond but distant memory, and then he leaned towards his son.

'But they became so drunk and sated that they fell asleep. No sacrifice was offered to Taal, no thanks made for the nimiety of gifts he had showered over them. Fools.

'They would rue the day.' He settled back into his chair. 'That night, the hills and valleys were wreathed in storms. Lightning flashed and the air filled with angry thunder. Rain lashed the land so hard that it flattened the crops and anyone who stepped outside had the skin stripped off them.'

'The storms stopped only after three whole days, and when the villagers emerged from their huts they saw that all the food had turned rotten. Maggots crawled in the flesh of the animals and an unholy stink made everyone sick. The chief of the tribe — at that time Redmane Dregor — ordered Sweyn to lead another hunt into the forest to procure more animals to sacrifice in order to assuage the wrath of the gods.'

'They were gone for two days. No one dared follow them and hunger had a grip on the people. On the third day, Sweyn returned alone. He sported a great hole in his belly that he had stuffed with leaves to stop his innards from falling out. He told of a great boar, as big as a pony, which set upon his party and killed them. It had the wrath of the gods in its eyes and its gory tusks were aimed with a mind for vengeance. He died soon afterwards from his wounds. It was his sacrifice which spared the village from further deprivation.'

Björn's face was bathed in firelight and the jagged scar that ran down his cheek looked like a fissure in a craggy mountain. Sigmar began to feel drowsy and he lay down before the fire. The smell of boar fat and smoke lulled him to sleep, but before he passed into a dream he heard his father speak: 'Blacktusk, as he is known, still roams by the river Skien, a constant reminder to us that the gods must be

honoured. Go not where he dwells, my son, for you too may face the wrath of the gods.'

Sigmar slept and in his dreams he saw Blacktusk, red of eye and fierce.

The next day Sigmar gathered his closest friends to him.

'Today we are going fishing,' he said. 'Fetch your lines and nets.'

When they returned with their fishing gear, Wolfgart asked: 'Where are we going to fish?'

'We are going to the river Skien,' Sigmar said.

'But that is where Blacktusk is said to roam,' Wolfgart said. 'No one fishes there.'

'Exactly,' Sigmar said. 'Which means that fish will be plentiful.' He shouldered his rod and marched away without a backward glance. After his friends had recovered from his proclamation, they scurried to catch up. When they reached the river, they waded out into the cool water to fish. All of the boys glanced at the shore, their ears



(i)

straining for any untoward sound. Only Sigmar seemed undaunted.

His friends talked amongst themselves.

'They say Blacktusk is as big as a pony.'

'I've heard tell it is as big as a bull.'

'My father says its look can kill a man.'

'I think we should go home.'

'Be quiet!' Wolfgart snapped. 'You are worse than my mother with your worrying. It is just a tale to scare children and it has certainly worked on you.'

Sigmar smiled at his friend; no one could question Wolfgart's courage. But he also knew Wolfgart was wrong. He continued to fish, but it was not the denizens of the deep he wanted to catch that day.

The sun rose into the sky and its rays danced merrily on the water's surface. Fish flashed silver as they darted to and fro and after a time the boys began to enjoy their expedition and forgot about Blacktusk. They laughed and joked and cheered when a fish was caught by hook or spear.

Wolfgart was closest to the shore. He stood stock still, waist deep, with a spear raised above his head, watching intently for passing fish. A shadow fell across him and he looked up; his face became stricken with fear and he dropped his spear. He crashed through the water towards the middle of the river.

Standing on the bank, scarcely yards away was a vision from a nightmare: a giant boar, Blacktusk himself. Its front legs — as wide as tree trunks — quivered with anger. Down its sloping spine and across its back was a crest of stiff hair covering skin which was black with patches of russet, like dried blood. But it was its head that looked so terrible, for it was too big for its body. Two tusks framed a wide,

pink snout, black they were and as long as swords. Drool hung from its lips and steam snorted from its nostrils. Two red eyes looked beadily at the terrified boys and a wrathful fire burned in them. A bestial smell of musk drifted over the water.

The boys backed away and as the snorting creature stepped forward, all semblance of courage left them and they half-swam, half-staggered deeper into the river, yelling for the gods to aid them.



(ii)

Blacktusk launched into the river and a white spray — sparkling in the sun — erupted as his bulk crashed into the water, scattering the boys in its wake.

Sigmar stepped in front of the beast. As Blacktusk charged towards him, head lowered, tusks ready to gore, Sigmar held out his hand and stared Blacktusk directly in the eye.

'Sigmar,' Wolfgart shouted, 'for Taal's sake, run!'

But Sigmar was not listening. Blacktusk bore down on him, yet still he didn't flinch. It was almost upon him and their eyes were locked together: Sigmar's a cool blue, Blacktusk's a wrathful crimson. Blacktusk faltered then stopped when its snout was almost touching Sigmar's

hand. The beast's head swayed as Sigmar whispered to it. The boys looked on, aghast.



(iii)

Sigmar touched Blacktusk on the snout and then moved his hand up and around its bristly head, until his arm encircled its neck. His other hand snaked down its quivering flank and tugged at something lodged in the soft part behind its ear. All the while he spoke softly, rubbing and scratching the creature's snout. With a final tug Sigmar pulled something out of its flesh. Blacktusk started and gave a high-pitched squeal, then, with a nod of its head, it turned towards the bank and trotted into the trees, foraging the ground as it went.

Sigmar showed the breathless boys what was in his hand. It was a broken spear tip, covered in blood.

'This is what drove the beast mad, not some unnatural malaise. Perhaps it was hunted by Sweyn that fateful day and ever

since has sought revenge on those who caused it so much pain.'

'But what of its size?' Wolfgart asked.

Sigmar shrugged. 'I cannot say. Perhaps the gods turned it into a punishment, or a warning. There is much we do not know about in this world.'

'Another question is whether your father will beat you for disobeying his command, or order a feast to honour your bravery,' Wolfgart chuckled. 'Truly, my friend, you never cease to amaze me.'

So the boys went home, all agog with what they had witnessed and awed at the chief's son. Sigmar looked one last time on the forest where Blacktusk had disappeared and then followed his friends back to the village.



(iv)

The Battle of Astofen Bridge

In which young Sigmar sets forth to earn his shield and in doing so ends the depravations of the orc warlord Grimgut Bonecrusher.



In the first day of Sigmar's fifteenth year, his father called him to stand before the council in the Great Hall. It was tradition in the Unberogen tribe for a boy to earn his shield in battle when he reached manhood.

There were many enemies, for the lands were overrun with brigands, cutthroats, greenskins, beastmen and other nameless threats. Life hung by a thread and a chieftain's job was to ensure that danger was kept at bay. This test would ensure that the chieftain's son was brave and capable of leadership. Sigmar had been waiting for this day all his life, and so it was that he stood in the centre of the Great Hall and asked for the chance to earn his shield.

'Sire, my lords,' he said in a clear voice. 'I have reached the age of manhood and do beg the honour to lead our warriors to war,

earn my shield and thus the respect of my people so, when Morr claims my father, they will follow me.'

King Björn presented his son with a round shield, covered in toughened leather and brass studs. It was green and bore the device of a boar. Sigmar smiled at the design, for it was Blacktusk whom he had faced a year before that very day.

'You will set out tomorrow with half the warriors of the village,' his father said. 'Travel south, for I have heard tell that our people there are beset by a savage orc warlord. It is rumoured to be Grimgut Bonecrusher — may Ulric rend his bones to splinters — come down from the mountains. I command you to rid the land of this scourge.' Björn hugged his son to his chest. 'Come back with your shield, or upon it,' he whispered.

That night the men feasted. Long tables were set up in the great hall and the warriors who were to set forth with Sigmar the next day sat on low benches, laughing and



(Plate II)

roasting the young prince. Before them was enough food to make the tables creak: roast suckling pig glazed in honey, sapid boars turned on spits and lamb with rosemary rested on wide, steaming dishes surrounded by bowls of seasoned vegetables. Plates were piled high with braised baby pheasant and young chickens. Thick, meaty soup was ladled from cauldrons and frothing ale flowed from casks. Baskets brimmed with apples and pears and flat breads fresh from the oven.

Sigmar sat next to his father at the top of the table. He laughed and joked, smacking his greasy lips and quaffing mead by the mug-full. He bantered with the serving girls who all fought for his attention, offering food, drink — and more besides! — with flirtatious giggles.

Björn looked at his son and saw through the bravado. He knew the serpent of fear which writhed in his belly, for he had felt it himself on his fifteenth year. It was not fear of death that tugged at his progeny's guts, it was fear of losing face, fear of falling short of the faith so many had placed in him. Most of all, it was fear that in the end he would not prove fit to continue the line of succession that his father held so dear.

'Son,' Björn said, 'I know how you are feeling. You and I are much alike, although sometimes, in your quieter moments, you remind me of your mother. It is right that you should feel fear. It is a man's task to face fear and defeat it, like he would any foe on the field of battle.' He gestured down the table at the men who feasted there. 'As of tomorrow, these men are your thanes to command and they will follow you without hesitation.' He smiled and pointed to shaggy haired Wolfgart who sat a few seats away



(i)

from them. Wolfgart noticed their gaze and raised his cup in greeting, a wide grin splitting his face.

'There is your good friend and he is going with you, too. How can you fail with such a sturdy-hearted scoundrel by your side?' Björn laughed.

Sigmar smiled in his turn. 'You are right, father. But I cannot help but fear, for you have no other son to pass on the mantle of chieftain to.'

'I want no other son. I have you, and I know you will be a great man and people will speak the name 'Sigmar' with respect and awe for years. Come, let us drink the night away, you and I. For tomorrow, you leave to become a man.'

The cock crowed and the day dawned bright and clear. The whole village gathered in the square to see the warband off. Sigmar sat on his dapple grey stallion. Slung over his back was his shield and in his hand he bore a thin bladed spear. His legs and lower arms were clad in bronze, wrought with swirling patterns that depicted the moons, the sun and the twin-tailed comet, in memory of the sign that heralded his birth. Over his shoulders was draped a wolf pelt and on his

hip was a flat, double-bladed sword with a simple cross guard and round pommel, inlaid with a single green emerald.

As his father walked towards the stockade gate, Sigmar pulled an iron skull-helmet strengthened with bands of bright brass over his head. His nose and eyes were protected by a plate of copper and under the eye-slits were inlaid rubies, like tears of blood.

Wolfgart was beside him. He carried his warhammer over his shoulder and his

eyes were bright and quick. To his left rode the standard bearer. He was one of the tribe's fiercest warriors and his name was Pendrag. His hair was long and red as the setting sun and in one meaty hand he held Sigmar's pennant; the sign of the boar fluttered eager and fresh in the wind. It had been sewn by the women of the tribe and had yet to be stained with the blood of the enemy.

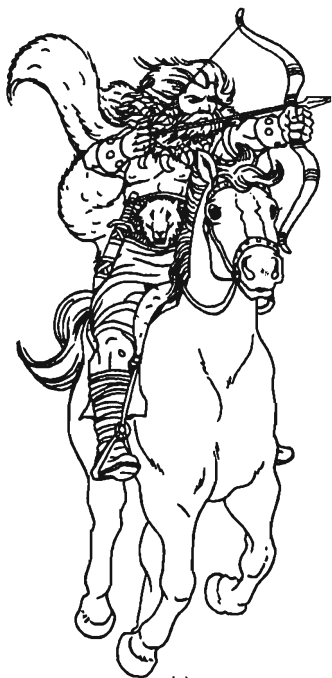
Behind them the warband formed up. Three hundred warriors in battle gear, their long spears held up towards the skies like raised hackles. Their eyes searched the horizon, as if looking for the foes they would soon be facing and their horses stamped the ground impatiently.

King Björn stood by the stockade gate. He raised his sword into the air and a beam from the rising sun caught the blade and it seemed that it was stained with blood. He spoke no word, just turned and threw open the gates and revealing the forest path.

'Forward!' Sigmar cried and he lifted his far-shadowed spear above his head, urging his horse out of Reikdorf. The horsemen surged after him with many cries and cheers. Dust was kicked up as hooves pounded the earth. The column raced past Björn as he roared and cheered his men to victory.

He watched as the host hacked away down the track until they were nothing more than a smudge of dust in the distance. "Tis the loneliest thing to be the leader of men in war," he said to himself. He went back into the village only when they had faded from sight.

'Perhaps that is not true,' he muttered. 'Perhaps it is lonelier here, as a



father, waiting for his son to return home safely.'

The party followed the path of the river south from Reikdorf and the forest pressed in on either side of the track. Always could be heard the rush of the river to their left and occasionally they saw it as a bright sparkle through the trees.

They passed tiny settlements which clung to the river banks, subsiding on the fish and what crops they could grow. Living in the forest and beset by the dangers that lurked there made them a suspicious folk. They came out of their huts when the rumour of the warband reached them, but welcome was not forthcoming, for men did not trust each other even within Unberogen lands.

After a few days' travel the river forked and they followed the westward stream. The river grew wider and the trees began to thin out. Before them they caught sight of an open plain of green grass covered with a patchwork of heather and gorse. The river slipped through the land like a shining road to the mountains, shimmering silver in the sunlight. As the land neared the Grey Mountain range to the west — which rose up proud and stern to meet the sky — it began to undulate with rolling hills covered in parts by trees.

Sigmar and Wolfgart rode out of the forest together. It was the first time they had been so far south and they had never seen a plain such as this before, for they were used to living close to the forest.

'I never imagined the world was so vast,' Sigmar said.

'Aye, my friend, and it is larger even than this. Your father has travelled out of

the boundaries of our land and beyond, seeking allies.'

Sigmar sniffed the clean air and patted his horse's neck. 'He champs for a gallop,' Sigmar said and turned to his men. 'Form up in line of charge, wind your horns, let's ride the open lands and proclaim our arrival!' He spurred his horse forward with a cry and his men fell in. The sun gleamed on their armour and the air was filled with the thunder of hooves and the harkening call of many horns.

When they reached a bend in the river they halted and dismounted to let their horses drink from the crystal waters. Sigmar ordered a council and asked his advisors what they would have him do next. Pendrag spoke first.

'Sire, the rumours say that Grimgut Bonecrusher is terrorizing the settlements on this land. The largest town here is Astofen and it lies about thirty leagues to the west.' He pointed towards the largest peak in the Grey Mountains. It looked like the last fang in a rotting mouth. 'There is Bonecrusher's domain.' He lowered his finger to the grassy terrain beneath it. 'Do you see that smear of smoke? There is Astofen, and that is not smoke from a cooking fire.' He turned to Sigmar, his face grim. 'I fear Astofen is already attacked.'

'Then we cannot delay,' Sigmar said. 'We ride to Astofen where I will win my shield.'

They galloped hard for the rest of the day, always heading towards the black spire of smoke which pointed like a scorched finger towards the darkening sky. At nightfall they made camp at the foot of a hill, on the other side of which — according to Pendrag — lay Astofen. Sigmar ordered scouts to learn

of the enemy and report back. They lit no fires, for they did not want to alert the orcs to their presence.

'We are only a league or so away,' Pendrag said, chewing thoughtfully on a strip of dried venison. 'We must rest now and see what we may on the morn.'

'Those orcs make a racket and no mistake,' Sigmar said, as raucous jeers drifted on the evening air. 'Not to mention the reek.'



(iii)

Pendrag grinned. 'Be thankful we are downwind of them. Orcs have keen noses and if they catch a whiff of us or the horses the night will get bloody.'

'My father said: "Never fight an orc in the dark, for it can see, hear and smell better than any man",' Wolfgart said, running a whetstone down the blade of his sword. 'But I would face any creature this night, if it meant salvation for those poor folk.'

'Peace, brave Wolfgart,' Pendrag said. 'Tomorrow you will have your chance to

fight. But now we rest.' The warriors rolled up in their blankets and went to sleep.

Sigmar kept watch that night, for he knew he would not slumber well. As he watched the moons ride across the sky, he heard the harsh laughter and growls of the greenskins when the wind carried them close. He prayed to Ulric and wrapped his wolf skin cloak tighter about his shoulders. The night passed slowly.

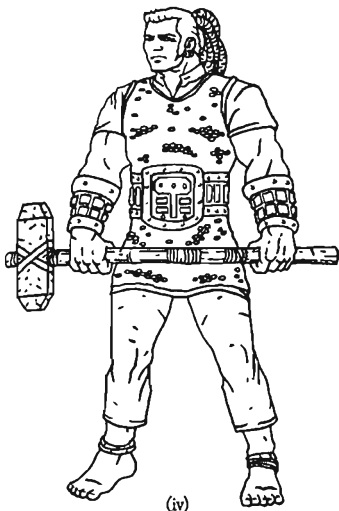
The next day Sigmar, Wolfgart and Pendrag crept to the top of the hill to see the lie of the land.

Below them was Astofen. It lay within an encirclement of rocky hills and its southern wall was further protected by a bend in the river. Half a league away from the town was a bridge spanning the river and leading into the open plain to the south. Tightly packed huts clustered within a stout wooden stockade. Towers guarded each corner and upon them was the devise of a swooping hawk, burnt into the timber. Men manned the towers and crouched on the parapet behind the walls, firing arrow at the besieging army.

Some of the buildings had been set ablaze by flaming arrows fired by capering goblins and a pall of smoke hung oppressively over everything. Villagers were bringing buckets of water to douse the spreading inferno.

The orcs were drawn up in an undisciplined rabble, waving their cleavers and spears above their ugly heads and filling the air with their grunts and taunts. Their animal skin bivouacs were decorated with grisly trophies and many had human heads perched on wooden stakes.

A huge orc in the centre of the mob hurled its war axe at the town gate and bellowed. The axe spun through the air and struck fast in the wood. The orc was Grimgut Bonecrusher and that was the signal to attack.



Marching in time with the war chants, drums and stamping feet of the horde, twenty black orcs strained to heave a wheeled battering ram towards the gate. Men fired flaming arrows but the orcs had soaked the contraption in urine and the flames refused to take hold. Closer and closer it rumbled.

'It looks as if we have arrived in the nick of time,' Sigmar said.

'We have to act swiftly,' Wolfgart said.

'We must attack while we have surprise on our side.'

Pendrag spat in the grass. 'Surprise will not avail us against such numbers. We cannot combat them in that terrain. We need open ground so we can use our horses and run them into the mud.'

Sigmar looked at the bridge and the orcs. 'I have a plan,' he said. 'I will need fifty volunteers.'

With a sickening crunch the ram smote the gate. The wooden posts groaned and twisted as the orcs smashed the tapered tree trunk into them again and again. Sweating men braced the gate from the other side, but they knew it was only a matter of time before it collapsed. Orcs pressed around the walls, stabbing at the wood with their weapons, bellowing and snorting in their eagerness to get inside. Men recoiled from their malodorous stink.

More warriors from the village formed up behind those straining to hold the gates shut. Their faces were grim and their hands, which gripped their shields and spears tight, were slick with sweat. All were prepared to sell their lives dearly, but hopelessness was in their hearts. Beneath the guttural barks of the orcs they could hear the wails and cries of the women and children who huddled in their homes, waiting for the end. Smoke filled the air, choking them and the fires at their backs blistered their skin.

Then the sound of a horn being winded carried vibrantly through the air. The men on the watchtowers stared in amazement, then cheered as many riders crested the hill behind the orc picket line and charged down its flank towards the astonished besiegers. Sigmar led them on his grey stallion. To show contempt for the foe he wore no armour. He held a spear in one hand and his

shield in the other. The horses galloped towards the orcs, who roared in defiance, smashing their hatchets and curved swords against their shields.



(v)

Grimgut muscled through the confused army, grunting orders and lashing out. The front rank hastily formed a tight shield wall, their stout legs braced for impact and the horsemen were suddenly faced with a solid barricade of bristling spear points and heavy wooden shields, each bearing the device of a severed human head.

Just before the riders reached them they hurled their javelins and wheeled away, riding hard back up the hill. The heavy missiles clattered against shields, shattering them and piercing flesh. Orcs tumbled into the mud with javelins embedded in their faces and chests, but more took their places and the line held.

Pendrag led another wave of horsemen down the hill. When only a few yards away from the orcs, they drew their recurve bows back and set loose white fletched arrows which fizzed through the air, flying

between the shields or splitting them apart to puncture armour and flesh alike. The riders turned, fired another clattering volley and laboured back up the hill.

This time the orcs reacted; their shield wall split apart and warriors charged out, launching spears after the retreating archers. Several riders were hit and they tumbled from their mounts with spears protruding from their backs. The orcs surged forward and delighted in silencing their cries with axes, cleavers and iron-shod boots.

Sigmar and his warband reformed on the hill. Horses snorted and stamped the ground, eager for the next charge. Sigmar turned to Pendrag. 'Remember the plan,' he said. 'Don't get in too deep. My signal will be two blasts on the horn.'

Pendrag nodded grimly. 'Tis a risky manoeuvre, but our best chance, I'll wager.'

Sigmar put his horn to his lips, blew a long blast from it and spurred his horse down the slope. With many cries his men followed. So fast they went that dust clouded about them and it seemed like they brought with them the fury and smoke of the underworld. They reached level earth at full charge, hooves churning the ground as the gap closed with the enemy line where spears were held steady and a thousand red eyes gleamed from behind shields.

The orc line opened and goblin archers were pushed out; they scurried forwards and fired arrows. Most flew over the riders' heads — for goblins are cowards and the sight of the closing enemy set a fear loose in their breasts — then they turned and ran back to their line. But the orcs just laughed at them and the shield wall remained closed.

The goblins pressed their backs against the shields, cries of terror escaping from their yellow-toothed mouths as their doom rode down upon them.

Sigmar flung his javelin and rejoiced to Ulric when it pieced an orc in the eye and drove out its brains through a hole in the back of its skull. He drew his sword and roared as his mount leapt into the enemy line, crashing through shields and pulverising bones. On either side of Sigmar his warriors did the same. The initial javelin strike did little to buckle the line — orcs are tough creatures who live to fight — but a mounted warrior is more deadly than a javelin.

The front rank of the orcs caved in under the shattering impact of horses and their armoured riders: spears shattered into kindling as hooves lashed out, battering the enemy to the ground, caving in skulls, shattering limbs then grinding the bodies into the mud. Sigmar hacked and thrust all about him with his sword whilst barding attacks away with his shield, but already the orcs were recovering, pressing forward, ready to grab riders from their horses or else slip between their mounts' legs and split their bellies open with knives. Sigmar knew that cavalry's strength was the shock of the charge; in a melee they would be torn to pieces.

The Unberogens were getting bogged down. Orc bellows mingled with the screams of men, iron swords clashed against wooden shields and the air reeked of blood and fear. Orcs began to get amongst and behind the riders, prodding with spears and hacking with cleavers. Sigmar sheathed his sword and lifted his horn to his lips,

blew two short blasts then wheeled his horse away, breaking free of the fight.

'Flee! Flee!' he cried as he galloped towards the river. With similar cries the rest of the riders broke from the press of bodies and followed him. Some cast their spears and swords away in their haste to escape.

The orcs howled in triumph, waving their weapons in delight. In the village the men looked on in dismay for it seemed their salvation had disappeared like the sun behind a storm cloud. They saw the riders heading to the bridge in disarray with the orcs, led by Grimgut, giving chase.

Sigmar reached the bridge first and behind him his men galloped in a strung out line. The Unberogens began to clatter across the bridge and still the orcs pursued them. A young rider at the rear of the column was too slow and an orc leapt and grabbed his horse's tail. The screaming creature reared up and threw the rider from his back. The orcs set upon him immediately. Sigmar stared aghast as they tore his limbs off and scrambled with the trophies, ripping flesh apart in dripping hunks and stuffing it into their mouths. He saw the rider's pale face streaked with blood, eyes wide with fear and his mouth gaping, giving voice to soundless screams. And then he was lost in the press of clamouring beasts.

Sigmar ushered his men across the bridge. 'Hurry, hurry,' he shouted. His heart filled with relief as Wolfgart rode past, the last man to cross. Sigmar followed him, looking over his shoulder at the approaching orcs. When he reached the other side he gave a signal. From their hiding places on either side of the bridge, fifty warriors appeared. They waved a greeting

and formed up on the bridge, levelling their spears at the charging orcs. Sigmar returned the wave and galloped off after the riders. He could hear the orcs roaring as they charged across the bridge at his rear-guard.

The riders stopped a quarter of a league from the bridge. They dismounted and picked up fresh spears and swords from where they had been secreted in caches on the ground. Pendrag rode up to Sigmar. Shielding their eyes from the sun they looked towards the bridge.

'They are holding well,' Pendrag said.

The orcs packed the bridge and swarmed along the opposite bank, eager to join the fray. The spearmen were holding them back, thrusting and pushing against the dark green tide, but they were being forced to give ground and as soon as the orcs could reach around their flanks they were finished.

'They must flee now, or they will be lost,' Sigmar said.

'Come, my lord,' Pendrag said. 'This task you asked them to perform invites certain death. They knew that, so do not pretend you did not. They have sacrificed themselves for our victory. Do not dishonour their actions by denying this.'

Sigmar bowed his head. 'You are right, Pendrag. And I promise to make their sacrifice worthwhile.'

At the bridge the mass of orcs pressed forward. As the men backed slowly onto the riverbank, their leader — a brave man named Trinovantes — put a horn to his lips and sounded the retreat. The spearmen dropped their weapons and ran towards the riders, with the blood-crazed orcs close behind them.

'Form up for the charge,' Sigmar ordered. On either side his men drew their horses level. Each man had a new spear and a fresh sword and as they watched their comrades at the bridge fall to the orcs, rage boiled within them.

Sigmar cantered down the line of riders. 'Wait,' he said. 'Wait until those murderous beasts have crossed the river, then we can ride them down on the open plain.'

They watched as the last of the rear-guard broke and ran. The orcs poured across the river, flinging spears at the retreating men. Their guttural laughter carried to the waiting horsemen, who vowed revenge. The fleeing men ran in different directions across the plain with the orcs in close pursuit. Soon they had all crossed the river and were hunting; so intent were they on bringing down every last warrior, they failed to see the horseman on the low horizon.

Sigmar ordered the charge with a blast of his horn. As one, the riders spurred their horses forward. The sound of chinking armour grew louder as their pace quickened to a gallop, lowering their spears as they closed in on the foe.

The orcs saw them too late and their victory cries died in their mouths. They turned to each other and realised that their ranks had become scattered. With low growls they turned to face the approaching onslaught.

The sun gleamed on the bronze armour of the riders, but at their head was a warrior clad in nothing but hose and boots. A shock of blond hair framed his face, which was a mask of fury. With a final howl of hatred young Sigmar smashed into the orcs — beheading Grimgut with a swing of his



(vi)

sword — cleaving armour and splitting skulls apart, so his naked torso was soon splattered with black blood.

The battle was short. The orcs were swept away before the storm of iron and bronze like autumn leaves in the wind. As they turned to flee they were run down to the last beast. Those that tried to cross the bridge were cut down by warriors from

Astofen, who had sallied forth to see off the remaining besiegers and come to the rider's aid. As the sun began its decent, the fight was ended and the plain was strewn with bodies.

That night they feasted in the village. Many flagons were drunk in the name of the fallen and sacrifices were made to the war gods to give thanks for their canny victory. Sigmar sat at the head of the table with Pendrag and the village elders.

'You won a noble victory today, young master,' Pendrag said. 'You faced a numerous foe in unfavourable terrain, but you used your cunning and courage to lure them into the open. I will drink to that.' He took a long swig of mulled wine then set the cup down slowly onto the table.

Sigmar took a drink, but said nothing.

'You are thinking of the men at the bridge,' Pendrag said. 'Your plan sent them to their doom. But remember this: they rest now in Ulric's halls, where — and I mean no offence to our noble hosts — the food is richer and the wine more potent than any at this table. In time we will meet them there and I promise you, not one of them would have changed his destiny if he were given the choice again. They died a fine death in battle and for that they will be grateful.'

And so the warband returned to Reikdorf and upon hearing the tale, Björn embraced his son and gave him his shield. He had proved himself, not only in battle, but also as a leader of men. The lessons he learned at Astofen he would remember throughout his life and his hatred of orcs burned even stronger than ever.



(Plate III)

Sigmar & King Ironbeard

In which Sigmar rescues King Ironbeard of Karaz-a-Karak from the orcs and receives Ghal Maraz as a token of gratitude.

n his Great Hall, King Sigmar took a long drink of ale. Grass had been growing over his father's burial mound for three years, and the Unberogen folk had taken Sigmar into their hearts as chief. King Björn had been gloriously slain fighting with the Taleutens against a Northmen invasion of their provinces. Björn had charged the enemy warlord alone and struck off his head, but had then been cut down by the vengeful barbarians. Sigmar looked at the tapestry depicting his beloved father's death that hung over the fireplace and raised a silent toast.

'What other business is there?' he asked.

'A little more, my lord,' Eoforth, his most trusted adviser said. 'You have passed judgement on the matters pertaining to law, and justice will be meted out according to your wishes. The tithes have been taken and

counted and have for the most part been met. The grain stores are full...'

Sigmar sighed. How he longed for action. Matters of state were important, of course, but he would much rather roam free with a company of men under his banner, seeking adventure and glory. His thoughts were interrupted as the doors were thrown open with a crash. Two foresters staggered in bearing a slumped figure between them.

'What is this interruption to my consultation?' Sigmar said sternly, although secretly pleased at the diversion. 'Who is this man you bring to my halls in such a state?'

'This be no man, sire,' one of the foresters said, attempting a bow. 'E's a dwarf, from afar to the east as the Worlds Edge itself! He says he has dire news and is in need of help.'

They set the wounded dwarf to rest on a straw covered bed. He looked at Sigmar through his one remaining eye; he was grievously wounded. He said that his name was Thrungi and that he was a shieldbearer

of King Kurgan Ironbeard, king of the dwarf stronghold of Karaz-a-Karak, who had been on his way to visit his kin in the eastern mountains.

'They set upon us at Helscrak Pass,' he croaked. 'Thousands of them, coming from all sides. But we fought. Oh, how we fought:

The ox-drawn armoured caravans made their way slowly up the mountain pass. The passage from Karaz-a-Karak to the dwarf holds in the Grey Mountains was a long and dangerous one, so when King Kurgan Ironbeard made the journey he took no chances. The trek was nearly over and four more days' trudge would bring him to within sight of the stone walls of his western kin.

The king's bodyguard, the Iron Guard, marched at the front of the column. They were clad in rune-blessed silver armour and wore ornate, closed helms through which their sharp eyes examined every nook and crevice in the rocks that swept up on either side. They hefted broad axes and war mallets and the valley echoed to the sound of the lowing oxen, the stamp of heavy boots and the clink of armour.



(i)

'Steady, lads,' King Ironbeard said. He stood at the head of the column on a broad shield, which was carried on a pair of poles by four of his most trusted warriors. 'I can smell greenflesh as ripe and dirty as an overflowing privy.' He spat a fat glob of phlegm onto the ground.

A trickle of rocks showered from above. Ironbeard growled and called a halt to the column. 'Trouble,' he shouted, unlimbering his axe. 'Draw up the wagons and make ready to see off raiders.' He spied more movement: swift shapes capered along the cliffs overhead, scrambling down inclines and along narrow ledges. Ironbeard's lip curled in disgust. 'Goblins,' he grumbled. 'Raise shields.'

Black fletched arrows clattered off shields and glanced off armour. Such weapons could do little against dwarf steel, but Ironbeard was canny enough to know it was just a ruse by the foe to keep their heads down until the real danger was unleashed.

As the dwarf warriors shuffled into tight ranks the valley walls began to shake with war-cries and drum beats: some deep, bowel-loosening thrums and some high pitched and musical, like bones being knocked together.

This is no raiding party, Ironbeard thought, it's an army.

'No shirking, dwarfs,' he bellowed. 'Protect the caravans. I'll let no stinking greenskin get his hands on my treasure.'

And then the valley was alive with howling monsters, leaping out on every side; from fissures, caves and holes they came, thousands of them: gigantic black orcs, scuttling goblins and lumbering, long-limbed stone trolls.

Ironbeard whispered a death prayer and set about selling his life as dearly as he could.

'To my shame I was struck by a troll and fell,' Thrungi finished. He collapsed back, choking, blood flecking his pallid lips and settling on his beard like rubies.

'Rest now,' Sigmar said.

'No. I must tell this tale now, or not at all.' He closed his eyes and Sigmar was astonished to see tears rolling down his cheeks. 'I fell and the king's shield bower fell with me. When I awoke I was alone. I searched the dead, but could find no sign of my king. It is my fault. The shame will kill me.' And with that he fell back onto the pallet in a faint.

'Do you think the dwarf king yet lives?' Wolfgart asked Sigmar.

'I know not,' Sigmar said thoughtfully. 'Perhaps. If the orcs have captured the king of Karaz-a-Karak that will stir their savage souls! They will fear nothing.'

'We must look to our borders,' Pendrag warned. 'Helscrak Pass is not far away.'

Wolfgart turned to where the dwarf lay in his fever. 'To have travelled all this way with such wounds,' he said. 'I knew the mountain folk were hardy, but still.'

'He will want us to find his king, no doubt,' Sigmar said. 'He will go back on his own to do so, with or without us.'

'The dwarf folk care little for men,' Pendrag said. 'They travel across our borders without by nor leave, yet they offer us nothing in return. By the gods, this is the first time a dwarf has stepped into our village, yet we have lived upon their borders for many a year. They are a proud and stubborn folk. Would they come to our aid, if we needed it? I think not.'

'There is little love lost, I admit,' Sigmar said. 'But neither do we bear them a grudge. I for one would not harvest the ill

will of the dwarfs for no reason.' He paced thoughtfully over to the sleeping shield bearer and looked at his drawn, grey face. 'A powerful ally would the dwarf folk make,' he muttered. 'They never forgive a grudge, but by the same token a good deed done unto them lives forever in their stout hearts.'

Pendrag shook his head and smiled ruefully for he knew what his master was thinking. Wolfgart grinned broadly and hooked his thumbs into his belt.

'Issue a call to arms,' Sigmar said. 'Gather my chosen warriors to me. We ride out as soon as our dwarf friend is fit to travel.'

'There are still several matters of state which need tending to, my lord,' Eoforth said, an edge of reproach in his voice.

'Matters of state be damned,' Sigmar cried. 'I have matters of war to see to!'

Upon hearing that the Unberogens were going to lend their aid in finding his king, Thrungi's mood improved greatly. His despair was replaced by a hasty desire to set out and within three days his wish was granted. He was ready to ride and Sigmar's bodyguard had gathered their accoutrements or war, feasted several times and sacrificed goat and boar to Ulric and Morr. They were ready to sally forth.

They rode not to bring open war — for the Unberogens had not the strength to take on such a numerous foe — but rather they had prepared for a raid. It was an errand of such danger and daring that it set the blood singing in Sigmar's ears.

They took the forest path west and set out upon the great plain. The sun had passed over their heads only four times

before they found themselves in the Grey Mountains' cold shadow.

On their way they met many folk fleeing from the outlying settlements, labouring under packs and driving carts piled with possessions. A greenskin scourge had come to the mountain's edge and was set to pour out over the lands of men and overcome them, they said. How many were there they were asked? Uncountable, was the reply, before they hurried away eastward.

'May you return home soon,' Sigmar whispered, making the sign of Shallya.

It was not hard to find the orc camp. Sigmar's scouts reported that the foul greenskins had set up a makeshift fort at the foot of a cliff on the west side of Helscrak Pass.

'I'll wager they'll use it as a redoubt to sally forth and raid the surrounding districts,' Sigmar said. 'Orcs seldom emerge from the mountains for long periods, so

under their snot-filled noses.' He turned to Svein, his chief scout. 'Was there any sign of the king?'

'Indeed, sire,' he said. 'He and a score of dwarfs are held captive in a wooden cage in the centre of the camp. They look in an ugly mood. But that is not surprising as the orcs poke them with sticks and flash their arses at them.'

'Make ready men, we move at dusk.' Sigmar laid a hand on Thrungi's shoulder. 'And you, my friend, will stay here. Pray to your gods for us. Worry not, you will have your revenge yet.'

Night draped its cloak over the sky as Sigmar gathered his raiding party to him. He picked his four best warriors: Wolfgart, Pendrag, his chief scout, Svein and his brother Eirik. They removed their mail shirts and armour, dulled their sword blades and blackened their faces with soot from the campfire. They were going to travel light and silent.

They ran swiftly, and as they did they saw many lights climbing up the side of the foothills of the mountain and they heard the animal noises of the orcs as they ate, bickered and snored.

'There are sentries ahead,' Svein whispered. 'They are drunk. These wretches are so sure of their numbers that they do not fear attack.'

'And in that they are right,' Sigmar said. 'But it is infiltration they should be wary of, for tonight the Unberogens seek entry.'

The party bypassed a rocky defile, holding their knives in their teeth. They crept amongst the unwary sentinels where they dozed, and slit their throats. Then they donned the orcs' foul garments and armour,



(ii)

they are either very stupid or very arrogant. Either way works to our advantage.'

'What do you have in mind, King Sigmar?' Thrungi asked.

Sigmar grinned wolfishly. 'We are going to affect a raid, my short friend. We are going to whisk your king away from

pulling down the visors of the heavy iron helmets to obscure their faces.

'What about our smell?' Pendrag asked. 'Those orcs will think we smell like roses when we walk past them.'

'Indeed they will,' Svein said. He bent down and picked up an orc dropping. 'Rub this into your skin and clothes. It will mask our smell.' To his companions' disgust he took a long sniff. 'Typical orc spore,' he said absently. 'Composed mainly of flesh and a few toadstools. There's dwarf ale in here too. That would upset our short companion,' he chuckled.

With commendable stoicism the men adhered orc dung to their bodies and clothes and set off toward the camp. They made no attempt to hide themselves, instead they aped the mannerisms of the orcs, swinging their weapons about, walking with long strides and grunting in the best imitations they could manage.

The orc camp was quiet, most of the beasts having gorged themselves into a stupor on dwarf ale and flesh. Those who were still awake took no notice of the men as they stomped around the bivouacs and slumbering greenskins.

When they reached the cage of captive dwarfs they quietly dispatched the snoring guards and unbarred the doors. The plan of escape was explained to the ecstatic dwarfs, of which there were about twenty-five, who vowed to get their revenge as soon as they were free. The dwarfs, already manacled together, were marched in column, with the disguised men around them, harassing them and poking them with their cleavers.

Orcs, being dull-witted creatures, took little notice. Any orcs that stirred from slumber was quietly dispatched with dirk and

blade, and no alarm was raised. They navigated the orc camp, passed the dead sentries and met up with the rest of the party. They silently decamped and returned to Reikdorf. And thus were King Ironbeard and the dwarfs rescued. Thrungi was reunited with his kin and there was much rejoicing. But the dwarfs vowed revenge, and Sigmar promised to aid them.

The dwarfs in the Grey Mountains were roused, and a great army of their folk marched with the Unberogens on the orc camp. Over the course of a bloody afternoon the greenskins were put to the sword, for they could not stand against the fury of the dwarfs and the repeated cavalry charges of the Unberogens.

In gratitude for the daring rescue, King Ironbeard gifted Sigmar with the great hammer, Ghal Maraz, the Skullsplitter — which is now the symbol of the Empire — and a pact of steel was forged between the Unberogens and the dwarfs of all the mountains.



(iii)

Sigmar sends tribute to the Taleutens and the Asoborns

In this tale King Sigmar uses his cunning and diplomacy to turn potential enemies into powerful allies.

pring had at last cast away the chilling shackles of winter's grip. The skies were blue, but on the horizon grey clouds were pregnant with the promise of the season's first rainfall. Men and women of the Unberogen tribe cut swathes through the fields with plough and bill. Now free from frost, the loamy ground was willing to accept nature's seed like a newly wed virgin, and where before the trees of the forest were like skeletal hands grasping at the heavens, now they bloomed with vigorous life. They shook the last of the winter frost from their boughs and opened up their leaves to the sun. Sap rose and blossom covered the ground with its fragrant embrace.

The mountain tracks and forest paths opened up as the snow thawed and once again trade flowed into the city of Reikdorf. The town thrived and bustled with the energy of a creature waking hungry from hibernation.



(i)

Sigmar had ruled his tribe for only three years since his father's death, but already he had made many changes. Sigmar had long



(ii)

sight and he knew that for his people to survive they must prepare for more than just war. He ordered many trees to be felled so the land around Reikdorf was clear for a league. He gave the land to the best farmers and in return they agreed to provide food for the warriors who protected them. Food became more abundant and stores were built for the grain, maize and barley in case of a bad harvest.

The trees that were cut from the forest were used to strengthen the town walls and many towers were built. Around these defences was a deep ditch with sharpened stakes plunged into its sides. Roads through the forests and across the plains were widened and made more worthy for carts and travellers. Dwarfs from the eastern mountains, Sigmar's new allies after he rescued their king, Kurgan Ironbeard from the orcs, travelled to Reikdorf, bringing

with them their finest weapons and armour to barter with. And back they went to their mountain strongholds, their carts laden with furs, wool, meat and black bread. In time, each Unberogen village and town was connected by a thoroughfare and travel and trade became easier.

But it was not only travellers and merchants who braved the new roads, for one day, Sigmar received two emissaries.

The fame of Sigmar and the burgeoning strength of his tribe were growing and the other warlords desired to know more about him. Who was this great warrior? Was it true he was as big as a bear? Why was he undefeated in battle? How strong, in truth, was his tribe?

On this particular day, King Sigmar sat on his wooden throne at the top of the Great Hall. He wore a short, leather jerkin studded with iron and a red cloak, fastened at his

neck by a gold brooch fashioned into the shape of a snarling dragon's head adorned his shoulders. To his left stood his thane, Wolfgart, and at his feet lay two faithful wolfhounds, chewing noisily on ham bones. They looked up as the doors at the far end of the hall opened.

Two strangers — a man and a woman — strode up towards Sigmar. When they reached the foot of the dais they unsheathed their weapons and placed them on the ground, as was the custom of the day. Sigmar appraised them as they bowed low, right fists covering their hearts.



(iii)

The woman was lithe and wiry. Her bare arms were corded with muscle and her slender wrists decorated with intricate bronze bracelets. Her dark skin was covered in swirling blue tattoos which curled like serpents around her limbs. Her sable hair was long and matted and reached halfway down her back. It had been twisted into braids and Sigmar noted small animal bones had been threaded into them. She wore a short coat of leather, upon which were sewn many rows of iron rings which were covered in dark grease to stop them from shining. Her movements were quick and she seemed to Sigmar like a bird, watchful and wary. She wore dark brown hose, cross-gartered with many

thongs and had filthy, bare feet. She had laid on the floor two throwing hatchets, a broad-bladed short sword and a slender bow.

'You are an emissary from the Asoborn tribe, are you not?' Sigmar said. He knew the Asoborns lived deep in the forests of their lands to the east. Their homes were built in the low boughs of the trees or dug amongst the roots. No one outside their tribe knew the whereabouts of their settlements, so cunningly hidden were they. They were a feral, matriarchal race, led by fierce Queen Freya. It was rumoured that she had strangled her husband in their bed and under her leadership the Asoborns had become a strong tribe. They were adept at ambushes and hunting and they rode to battle on swift chariots.

She stood up straight and beheld Sigmar sternly with her eyes. 'Aye, lord,' she said, and her accent was light and musical. 'My name is Gwynned and I have come with my ally here to hold counsel with you.' She indicated the man who still bowed next to her.

He was tall, and broad across the chest. His round, flat-nosed face was framed in a shock of red hair which caught the firelight and seemed to burn with it. His wrists were covered by silver bracelets, wrought into the shape of coiling serpents and his legs were clad in burnished greaves of copper and iron. He wore a coat of leaf mail and each leaf was etched with the device of a serpent eating its own tail. An orange cloak fell to his ankles and it was held at his throat with a clasp shaped like a horse's head. He had placed on the ground a double-handed sword: a famous *hyrkelblade* of the Taleuten tribe. He stood up and gazed upon Sigmar and his eyes were bright blue, but they danced with an inner fire.

'And you are from the Taleutens?' Sigmar asked. The Taleutens lived on the open plains to the north-east of the Unberogens. They were a fierce and proud race and all acknowledged they were the best horse-breakers and fielded the finest cavalry in the land.

The man nodded. 'I am named Curbad. We are honoured to be accepted into your worthy hall,' he said.

With the customary greeting over, Sigmar smiled broadly and settled back into his chair, propping his chin on his clenched fists. 'You are most welcome. Please, sit. We will have wine and food, for, I imagine, we have matters of import to discuss.'

Gwynned returned the smile. 'Indeed, lord. You may be aware that the great tribes of the Asoborns and the Taleutens have united together in a pact of steel. When we march to war, our warriors march together as kin.'

Sigmar nodded. 'Strength in numbers,' he said. 'Most wise. But a two headed goat rarely survives for long.'

'With our tribes united no one can stand before us,' Curbad growled. 'And I dislike being compared to a goat.'

Gwynned coughed. 'Peace, Curbad.' She returned her attention to Sigmar. 'The ores muster on our borders. They pillage our villages and burn our crops, but our combined strength keeps them at bay. And it also allows us other opportunities.'

Sigmar grunted. He knew what was to come.

'We ask for a tribute from the Unberogen tribe, and no more than you can afford,' she said.

'Why should we pay tribute to you?' Sigmar asked.

'While we fight the greenskins, your people are safer. We ask merely for recompense for the blood of our warriors,' Curbad said.

'Are you going to listen to these fools and their insolent demands?' Wolfgart whispered in Sigmar's ear. The young king raised his hand to silence his comrade.

'And if we refuse?' he said.

Curbad and Gwynned picked up their weapons. 'When our tribes' warriors are counted together, we number over three thousand spears. I estimate no more than a thousand men gather beneath your banner,' Curbad said.

The emissaries walked to the Great Hall's door.

'Our tribes maintained friendly terms under your father,' Gwynned said. 'I sincerely hope this will remain the case. Bring your tribute to us before the leaves fall in autumn and you will have two strong allies. If you do not, you will have two new enemies to add to your list.' Then she crossed the threshold and was gone.

'You are not thinking of pandering to those snivelling worms?' Wolfgart asked.

'Hush, my friend. Let me think for a moment,' Sigmar said.

Wolfgart snorted in disgust. 'There is nothing to think about. We gather our warriors, march on their hovels, tell them we have brought them suitable tribute and then kill them all.'

Sigmar's head councillor, Eoforth, stepped forward. 'My lord, I would advise most strongly against this. Together, the Taleutens and the Asoborns number many more men than we can muster. Their borders stretch down the entire east side of our land. They can strike wherever they

please and we would be sorely pressed to counter any attacks. Besides, we have long been at peace with them. It is not as if we would be paying tribute to a sworn enemy.'

'The Unberogens pay tribute to no one,' Wolfgart said. 'If peace has existed, let it continue without tributes. Our blood pays the price to keep the east free from the privations of the greenskins that pour down from the western mountains. That is tribute enough.' He spat into the fire and the phlegm danced in the embers. 'Let's burn them all for their insolence,' he growled.

'What say you, lord?' Eoforth said.

'There is some wisdom in both of your words. This is why I keep council. A wise leader gleans what value is offered from many dissenting voices.' He stood up and paced the room. 'It is true that when combined the men of those tribes greatly outnumber us,' he said, looking at Eoforth. 'It is also true that the Unberogens pay tribute to no one,' he added, turning his gaze to the still glowering Wolfgart. 'But I see not how the solutions you have offered us will give us gain. War will be costly, perhaps fatal—'

'But at least we will die gloriously—' Wolfgart began.

'But needlessly,' Sigmar said. 'Likewise, we will offer no tribute of fear. The moment we do this, men will smell blood in the water and all will come to think us weak.'

Wolfgart and Eoforth looked upon their lord. 'So what should we do?' Eoforth asked.

The Unberogens had travelled for several weeks and by the time they arrived in sight of Taalahim, the capital of the Taleuten tribe, it was mid-summer. As they emerged from the forest the folk working in the

fields stared at them, then dropped their tools and hurried to the safety of the town walls. As the last of them scurried inside, the gates closed behind them.

Taalahim was built on a flat hill which had been raised using the earth excavated from the deep moat that surrounded it. The town was protected by a tall wooden wall topped with spikes. The gate was covered in beaten gold leaf depicting prancing warhorses and the numerous guard towers had been built into the shape of enormous equine heads. The Taleuten's veneration of horses was so strong that the grandest buildings in the town were the stables, which were situated in the centre, the safest place of all.

Weeks before, Taleuten scouts had reported to their chief that a large number of Unberogens had entered their lands, including their warlord, King Sigmar. Runners were dispatched with all haste to Queen Freya of the Asoborns with the news: tribute or war — none could say for sure — was about to be delivered. And so it was that King Krugar of the Taleutens, Gwynned and Curbad stood on the palisade above the gilded gate of Taalahim and looked upon the procession as it made its way down the road towards the town. They had mustered their warriors who lined the walls on either side of them. They were grim faced and fierce, gripping their spears in strong hands and the walls groaned under the weight of so many men. Behind them were drawn up archers.

In the forests encircling the town, Asoborn warrior-women lay hidden, ready to fall upon the Unberogens at a signal from the walls. These born ambushers were lightly armoured in leather jerkins. They

hefted javelins, carried small round shields and had hatchets tucked into their belts. The metal of their blades was dulled with a mixture of oil and ash, so light would not reflect from them.



(iv)

Taleuten cavalry had formed up in the flat fields on either side of Sigmar's column, ready to ride to the attack. They were heavily armoured and carried long-hafted axes and oval shields. Their horses – magnificent creatures protected by heavy leather barding – stamped and snorted, impatient to charge.

All this Sigmar saw as he rode at the head of the column on his own trusty warhorse. He was clad in his finest bronze armour which glowed in the sunlight. About his powerful shoulders there flowed a red cloak and on his head was his famous boar mask

helmet. He carried Ghal Maraz over his shoulder and he exuded an aura of power and nonchalance. He looked not upon the Taleutens who flanked him on either side, or into the dark woods where the ambushers lurked. Instead, he looked ahead, his bright eyes gleaming.

Behind him were his chosen warriors. All wore brightly burnished armour and carried tall spears and wide shields. Around the horses trotted long-legged hunting dogs. On foot, a hundred Great Hall Guards marched in step. Over their shoulders they carried poleaxes and as the sun kissed their gold-plated armour it cast a yellow glow around them.

Sigmar called a halt to the column. At a signal, the foot soldiers filed off the road and formed up into ranks. They rammed their poleaxes into the ground, a sign that they did not intend to use them that day. Gwynned stifled a sigh of relief.

Through the parting ranks of men, eight covered carts drawn by straining oxen rumbled forward. Wolfgart rode with them. He put a horn to his lips and blew a long, deep note.

'Sigmar, warlord of the Unberogens, brings many gifts for the Taleutens and Asoborns.' His deep voice easily carried to those on the walls. 'We hope these tokens will show our goodwill and also demonstrate the great strength that the Unberogens wield. It would be well for you to note the gifts and realise how it would benefit you to ally with us.'

King Krugar motioned to the gatekeepers and they swung the doors open. Sigmar and his men cantered under the palisade and behind them grumbled the carts.

'Is this charade going to work, lord?' Wolfgart whispered.

'They expect a few carts with some grain, meat and ale. What we have brought will send a message plain and strong to these folk. Whether it will work, well, I will know this only when I can look into their eyes.'

The Unberogens gathered in the courtyard. Down the wall steps came King Krugar, Gwynned and Curbad and many soldiers were with them.

'Welcome, Lord Sigmar,' Curbad said. 'This is King Krugar, Master of the Taleutens and my liege lord.' The two great warriors regarded each other and nodded briefly. Sigmar thought he could see uncertainty in his eyes.

'Welcome to my lands, Lord Sigmar. I knew your father well. We fought together on many occasions,' Krugar said.

'Indeed,' Sigmar said. 'My father said the magnificence of your cavalry in battle

was something he would never forget. In fact, he said you fielded the finest army he had ever seen.'

Krugar smiled more confidently. 'And your warriors proved very useful in my wars. I enjoyed your father's earthy hospitality on more than one occasion.'

'Much has changed in my lands since my father departed to the Eternal Warrior's Hall.'

'Indeed?'

'Indeed.' Sigmar signalled to the cart drivers and they unfastened ropes and swept back the material covering the carts. Everyone edged forward, heads craning to see what had been revealed. They saw not sacks of grain or barrels of salted meat or caskets of ale or bundles of poor furs, instead revealed was an armoury to shame the greatest king.

Oval shields wrought with swirling patterns and scenes from legendary battles lay in piles with their edges protected by soft leather wraps. Spears with smooth hafts and wide heads were bundled together like sheaves of wheat. Bronze swords with engraved blades and jewel encrusted hilts hung on wooden racks. Pieces of armour littered the cart floors: helmets, breastplates, gorgets, greaves and vambraces gleamed in the sun and basked in the amazement they garnered from the jostling crowd.

Curbad, Gwynned and Krugar looked at the treasure in astonishment. This was far beyond their expectations and none of them knew what to make of it. They rushed forward to examine more closely what they had received.

'This is what our tribe chooses to give as a gift to your people,' Sigmar said.



(v)

'We are giving far more than we can afford,' Wolfgart whispered.

'You know that, I know that, but these worthies do not,' Sigmar replied. 'And that is the most important thing.'

'This is dwarfish work,' Curbad said in wonder, turning a helmet over in his hands and running his fingers over the intricate runes carved into the iron. 'But this was made for a man, not a dwarf. A kingly gift.'

Sigmar nodded, stifling a smile. 'Aye, that was given to me by King Ironbeard of Karaz-a-Karak.' He had to stifle harder at the look of incredulity that crawled over Curbad's face.

Gwynned held a longbow and tested its tension. 'Am I mistaken in thinking this is a bow of the old folk's make? Is this truly a weapon of the wood elves?'

'You are not mistaken. We have forged powerful pacts with the dwarfs of the Worlds Edge Mountains and we trade much with them. In fact the only thing we do not barter with is our ale. It is too weak for dwarfish tastes. And the dwarfs have long traded with the fair folk of the forests and we benefit from that as well.'

Sigmar dismounted and strode over to Krugar. 'Our pact with the dwarfs states that if ever our people come under threat — any threat — we will march to each other's aid. And you know how seriously the dwarfs take their oaths,' he smiled.

Krugar smiled back, but it was not reflected in his eyes, for they were full of doubt.

'Accept these gifts with our blessing,' Sigmar said clearly. 'I desire peace between

our people.' He got back on his horse. 'In the future, if either Taleuten or Asoborn call, we will march out, bringing with us our allies from the dwarf holds. And if we should need aid, you will likewise answer the call. No tributes will be exchanged between us. Do you accept these terms?'

Krugar, Gwynned and Curbad gathered together and talked, then Gwynned stepped forward.

'We accept this pact and will honour it as long as the blood runs true in our veins.'

Sigmar and his warriors cantered down the track towards Reikdorf.

'An expensive pact,' Wolfgart remarked.'

'Not at all, my friend,' Sigmar said. 'The extravagance of our gift has convinced them that we are far more powerful than they realised. We will pay them no more tributes and we have secured firm allies. They will not forget the strength and generosity of the Unberogens in a hurry, and as men of honour they will not rescind their vow. The terms are in our favour. As you said in the spring, we bow to no one.'

And so Sigmar returned to his home triumphant. Through his cunning and diplomacy, the possibility of veiled servitude was averted. By using an iron fist in a silk glove and by issuing threat through generous gifts, Sigmar won the battle without shedding a drop of blood. And now he had the best ambushers and cavalymen in the land ready to fight with him.



(Plate IV)

Sigmar Battles Skaranorak

In which Sigmar travels into the Black Mountains to seek out the first dragon ogre, dread Skaranorak, and kill him in single combat.



To the east and south of the lands of the Unberogens lay the domain of the Brigundians, what is now the grand province of Averland. The Brigundians had always remained aloof to the Unberogens, yet it was well known that they traded much with their other neighbours.

Their south-eastern portion of the land was rich in iron and boasted fertile soil for crops. In time the Brigundians grew rich with trade. Sigmar's spies warned that this burgeoning power may in time prove a threat to their own lands. After all, no treaty held the Unberogens and the Brigundians at peace, much was unknown about them and nothing inspires fear and hostility in a man's breast like the unknown.

And so Sigmar decided something should be done, for he knew that powerful

friends increased his tribe's strength. He called his council together and bid them speak on the matter. Some said to only act when the Brigundians did and to let them make the first move. Some announced war was the only answer. A few even suggested the assassination of the Brigundian noble house. But Sigmar rejected all these notions. He was aware that they only had conjecture and rumour on which to act and the Brigundians were yet to do them ill.

'I will set forth, alone and treaty with these folk,' he announced. 'I am sure an agreement can be reached.'

Despite the protestations of the council he set out the next day, taking the forest road east. Across rivers and over hills, through wood, bog and briar he rode, until he passed the limits of his domain and entered the dwelling of the Brigundians.

Their land was flatter and emptier than his, and the view to the horizon was broken only by hillocks covered with brown tufty grass and outcrops of jagged rock that broke through the vegetation like the last burnt

timbers of a pillaged town. The endless plain awoke a yearning in Sigmar's breast; how he longed to ride forever across that everlasting place and forget the cares of the world. But instead he turned his horse to the south and made for Siggurdheim, capital of the Brigundians.

Ahead of him, standing like a ragged stone wall from north to south, lurked the



(i)

Black Mountains. Their jagged heads were wreathed in grey clouds and lightening flickered and flashed about them. On Sigmar rode, until he reached Siggurdheim, standing proudly on a rocky hill, surrounded by a stone wall. He saw many carts on the roads, filled with goods and bringing great wealth to the tribe.

Upon reaching the gates Sigmar claimed his name and title and amid much excitement was escorted to the Great Hall of King Siggurd. He was greeted guardedly but politely and asked to state his business.

'The lands of men stretch from the Grey to the Middle Mountains, from the Black to the Worlds Edge Mountains,' Sigmar

said. 'Our hallowed race resides within them like fine wine in a golden chalice and our strength as a race grows every time a child is born. Yet men turn on one another like wild dogs and ignore their neighbours' pleas for help. We are beset by enemies on all sides. Can we afford to be disunited any longer?'

King Siggurd listened to Sigmar. He was a wise man and cunning. He saw the sense in Sigmar's words and agreed. Yet he sought gain in all opportunities — indeed, many empires have been forged through deviousness.

'You say all men should heed their neighbours' calls for aid?' he said.

'Indeed I do,' Sigmar answered. 'For how else can we prosper, if we stand aside and let the wolf amongst the herd?'

'You are a great fighter, I hear,' Siggurd continued, weaving his words like a net around Sigmar. 'Your lands are protected by the strength in your arm and the courage in your heart.'

'I have fought many battles,' said Sigmar. 'And have yet to be bested.'

'Then you are to be congratulated.' Siggurd walked to the roaring fire. 'My people prosper less by force of arms and more by diplomacy and trade. Our farms provide much food for the Asoborns and the Merogens. We even trade barley with those thirsty dwarves in the Black Mountains to brew into ale. These people have become our friends and thus our land is kept safe.' Siggurd turned to Sigmar and his face was troubled. 'But some creatures do not listen to reason, nor do they seek peace through trade. True evil cannot be placated, and a great evil stalks my people and I am powerless to stop it. Perhaps you can come to my

aid, Lord Sigmar? As you say, a good man should come to a neighbour's side when called.'

And the net was closed.

The horses raced across the plain, kicking dust into the air in their wake. Sigmar rode with King Siggurd and his bodyguard galloped behind them. The mountains loomed above the land, arching oppressively over their heads.

The yellow-green grass gave way to stone as the riders scaled an incline. They stopped when the edge dropped away into a shallow valley through which ran a fast flowing river. The water glinted like polished silver in the sun and gurgled merrily around the rocks on the riverbed. But its beauty could not detract from the scene of devastation that lay on the far shore.

It had once been a small fishing settlement. Huts crowded the river, hugging the banks, but they were burnt and blackened by fire. The shallows of the river were clogged with debris. Clumps of hay from the thatched roofs tumbled and tossed in the swirling eddies and charred timbers stood stark and naked in the ground. All trace of life was gone.

'This was the village of Krealheim. Many believe this to be the first settlement of our people. It was the birthplace of my mother and father,' Siggurd said. 'It is but one of the places on the frontiers of my land that has been ravaged by the beast.'

'Of what beast do you speak?' Sigmar said, aghast at the sight before him.

'He is called Skaranorak,' Siggurd said in a hushed tone and his men made the sign of Ulric at the mention of the name.

'A dragon ogre. We believe it has been driven out of the mountains by the dwarf slayers. Now it preys on my land, laying waste to villages and murdering my folk. We are powerless to stop it.'

'Many of our best fighters have gone up the mountain to kill it, but none have returned,' a warrior said sadly.

Siggurd placed a hand on Sigmar's shoulder. 'But it is said you are the greatest of warriors. Only you can vanquish this creature for us and set my people free from its depravation. You would earn my eternal gratitude if you did this thing.'



Sigmar hefted Ghal Maraz and looked at the remains of the village. His eyes roamed over the blackened earth and the charred huts. He spied a fishing boat tethered to a post on the shore bobbing on the water. It was the only undamaged thing left.

'I will kill this beast for you. It will be a symbol of the new unity between our tribes. Wait for me here. I will return when I have fulfilled my oath, or not at all.'

As Sigmar urged his horse towards the mountain pass, the Brigundians thumped

their breasts with closed fists and muttered blessings. None there believed they would see Sigmar again.

Clouds gathered overhead as Sigmar rode closer to the feet of the great mountain range. He had forded the water downriver from the village and there he saw many bloated corpses of people and animals gathered in piles in the frothing shallows. As he passed them he breathed in the heady stink of death. The twisted piles swayed and bobbed in the current and a scorched hand sticking up through the water seemed to beckon to him.



The land sloped upwards and grass and heather gave way to hard rock and the occasional bare-limbed tree. The clouds got lower in the sky as Sigmar reached the mountain pass. By the time he had tethered his horse to a tree stump and entered the narrow ravine a cold drizzle was falling, turning the world grey. Sigmar climbed up towards the steeper slopes and into the chill embrace of the rock.

After two days and nights of toil Sigmar passed through a tight crevice and into an open place. The sky opened up over his head, wide, flat and drab as slate. He saw that he was on a spit of rock that jutted out of the mountain side. Sigmar peered over the side and saw nothing but swirling mist; the bottom was lost in its cold depths. The mountains soared up on all sides, their flanks skirted with clouds. Rocks and boulders littered this precarious place and Sigmar saw bones strewn everywhere which crunched under his feet: bones of horses, cows, sheep and humans. Sigmar knew he was near Skaranorak's lair.

He crept forward, from one boulder to another. The hiss of the rain and the shriek of the wind battered his ears, but underneath he could hear a deep, rhythmic rumbling, like the sound of a creature in slumber that grew louder with every step he took. But what size of beast could make such a racket?

He saw a cave which scarred the otherwise featureless cliff that slanted up the mountain. Around the mouth of the cave lay many rocks, which were blackened as if a tremendous heat had seared them. At the entrance of this cave, fast asleep, was Skaranorak. Sigmar gasped in wonder at the beast.

It was a thing of flesh and blood, yet it seemed harder, older and stronger than the rocks of the mountain that it called home. Its head rested against a boulder and was covered in long black hair. Its eyes were closed but Sigmar could see a baleful fire burning through a crack in its eyelids. Above its prominent brow rose a crest of bone — sharp and curved forward like an antler — yet its face was strangely human.

Sigmar could feel hot breath blasting out of its nostrils and it seemed to him that when the creature took a breath it sucked all the air from around him. Its mouth lolled open and a fat tongue roiled between teeth the size of javelins.

Its torso was shaped like that of a man — although no man could grow to such a size — and it cradled a gigantic axe in its brawny arms. The skin was reddish-brown and covered with many scars. From its waist down it had the shape of a dragon and was covered in black scales which shone like newly mined coal. It had four powerful legs, wide as oak trees which ended in hooked claws. A spine of red bone ran from the top of its broad head, across its muscular shoulders and down its back to the end of a sinuous tail. Sigmar marvelled at its savage beauty.

'The gods are smiling on me today,' he thought. 'I can kill it while it sleeps. Although it seems unjust to end its life in such a dishonourable fashion.'

The gods heard his words and saw the opportunity to test Sigmar's strength. How mighty was this man among men they asked themselves? Allowing him to kill Skaranorak in its sleep was no way to find out, so they set a plan in motion.

As Sigmar crept towards the creature he was almost overcome by its stench of damp wood and blood. Rain began to fall, softly at first, but it got stronger until the rocks ran with water and the ravine echoed with the sound of it rushing down through fissures and cracks. The mountains disappeared behind a thick pall of grey fog. Thunder grumbled angrily and the air was tense.

Skaranorak began to stir and Sigmar quickened his pace. He could see details now: the coarse black hair that grew on its arms,

the way its skin shone a deep purple when the light caught it, the pieces of flesh — some with fragments of cloth attached — caught in its teeth, the wide belt of silver clasped around its midriff, the barbs that whipped back and forth on the end of its restless tail.

Taking care to remain silent, Sigmar climbed up onto the rock where the creature's head rested. He raised his hammer and with a muttered farewell swung it down with all his might. In that very instant a clap of thunder burst with the noise of a landslide. Lightning arced down and bright fingers of power lanced into the cave. Sigmar tumbled from the rock and landed on his back. Thunder reverberated around the cave and rain lashed down. The god-sent elements of power wrapped themselves around the awakening beast in flowing rivulets of coruscating

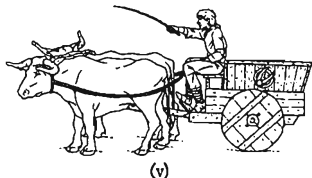


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ing blue, infusing new strength into its flesh and bones.

The creature clambered to its feet. A shard of lightning caught it full in the chest. It spread its mighty arms, threw back its head and roared to the heavens. The

rocks of the cave shook and Sigmar pressed his hands to his ears. When he removed them they were covered in blood. As the primal elements of the storm lashed Skaranorak's body, it swelled and grew taller, skin rippling as if forces beneath were trying to break out.



Sigmar backed away as the shadow of the creature fell over him. He ran into the sleet-ing rain, ducked behind a rock and offered a hurried prayer to Ulric, asking what in the world he was going to do now.

Skaranorak lumbered out of the cave after him. The beast had grown much larger and it seemed to dwarf the mountainside. It shook with rage and swung its axe into the cliff face, sending chunks of rock flying into the air and causing the ground to shiver. It bellowed its fury so loudly that Sigmar thought it would bring the mountain down upon them. The air quaked. Under the cacophony Sigmar could hear distant laughter in the sky.

Steeling himself for the fight of his life, Sigmar strode out from behind the rock to confront the beast. He could think of nothing else to do. It engulfed his vision, this thing from an age long past, a creature so powerful that it had survived millennia, growing stronger with every day and every kill. It seemed to Sigmar as if the gods had sculpted the rock into a hideous shape and

brought it to unstoppable life. Through the grey rain they stalked one another, hefting their weapons, both thinking only of killing the other, all other considerations lost in the lethality of the moment.

They fought for many hours. Sigmar leaping from rock to rock, dodging the creature's attacks, Skaranorak smiting the cliffs in its attempts to land a killing blow. As the hours crawled past the two adversaries tired, for the titanic clash enervated their souls, made their breath labour and caused their hearts to strain in their chests. Skaranorak and Sigmar both bled from many cuts. After a day and a night of combat the plateau was a cracked and shattered place. The air echoed with their battle cries and shouts, the noise competing with the rolling thunder that split the sky with its din. The rock of the mountainside became scarred from the beast's axe and Sigmar's hammer.

At midnight on the second day, Sigmar and Skaranorak stood face to face, sweat pouring from them, eyes burning with anger.

The creature lunged forward with fluid grace and great speed, bringing its axe down towards Sigmar's head, who leapt to one side finding protection behind a boulder, just before the blade bit into the ancient rock. Keeping his back against the rock he listened. Was that breathing to his left? A heavy footfall to his right? Sigmar's hands were slippery with rain and sweat.

A clawed hand groped blindly around the rock. Sigmar cried out as it tore a lump of flesh from his thigh but he managed to bring his hammer round awkwardly onto the probing finger. The runes on Ghal Maraz burst with light as it smashed into

the flesh. The creature roared and withdrew its hand. Sigmar vaulted onto the boulder and for a moment man and beast were eye to eye, then he leapt onto the creature's head, gripping its antler for balance and swinging his hammer down into its skull before leaping onto another boulder and scrabbling up the cliff onto a high ledge. He crouched inside a narrow defile and waited, breathing heavily.

The beast bellowed in pain, clutching its head. Black blood oozed out of the wound, mixing with the torrential rain and running into its eyes. It stalked down the plateau. Its head swung from side to side, sniffing the air, trying to catch a scent of its tormentor. Its eyes narrowed, it could smell man-flesh to its right. It picked up a rock and hurled it above the fissure Sigmar was hiding in. Sigmar dived forward as a cascade of rock collapsed from above, blocking the fissure's entrance. Choking on the dust kicked up by the rock fall, Sigmar scrambled off the ledge and jumped down to the ground.

Skaranorak was upon him in an instant. With a swipe of its claws it sent Sigmar sprawling towards the cliff edge, then its fist arced down to pulverise his head. Sigmar dove forward under the creature's belly and through its legs. He drew his sword with one hand and smashed Ghal Maraz into its hind leg with the other. Skaranorak lost its balance and sunk down onto Sigmar's upturned sword. Its weight was such that the blade sunk up to the hilt. The beast staggered away, scrabbling frantically at the weapon buried deep into its innards.

Sigmar leapt on to a rock and jumped into the air.

Rain lashed his body — a thousand icy needles across his skin — as he jumped, legs

braced for landing, his hammer raised over his head and his eyes never leaving their target. His leap reached its apex and he fell, swinging Ghal Maraz into Skaranorak's upturned face. It pulverised its nose, crushed its skull and buried itself into its brain. Sigmar let go of the hammer and landed, legs bent, crouched on his feet.

The beast loomed over him, arms outstretched, claws twitching. Its axe slipped from its grasp and crashed to the ground. Its once terrible face was ruined, nothing more than a shattered mosaic of dark blood, bone and brain matter with Ghal Maraz's handle sticking out of the hole.

Slowly, with the speed of a passing age, Skaranorak, scourge of the land, leveller of mountains and one of the first born of the dragon ogres, toppled over and died without a murmur. Sigmar sidestepped out of the way as it capsized and split the rock with a mighty crash. All this the gods witnessed.

Exhausted, Sigmar sat down and wept for the passing of such a mighty beast. As his tears fell, the rain finally stopped.

When Sigmar returned to the village and told Siggurd the news there was much astonishment. Sigmar had cut a tooth from the creature's mouth and dragged it behind him to prove the validity of his words. On their return to Siggurdheim, it was placed in the market square as a constant reminder of the steadfast bond between the Unberogens and the Brigundians. He had also taken part of the creature's hide and from it he made a cloak which could turn any blade and shone like the starry sky at midnight. Soon the land was talking about Sigmar's titanic duel with Skaranorak and his legend grew still further.



Plate V

The Battle of Black Fire Pass

In which King Sigmar unites the worthy tribes and sees off the greenskin menace in the greatest battle ever fought.

And so it came to pass that wherever the crude lines on the maps of men spread, great woe and lamentation was to be found and a tide of green death held sway over the southern portions of the land. Orc and men battled tooth and tusk for many long years and the war was sapping the strength from the tribes and everywhere the hearts of men faltered.

Sigmar and his generals strove to stem the flood and stop it from surging north to sweep away the fledgling nations of humankind, and under his leadership they managed to push the goblinoids back over the rivers Stir and Aver. But the lands between the Black Mountains and the Grey Mountains were entirely overrun by the enemy, and those few folk who escaped their depravations said that they had never encountered such a rapacious foe. The men of the Merogens and the Menegoths were

besieged in their capitals, barely holding out and those left alive in the southern settlements were fleeing north, away from the approaching danger and into the as yet unsullied lands of the Ostragoths and Asoborns.

Sigmar and his allies clashed with and defeated many orc tribes and goblin hordes, only for fresh rumours to reach them of new enemy armies pouring into other parts of their lands. No one slept safe and even stout-hearted Sigmar began to wonder if he would ever see the day when he could rest his head and sleep without care. Wolfgart complained that no sooner had he washed himself clean of orc blood than fresh sword fodder would charge screaming into his blade. The tide of foes seemed never ending.

The tribes of men forgot their old animosities and oft warred against the greenskins together, but with each costly victory their armies grew weaker and hope slipped away with the inevitability of sand through an hourglass. In Sigmar's twenty-sixth year, most folk thought that the end of the

world was coming. He travelled south with the best part of his armies and with many allies – at least those who were not fending off the orc invasions from the east. He knew he had to hold the bridges across the river Stir against the advancing orcs, or risk the annihilation of all the lands of men.

It was a time for one man to gather around him the strength of the tribes, wield it like a sword and put to death the gibbering green hordes, or die trying.

'Who holds the western bridge?' Sigmar asked.

'The Cherusens under King Aloysius,' Wolfgart replied.

Sigmar grunted. 'Good. His axemen are sturdy warriors. If anyone can hold the bridge, it is he.'

'Aye, and he has called upon the men from the mountains.'

'Berserkers? Ha! They will feed the orcs a tenfold taste of their own fury. And the eastern bridge?'

'It is held by the Talcutens and the Asobornis.'

'Will they stand?'

Wolfgart shrugged. 'They may. I would ask the same question of us, my lord.'

'Against this measly band of goblins?' Sigmar chuckled. 'Really, my friend, your lack of faith surprises me.'

From where they stood it seemed like the lands had been set aflame. From the horizon to the river it was a blaze of campfires. The river Aver looked like a winding black crevice reflecting the orange blazes like a million fireflies. Tall flames licked the air, staining the low clouds the colour of gold smeared with blood. The hungry fires were fed

with both the combustible remnants of the nearby settlements and the folk who used to dwell in them. Around the infernos capered uncountable orcs and goblins, chanting to their primitive gods, eating flesh from the bone and hurling shrieking prisoners into the fires.

Sigmar and his generals stood on a slight rise, surrounded by the Great Hall Guard. The sun had long set behind the hills and Sigmar wondered in his heart if it had turned its back forever on the fate of men. 'Well, if we are on our own, alone we shall be,' he thought.

They had held the bridge over the Aver for four days. His abiding memory of that time was of desperate struggle, organising reinforcements and fighting one rearguard action after another, forever denying the savage foe passage across the river. Many was the time he had thanked the patron god of the Aver for the heavy rain which had turned this usually placid river into a deep, swift-flowing torrent. The only way across was the bridge and so far Unberogen iron and courage had held it. But he knew time was running short.

With the mountain passes no longer held and the southern provinces overrun, the orc tribes were piercing the lands unimpeded and with the chance of grinding the lands of men under an iron-heeled boot in their minds, all the green-skin tribes were united in that one purpose. Every day Sigmar saw the ranks of the enemy swell as more warbands joined the throng and every day his allies grew weaker. He knew he could not hold the rivers for long for his men were exhausted. But he had one dice throw left.

As dawn encroached, grey and feeble, a rider came to Sigmar as he kept vigilant watch on the enemy lines. Already orc archers had formed up to harass the bridge defenders with desultory marksmanship.

'Train the catapults on that scum. Smash them up. I want my men to break their fast in peace,' he ordered, before turning to the horseman. It was Svein, his fastest rider and scout. Sigmar grinned and embraced him. 'I am glad to see you safe, my friend. You look dreadful. Did your mother never tell you to smarten up before you met with your king?'

Svein smiled and bowed. 'Needs must, I'm afraid, my lord. I have ridden without rest for two days and nights.'

'Is your news good?' Sigmar asked.

'Aye, lord. King Kurgan will attack at first light on the fourth day of the new moons.'



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'That's two days from now. We will hold the bridge till then. Well done Svein, we'll make a diplomat of you yet.'

For two more sunsets the Unberogens held the bridge. Finally the fourth day of the new moons arrived and Sigmar set into motion his plan. At dawn, he sent his best warriors surging across the bridge. The orcs were taken by surprise but they rallied quickly, thinking this was the last act of a desperate enemy.

As the Unberogen spearmen clashed with the orcs, Sigmar ordered all his archers and catapults to pour fire onto the enemy picket line and then he ran across the bridge to aid his warriors. Death rained down upon the foe. The angered orcs redoubled their efforts to take the bridge, but in doing so they neglected the rear echelons of their army encampment. Sigmar's heart leapt for joy as he heard war-horns blaring to the rear of the enemy.

'Onwards, men! Let us meet our dwarf allies over a land stained black with orc blood,' he cried.

The wrathful army of King Kurgan Ironbeard fell like a cataclysm on the greenskins' rearguard. Caught between the hammer of the dwarfs and the anvil of the humans, the orcs were slaughtered. The brave armies then separated, the dwarfs heading east and the men west along the river bank to relieve the allied forces holding the other two bridges.

And so the invasion was for a time stymied. But this was merely the opening skirmish of a far greater war.

Following the victory at the bridges of the Aver, the allied tribes forged into the

southern provinces, destroying the fleeing greenskins, cutting them down as they fled into the mouth of Black Fire Pass. Many thousands of orcs were killed and hundreds of warlords destroyed. It was hoped that without leaders, the orcs would dissipate into the hills and mountains bloodied, broken and dispirited. But Sigmar's vengeful host's advance was halted by the onset of a bitterly cold winter and the armies disbanded and returned to their homes, leaving behind contingents of men to protect the south-eastern lands from any



remaining orcs who had not fled back to their mountain fasts.

The lands of the Menogoths, Merogens, Halflings and Brigundians were in disarray. Entire communities had been wiped out, villages ravaged, crops burnt and food stores wasted. Many died from hunger and no one escaped unharmed from the depravations of the enemy; all had lost property or kin, or both. As winter tightened its icy grip over the lands, folk from the south fled north, seeking shelter and sustenance. The bridges over the rivers Stir and Aver became choked with refugees. Some even braved the

straits of the river that had become frozen in their bid to cross quickly. Sigmar left orders that none were to be refused entry.

Sigmar was blessed by all the desperate folk fleeing from the new threat of starvation and cold and his name became a byword for both bravery and mercy.

After the Festival of the Dead — a particularly somber and heartfelt event that year — Sigmar called a great meeting of his confederacy in Reikdorf to discuss what next to do. It became known as the Council of Eleven and it was comprised of Sigmar Heldenhammer of the Unberogens and Teutogens (for Sigmar became king of that tribe after killing King Artur in single combat), King Marbad of the Endals, King Orwin of the Thuringians, King Aloysius of the Cherusens, King Krugar of the Taleutens, Queen Freya of the Asoborns, King Siggurd of the Brigundians, King Markus of the Menogoths, King Henroth of the Merogens, King Adelhard of the Ostagoths and King Wolfila of the Udoes.

As refugees poured into the city, these great leaders discussed the best way to deal with the problems they faced. Few there knew — Sigmar aside — that this meeting heralded a new age of cooperation and kinship between the worthy tribes of humanity. It was unanimously decided that all would open their arms to the homeless migrants and each tribe would spend the winter preparing for the coming war. Scouts were returning from the ravaged south, saying many thousands of orcs yet remained in the lands and more were massing on the borders. It was agreed that a muster of all available forces would need to occur as soon as the campaign season

began. The kings returned to their homelands to see to their own defences and prepare for the summer campaign season in the following year.

After they had left, Sigmar held counsel with his closest advisors.

'This is far from over,' Sigmar said. 'The greenskins will want revenge. We have but bloodied their nose.'

'We must strike as soon as we may,' Wolfgart growled. 'If we catch them when they are in disarray we stand a fair chance of routing them and a more than fair chance of a valiant death in battle.'

'I concur with noble Wolfgart, lord,' Pendrag said. 'But I warn you, we have lost much of our strength. We will need the support of the confederacy. And who can say if they will return as they promised? A man can get comfortable when he returns to his hearth, especially with us between him and danger.'

Sigmar nodded. 'And you, Eoforth?'

'It is vital to consolidate our forces,' he replied. 'Let our men return to their families, for they deserve a respite over the winter. In the meantime, send scouts to the mountains to keep eyes on the greenskins and dispatch emissaries to all our allies. Do not let them forget their pledge. When spring comes, gather your armies together and we will march out together.'

'Sound advice, my friends. It is as you all say. We take the fight to the scourge in the spring. Until then we must prepare. Let us set about to work.'

And so it was that throughout the winter the Unberogens girded for war. As frost enveloped the land in a pale shroud, Sigmar disbanded his freemen army and told them to

return to hearth and home and see to their lands and families. They were ordered to return to Reikdorf in the first month of spring, with sharpened swords and hardened hearts.

Smithies throughout the land sang with the sound of hammers beating blades and sparks flew as steel was tempered and given bite. Armouries filled up with bundles of swords, axes and hammers, sheaves of spears, pikes and javelins, piles of shields and pavices, leather slings on poles, unstrung bows, barrels of intestines from which strings would be made, bronze gorgets and greaves, iron skull-helmets, breastplates of leather and bronze and countless arrows. The materiel of war was being made in abundance, including the newly fashioned heavy lance.

Horses were prepared and saddlers worked through the nights putting stirrups onto riding gear. Sigmar had been most impressed by this innovation from the Talcuten tribe. One day he took Pendrag onto a hill. There were two stakes driven into the ground, each with a heavy wooden shield nailed to it. He asked Pendrag to split a shield with his spear. Pendrag did as he was bid and rode towards the stake at full gallop, holding his spear at arm's length — as was the technique of Unberogen horsemen on the charge — and as he thundered past the tree he duly left his spear quivering in a rent in the shield.

Without a word Sigmar dug his heels into his stirrups, couched the lance under his arm and rode full pelt towards the other shield. To Pendrag's amazement and delight the lance smashed into the shield and shattered it into a thousand pieces.

It was then ordered that all mounted warriors of the tribe would learn this new

method of the cavalry charge. 'With the lance,' Sigmar declared, 'we will break orc lines like so many dead branches.'

Spies were dispatched to the mountains to gather news of the orcs. Some returned and all of them bore ill news; indeed, the approaching danger was worse than the confederacy had dared guess. The orcs were gathering again, this time east of Black Fire Pass, but they were not comprised of a disparate faction of many tribes and bands with their own conflicting plans and feuding warlords. This time the orcs and goblins from under the mountains were united into one vast horde, led by one powerful chieftain.

It seemed that the foul creature had made use of the disarray the orcs were in after the battles of the rivers Aver and Stir to forge the fragmented tribes into one, gathering together the shattered shards of the armies to forge a new potent weapon with which to sweep aside all resistance. The spies said that the mountains shook with the sound of ten-thousand war drums and the air vibrated with a hundred-thousand war cries. The lands at the foot of the mountains were desolate places, now the haunts of orc raiding parties and the ghosts of the restless dead. War was coming, the worst of wars and with it, perhaps, the end of the world for men.

Emissaries sped to all the capitals of the confederacy to ensure the pact between them was upheld. There were no dissenters. All the young men from across the lands were mustering at the spear counts by the death of winter. As stipulated by the chiefs and kings, every village was obliged to produce a tithe of warriors — one man in every pair of fighting age — who must be equipped

with a spear, a shield and a blade. Most villages sent all their men, such was their heart for the fight.

Many women left too, vowing to fight as well. They wielded fine-bladed swords and long knives and most carried short bows. Indeed, the Asoborn, Cherusens and the Udoses always had women in the ranks and their fury and skill in battle had turned the tide of many a knife-edge battle; sometimes their shrieking war cries and terrifying appearance was enough to put fear into the heart of a foe. It was also a common belief that men fought harder if they knew their wives and sisters were nearby, for to lose face in front of them was the lowest form of humiliation.

Feasts were held all across the land before the warriors left for the spear counts. Villages gathered together in the light of bonfires, eating and drinking, laughing and dancing. Much cavorting there was, but many tears were shed too, for all knew that life was a tenuous thing and many would not return in the autumn. Men said goodbye to their wives and children, before turning their backs on their homes and marching away, many for the last time.

Some tribes of men — those who had not been at the Council of Eleven — forsook their brothers. King Marius of the Jutones — curse his name — considered himself safe in the marshes of the wasteland and refused to send any men to the war in the south. He gave the emissary a gift of a hunting bow as a token of luck. Sigmar broke it and sent it back with a message saying he had no need for luck, he needed men. The Bretonni (now Bretonnians) also refused to lend aid. They

believed themselves better off on their own, left their lands and travelled across the Grey Mountains where they have wallowed ever since.

Sacrifices were made and festivals held to the gods of war — Ulric and Myrmdia, the god of health and healing — Shallya, and Morr, lord of death. Livestock was slaughtered and prayers offered. Not one person throughout the land shirked in their duty to show due respect and adoration to the gods.

After the spear counts and as spring prised open the grip of winter from the land, the armies of men marched south. Chieftains led their warriors on their finest horses and the roads were filled with winding columns of soldiers with sharp spears over their shoulders and colourful shields by their sides, many singing lusty paeans of war. Horsemen cantered before them, kicking up trails of dust. Creaking chariots of the Asoborns, led by proud Queen Freya, whose hair flew fair and free in the breeze and whose eyes flashed with fierce intent, clattered down the tracks, scythes quivering on the wheel bosses. Through the forests on either side stole feral Wolfkin warriors.

King Marbad sent his Ölfhednar warriors by river. They were half mad men dressed in buckskins who wielded two swords. They were whispered about in legends and carried with them a mystique that no amount of talk could dissipate. It was rumoured that before a battle they imbibed a fermented herb concoction mixed with the blood of snakes to send them into frenzy.

'I look forward to commanding them in battle,' Sigmar said.

'No man commands the Ölfhednar, lord,' Pendrag replied. 'They obey naught but the savage spirit that resides in their breasts.'

'You have seen them fight?'

'Aye, and I shall never forget it. Marbad of the Endals has sent a potent weapon for us.'

And so, by the middle of spring the lands of men had combined their forces and converged in the green valley before the mouth of Black Fire Pass. Spearmen, billmen, pikemen, axe wielders, hammerers, swordsmen, berserkers, shield-



thanes, archers, slingers, javelin throwers, skirmishers, scouts, heavy cavalry, mounted archers and two-horse chariots thronged together in the shadow of the

mountains. The battle was about to begin.



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'Well met, my friend. I am glad you stand with us,' Sigmar said to King Ironbeard. 'You must have marched hard from Karaza-Karak to have got here in such good time.'

'Nothing galvanizes a dwarf more than the prospect of a fight, except perhaps a good stein of ale.'

Sigmar took this as a hint. 'Wolfgart, fetch the king some ale.'

King Ironbeard curled his lip. 'Don't trouble yourself. I want a real drink, not that watered down mule piss you fellows drink.' He clapped his hands and several

dwarfs staggered up with a huge tapped barrel and a gigantic mug with a hammer motif stamped onto it. 'I always bring my own supply.'

'Our nations stand ready to fight together,' Sigmar said, surveying the teeming throng which blanketed the rocky plain from his vantage point on top of a hill. 'I would never have believed I would have found myself here when I was a boy playing in the forests.'

King Ironbeard grunted. 'Dwarf children do not play and we have been fighting these savages since before your folk appeared. But I must admit, what you have achieved is beyond compare in your people's short history.' He took a long swig of ale and wiped his beard with the back of his hand. 'But bringing them here is only the first part of the struggle. You'll need to mould them into a fighting army. I don't want my lads going to battle with a sham-ble. Makes them bad tempered.'

Sigmar wondered what a dwarf with a good temper was like, but he kept the thought to himself. 'We're having a council of war tomorrow. There I will appoint all the chiefs of the tribes as generals under my command.'

'Will these high folk submit to that? Men are proud and jealous, and that has been their downfall before.'

'They will submit to me,' Sigmar said firmly.

'I hope so, King Sigmar. I hope so.'

A round table was set up in Sigmar's bivouac and all the chieftains of the tribes were seated around it, as well as King Ironbeard and his ale carriers, who he insisted were on hand. Wolfgart stood

behind Sigmar, watching as the debate raged back and forth, astounded at how quiet his lord was. He seemed content to listen to his compatriots jibe and hector each other on all aspects of the coming struggle, with one hand cupping his chin, the other resting on Ghal Maraz, keeping silent but listening to every word.

King Ironbeard spent his time quaffing ale, smacking his lips and snapping his fingers for a refill. It was all the same to him. He and his dwarfs would fight when the time came whatever these foolish humans decided.

Wolfgart puffed out his cheeks in irritation when King Adelhard of the Ostagoths spoke up again, seemingly for the thousandth time that day.

'Even if I were willing to give up command of my warriors, they would follow no one else but me. Why should I relegate myself to a mere spectator in this most important of battles?'

'No one is asking you to be a spectator, Adelhard. I for one will be in the thick of the fighting with my brothers and sisters,' Queen Freya said archly.

'I only demand a say in the strategy,' Adelhard snapped. 'As well as a chance to wet my sword on orc blood.'

'You can speak about strategy now, you old fool,' King Siggurd said. 'But Lord Sigmar must take overall command at the time or we are all lost. He has my vote of confidence, for one.'

Sigmar nodded in recognition of the faith that was being shown in him.

'And mine,' Queen Freya said.

King Ironbeard burped loudly and shouted belligerently for more ale.

'I will hand over my men to no one,' old King Marbad said. 'They fight under my raven banner and under my command.'

'Then we will all die!' King Wolfila said. 'If we march against the orcs piecemeal, they will choke the Pass with our dead. I stand behind Sigmar, and proudly.'

'And what does Sigmar have to say?' Marbad said. 'What if the orcs attacked now? What then would he do?'

All eyes turned to Sigmar. Even King Ironbeard stopped drinking and bent his bloodshot eyes to him. Sigmar stood up. He gripped Ghal Maraz in both hands, swung it over his head and with a roar smashed it into the table with all his might. It shattered under the blow, sending pieces of timber flying through the air. Those sat round the table flung themselves backwards with cries of alarm and King Ironbeard was soaked with his own ale.

They lay where they fell, all eyes on Sigmar who stood over them, his face unreadable. 'This is our downfall,' he said. 'This is the incurable symptom of the malaise that will see us ground into the dust by a lesser race. The orcs stand united against while we are divided. Our race will be shattered as easily as this table, unless we stand together against the common threat.'

Sigmar walked around the circle of astounded chiefs, helping each one to their feet and back into their chairs. 'Stand behind me, do what I say and we may live through this trial. Walk out of here divided and we will all die.'

'That's one way to end a diplomatic meeting,' Wolfgart said with a smile.

Sigmar could not help but laugh. He sat on his chair with a mug of dwarf ale as the

newly recognised overlord of the combined armies of men. Each chief had been appointed general of their own armies, but they all agreed to follow orders from Lord Sigmar on the battlefield. King Ironbeard retained undisputed command over his armies — no dwarf king would place himself under the command of a man, no matter how great — but agreed to adhere to the decided strategy for the coming battle. The combined armies of the dwarfs and the chieftains would attack just after dawn the next day. Attack, Sigmar said, was the best form of defence.

Below him, spread out on the plain were thousands of campfires; it looked like the starry sky had fallen to rest on the land. He could smell the mingled odours of wood smoke, roasting meat, burning oil and incense and, almost tangible in the cool air, apprehension.

He poked the campfire with a stick then stirred the yellow goat tallow which was heating in a wide bowl resting on the crackling logs. He whispered a prayer to Ulric.

'Great wolf, god of war and fury and battle, lend me the strength of your arm, the courage in your heart and the fire in your belly so that I may prevail on the morn and be forever renowned in the history of my people.' He unwrapped a cloth and picked up four ox thighbones. He rubbed them in scented oil and cast them into the bubbling goat fat which spat and hissed. Thick clouds of sweet smelling smoke plumed into the sky. 'Accept my offering with the promise of more, if you bring me victory tomorrow.'

He got up and walked to the edge of the hill. Eoforth was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, looking at the night sky. He pointed

up. Sigmar saw that there were many birds. They made no sound, except for the soft beating of their wings.

'A good omen?' Sigmar asked.

Eoforth continued to stare at the birds. 'They are flying south. They fly south every year, do they not, my lord?'

'That is so. So it is not an omen, then.'

'They usually fly south in the autumn, my lord, yet we are barely halfway through spring.' He stood up and walked down the hill. 'They are leaving the lands of men. Make of that what you will.' And he was gone, leaving Sigmar with dread in his heart.

The next day dawned clear and crisp and the vale between the mountains was washed with pale sunlight. The camp came alive as men prepared breakfast of cured meat, black bread and cheese. Soldiers buckled on their armour and whetmen set up their grindstones to sharpen blades. Companies mustered together, talking, some laughing, but all cast apprehensive eyes towards the mountains and the narrowing pass that led up to them.

King Ironbeard strolled up to Sigmar who stood overlooking the awakening army. He set his warhammer on the ground, put a cushion on it and sat down. 'Fine day for a little ore bashing, eh Sigmar?' he bellowed before taking a lengthy pull on a tankard of ale. He sniffed. 'Clean air to be filled with the cries of those who have been relieved of life.' He spat on the ground. 'Thirsty turf to sup on the blood of the slain.' He patted his warhammer. 'And hard, dwarfish metal to get the job done. Ha! Today is a very good day.'

Sigmar had never seen the old king so merry and it did his heart good to see it.

'You look troubled, manling,' Ironbeard said. 'Have you been standing here all night?'

'Aye, King Kurgan, I have.' Sigmar cast a hand over his eyes and the dwarf realised how old he looked. 'I have been fighting all my life. I am no stranger to war, and death has ridden at my shoulder since the day my great father taught me to swing a sword.'

Ironbeard nodded and waved his tankard at his barrel bearers. He had a feeling this could be a long speech.

'I have led men into battle against men, the uberklein who inhabit the Freinmench plains, beastmen and horrible twisted

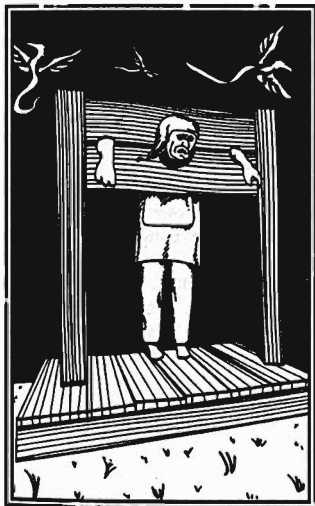
things who pollute the deep parts of my forests, and orcs and goblins and trolls. Never have I faltered and cowardice has yet to stain my heart. Yet today is different. Today I will be judged by my gods and if I am found wanting, we will all die and the life I wished to grant my people will be forever lost. King Ironbeard, what advice do you have to give me before I lead my people to their destiny?'

The venerable dwarf emptied his tankard noisily and set it down on the ground. He burped with enthusiasm and said: 'Lord Sigmar, for a chieftain of men, you think too much. Battle, like life, is a simple business. Close with the filth then hit them as hard as you can. Consider the consequences afterwards, and if the day goes ill, with any luck you won't be alive to worry about it. I gave you that hammer to hit orcs with. Remember that and you won't go far wrong. Come, we have a war to win.'

Black Fire Pass yawned before Sigmar like a hungry mouth. The great plain that the army formed up on seemed to be sucked into the throat of the mountain range and as the scouts neared them they noticed that the terrain got uglier and more treacherous.

The green grass and gently undulating hills of the open vale were gradually replaced with bare rock, inhabited only with dead trees and scattered boulders. The feet of the mountain hemmed the Pass in on either side and in the distance, as the pass climbed up, it seemed that the mountain walls closed in completely as if ready to crush anyone who dared to enter.

An Asoborn scout scurried through the rocks that lined the bottom of the western side of the pass. She looked behind her. The



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land shone green and yellow in the rising sun, but she could see how it was being eaten up by a black shadow. A pall of dust hung over the vast army and she grinned at the sight. Sigmar's host drowned the plain like a new stream fed by the rain drowns a dry riverbed. The columns were advancing in good order, approaching the mountains with the sun behind them; spears were lit up as if tipped with fire.

She could hear the heavy tramp of feet and harsh war cries. At the front rode Sigmar, flanked by each of his generals. She made the sign of Taal as she saw Queen Freya riding in her chariot, her hair flowing over her mailed shoulder like a silk cloak. Then she kissed the token of Shallya that hung around her neck for luck and hurried on up the Pass.

'Have any of the scouts returned?' asked Sigmar.



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'No, sire, but we do not need scouts to tell us the enemy is nearby. They make enough noise,' Pndrag said.

Sigmar smiled wryly. 'Aye, my friend. And I remember you telling me years ago that we should always stay downwind of an orc. Well, my nose is telling me that we are.'

The tribal armies marched in columns across the plain, King Ironbeard taking up beside Sigmar's Unberogens. They crawled forward like great centipedes bristling with ten thousand silver tipped spines, their marching feet creating vast clouds of dust that drifted with the breeze.

Captains shouted orders and soldiers sang full-throated songs and war chants. Drums were pounded, horns were winded and the air sang with the joyous, savage sound of men and women brimming with intent to bring death to their enemies. No one's heart was unmoved at the sight of such a glorious army. Nothing had been seen like it before; the combined armies of the tribes of men and at their head the greatest warrior the world has ever known.

Sigmar sat astride his favourite warhorse, its body and legs covered with green barding, depicting a charging boar and the twin-tailed comet icon in gold embroidery.

The walls of Black Fire Pass pressed on the army's flanks, rising steadily higher as they progressed. The sound of a thousand drums reverberated between the stern cliffs. Sigmar knew that many of the orc drums would be covered in the skins of men, women and children. The horses were getting nervous, stamping their hooves and whinnying. Sigmar patted his steed and whispered into his ear. He smells them too, he thought.

The odour that drifted from the narrow gorge ahead was heavy and rancid. Sigmar knew it well. It was the smell of greenskins: sweat, dung and rotten meat. His mouth burst with saliva at the recognition; battle was not far away. He spat onto the ground. He could see many flies crawling over the rocks and filling the air ahead with swarms and the lazy droning of their wings. Brought here by the smell of so many orcs, no doubt, Sigmar thought. That and the promise of plenty of dead flesh before the demise of the day.

He raised his hand. 'Halt the columns,' he said.

Pendrag blew on his horn and each general's thane took up the call until the valley echoed with the rallying sound of many war-horns. The tramp of marching boots stopped and as the last notes of the horns died, all could hear the distant bellows and roars of the orcs, still hidden up ahead. The bestial cries seemed to come from all around. Clouds loomed overhead, blown on the tepid breeze from the heights of the mountains to darken the sky and block out the sun. It began to get colder.

'The time is nearly upon us,' Sigmar said. 'Form up for battle!' he cried.

Three long blasts on the war-horn and the armies of men and dwarf rushed into action. The generals and their retinues peeled off and joined their warriors. The plan had been carefully discussed and prepared and Sigmar watched everything to ensure it was carried out as agreed.

Eoforth cantered forward and said: 'Sire, you must get behind the lines and direct the armies safely.'

Sigmar turned his horse without a word and sped back through the ranks of his men, who opened up before him, cheering their great leader. Sigmar raised his fist in salute, but inside his soul rebelled against abandoning his men. He had always fought from the front, leading his soldiers into the fray and always was he the first into the thick of the fight. His body was a canvas of scars giving testament to the bravery in his heart. But he knew he had to watch and direct this most momentous battle, the greatest battle ever to befall the sons of men.

As the ranks closed behind him his mind set upon the order of battle. It had been decided that they must take the fight to the enemy and pick their ground well. As he reached the summit of the spit of rock that thrust up from the ground — named the Eagle's Nest because it was shaped like the hooked bill of such a bird — he could see his choice of terrain was a good one. It had once been a watch place for the men of the local tribe. A ruined stone tower threw a shadow over Sigmar and his retinue as he dismounted to observe the host's manoeuvres.

The ground where his army was forming up was flat, but with a steady incline running down from the north wall to the south. It was perhaps two miles from one side to the other and Sigmar's army, when strung out in line of battle, would touch both walls without a single break. Their flanks were protected by the bastions of the Pass, which sloped up shallowly at first, until they rose sharply into precipitous cliffs of stern grey rock walls that few men could climb. Sigmar marvelled as he saw nimble Asoborns scaling the cliffs, leaping from rock to rock with the grace and sure-footedness of mountain goats, with short

bows over their backs. Others were sprinting ahead of the assembling battle line, hiding behind rocks or sheltering in cracks in the ground. There they waited. Their sure marksmanship was a weapon Sigmar wanted to use to his full advantage. After a time, the noise of the shifting army stopped.

The line had formed and all of the generals' eyes were on Sigmar. The booming orc drums were audible again, crashing into the valley walls, reverberating and chipping away at the men's resolve. Ahead was the mouth of the pass, dark and broad and empty. But the dreadful drums preached otherwise. Sigmar raised Ghal Maraz into the air and the host advanced. Horns sounded their repost to the orc cacophony and the army fell into thundering step.

They tramped up the Pass. Sigmar watched as they passed a line of huge boulders, like hills of stone, which broke up the terrain from one side of the pass to the other. Most of the infantry halted and formed up into ranks between the rocky outcrops, as smaller bands of soldiers marched on, along with the cavalry and Queen Freya's chariots. Sigmar was sending his shock troops ahead to meet the orcs while leaving a strong defensive line behind, anchored together by the rocks. Behind them were many archers, catapults and the reserves, ready to rush towards any weakening in the line. All this Sigmar saw from the eagle's nest. But he had yet to have any sight of the enemy.

'I sorely hope the scouts will return,' he said. 'I need to learn something of the strength of my enemy. Are my advance contingents strong enough? Am I sending the flower of my army to their doom?'

'I have no way of answering your questions, lord,' Eoforth said. 'But for myself I trust your judgment above all other men.'

The cavalry halted when they were a quarter of a league in front of the battle line. Dust drifted across the ground. Horses stamped and threw back their heads, spoiling to fight. The centre of the cavalry line was made up of the Unberogens and the Taleutens who fielded the finest mounted warriors. They wore their best war-gear and their horses sported half-barding of felt and leather. The other tribes' cavalry formed up on either side, with the entire right flank consisting of Queen Freya's nimble chariots. Lance captains rode up and down the line, encouraging the men, putting fight in their hearts and hatred in their guts.

Behind them were the wildest foot soldiers in Sigmar's armies: the naked fanatics, the berserkers, the bastard-swordsmen, the slingers, the headthrowers, the wailing harpies, the bladder hurlers, the fire-breathers, the gutters and the wild folk of the mountains who took on the mantle of the bear or the wolf when battle called. He watched fascinated as they prepared themselves for the coming slaughter.

The wailing harpies were in a trance, swaying from side to side, murmuring and muttering. The noise grew until it was an untamed screech dragged from the depths of their unfettered souls. It was the sound of woman's sorrow at the impending death of so many fathers and sons given voice. They waved their pale arms and pulled their wild hair, their eyes rolling in their sockets.

The headthrowers were silent. These men inhabited the southern parts of the Middle Mountains. From their leather

skirts hung severed heads, each had been pickled and some run through with spikes. The night before a battle the headthrowers sucked out the brains of their grisly mis-siles and smeared the matter over their swirling tattoos. Sigmar saw these savage warriors bless each head with a kiss on the shrunken lips to ward off their vengeful spirits, then settle down on their haunches to wait.

The firebreathers juggled their flaming brands and danced to the sound of drum and flute. They were like street performers, full of the lust and spectacle of a carnival, yet they were fighters and they professed their love of fire by scarring their flesh with brands. Each man and woman's body was a mosaic of scarring which created beautiful yet macabre patterns.

Naked fanatics capered and pranced. They had shaved their bodies entirely of hair and their bald skin was covered in

bright blue dye. Their faces they rubbed with chalk dust and their eyes with black soot so they looked like grinning skulls. They carried shields with spikes at either end with which they skewered their enemies.

The bastard-swordsmen sparred with their double-handed weapons, striking sparks and making a terrific din. Lightly armoured slingers settled down to play dice and gamble, for tomorrow they could be dead. The gutters sliced shallow cuts into their bellies with razor sharp knives and smeared each other with blood, for they believed its potency would turn any blow.

The bear and wolfkin had settled onto their haunches, gathering about them their pelts. They rocked back and forth, praying to Ulric and singing loudly. Each wore the skin of his chosen patron beast and their faces were covered with masks made from animal bones. They sported long, bone spikes which were strapped to their wrists like claws. Some of them howled, some of them roared and they all seemed to take on an aspect of the wild creatures they worshipped. Wolfkin loped among the horses in a lupine fashion, padding this way and that, and bearkin stood up with their arms hanging loosely at their sides and their heads thrown back, sniffing the air.

But it was the berserkers who were the most arresting of these outlandish warriors. They were clad in fur and hide, with leather straps studded with sharp spikes wrapped around their limbs. Their hair was long and unkempt and they had threaded bones and tusks into it. Some had dreadlocks and some used a mixture of ash and blood to make their hair stand up into horns on either side of their heads. They carried long swords and wide shields.



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These strange men gathered into a circle, gripped each other's shoulders and roared, their faces masks of fury. They passed round a drinking bladder and they each took a long draught from it then threw back their heads and gargled. Red fountains erupted from their mouths which splattered their faces and covered their hair and beards with ruby droplets. The liquid was thicker and darker than wine.

'They are supping the blood of their enemies,' whispered Eoforth. 'They do so before every battle. The blood is mixed with herbs and fungus to make an elixir that sends them into a fury that no man can match. They say no weapon will bite them.'

As they watched, the berserkers began to shiver, their teeth chattered and their faces seemed to swell and contort in a most horrible way.

'I wonder how the orcs will fare against them?' said Sigmar.

The berserkers had pushed through the disciplined cavalry and formed up in a loose line. They surged forward and then backed away, clashing their weapons together and biting their shields until their gums bled.

At that moment the wind changed, carrying all noise away from Sigmar. For a moment Black Fire Pass was quiet. All the men, women and dwarfs in the army became still. Pennants fluttered from a thousand spears, pikes and banners, bearing all the devices of the different tribes and the captains of their armies: boars, wolves, bears, dogs, hawks, horses, hammers, crossed swords, skulls, dragons, serpents and chariots. Horses stamped, armour clinked, spears rattled and overhead crows and vultures circled, patiently waiting for death to lay out a banquet.

Sigmar marked the position of his troops one last time. The cavalry and shock troops screened the main battle line with the heaviest knights taking the centre and the lighter skirmishers on their flanks, along with the Asoborn chariots. The infantry battle line's centre was made up of deep regiments of spearmen and pikemen. These tough units were deadly when fighting to their front, prodding and thrusting with their long-staffed weapons,



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but vulnerable to flank attacks. With this in mind Sigmar ordered swordsmen warbands to protect their sides.

Smaller infantry units stood behind them with orders to reinforce sections if it appeared they might break. Behind them were the archers. Some stood behind pavices and planted arrows, blade first, into the ground for easy retrieval. Endal archers had pots of pitch which they used to make flaming arrows. Reserve troops were drawn up behind them, more spearmen and swordsmen and several units of heavy cavalry. A

line of catapults punctuated the line, already limbered with their cradles loaded with rocks.

King Ironbeard's army formed up alongside the Unberogens. Ironbeard stood amongst his warriors who were armed with huge war mallets. They wore conical helmets with face masks and their precious beards were protected by plates of iron. Their stocky bodies were covered in long coats of silver leaf mail and they held heavy bronze shields before them. More than anything they resembled a solid wall of unbreakable metal. Sigmar smiled when he saw King Kurgan beckon to his barrel bearers who huffed their way through the ranks to give him another stein of ale.

Sigmar saw all this and was satisfied. But still he hungered to be with his Great Hall Guard who stood stock still in the front and centre of the line. When the wind returned to its original course, he heard the sound of many feet tramping on the rock and the fearful clatter of spears being rattled on shields. Guttural barks and shouts echoed from the approaching host as the feet kept time to the beat of the drums. From behind the defile of rock that cut off the human's view of the mountain pass, a pall of dust rose, denoting the passage of the orc horde as it got ever closer.

Men licked dry lips and blinked sweat from their eyes. The sun was overhead now and armour weighed heavily upon their shoulders. Most could only see the man to his left and right, the horsemen in front and the billowing cloud of dust in the distance.

'Tis the waiting that is the worst part,' said one man to another.

'Oh, I don't know,' said his friend. 'The longer I wait, the longer I stay alive.'

It was then that the first scout returned to the army. Sigmar heard the sharp *crack* and *swish* of a catapult unloading from behind the rocky promontory ahead and something flew up into the air. As it came closer he saw it had arms and legs that pin-wheeled, and then he heard it screaming. It hit the ground with a wet thud, barely twenty yards in front of Wolfgart and Pendrag who were leading the Great Hall Guard. The screaming stopped and the body twitched, its twisted limbs jerking. Sigmar recognised it as an Asoborn warrior woman and noticed with sadness the icons to Shallya that she wore around her neck. The goddess of healing could do nothing for her servant now.

More catapults let loose human missiles and the air was filled with their hideous screams. The orcs had set some of them alight before sending them back to their comrades and they blazed bright trails through the air; no one who heard their pitiful cries forgot them. Some crashed into the forward ranks, crushing men into the ground and breaking spears into splinters.

And then they got the first look at the foe. Orcs appeared in a solid line of green flesh and fury. They rounded the rocky outcrop, running quickly — seeming to rise out of the ground, spewing from the earth — and began to spread out across the Pass. Spears rested on their broad shoulders and they carried thick wooden shields. They fell into ranks and Sigmar marvelled at their discipline. Their red eyes were bent upon his army and he saw a fury in them that was about to be unleashed. For a moment Sigmar felt doubt gnaw at his heart.

Towering over the orcs lumbered many trolls. Their ugly faces were vacant and

stupid but Sigmar knew how frightful they were in the fray, when their visages became wild with untamable fury. In their clawed hands they carried weapons made from bones, skulls and rocks. Many had rotting fish, livestock or human cadavers hanging from their belts. They grunted and snorted as orcs drove them forward.

Amongst the orc ranks scuttled thousands of goblins. Their mean faces peeked out from beneath hoods and they were dressed in rags, sewn together roughly with stretched intestines. They were filthy and smelled of dung. They settled among the rocks and boulders, gibbering and squawking to each other. Speeding down the infantry's flanks loped hundreds of wolves with goblins on their backs. The wolves were lean and hungry, doubtless starved by their keepers to make them more ferocious in battle. My work has been cut from rough thread this day, Sigmar thought.

The two armies faced each other, no more than a quarter of a league apart and close enough to see individual details: the orc with the tusk driven through his nose, the hooked



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blades on their pikes, the spikes driven into the shields, the dismembered body parts

which hung like meat from a butcher's stall from their ragged banners.

The orcs stretched to both sides of the Pass and Sigmar could see that their ranks were much deeper than his own, and who knew how many more they had waiting in reserve? Sigmar spied goblin spider riders creeping slowly along the sides of the Pass walls. I hope the Asoborn ambushers have their wits about them, he thought.

Then the greenskins fell silent. The drums stopped, the orcs ceased their taunts and the goblins cowered in fear. A rhythmic beat at the far edges of hearing began, like the wing beats of an enormous bird. A cry of dismay came from the men as a black shape appeared in the sky above the mountains.

It looked like a bird, but as it got closer they could see it was much larger and the pulsing beats were made by clawed, leathery wings. A sinuous neck stretched out before it, ending in a long-snouted head framed with spines and armed with jagged teeth. A tail tipped with curved blades of iron swept elegantly behind it and as it landed on a precipice above the battlefield it wrapped it around its muscular legs. The light caught its scales and they burned bright. It snorted and shook its head, black eyes leering hungrily at the quailing men.

It was a wyvern and upon its back squatted the orc warchief. Sigmar had never seen a bigger greenskin, but the most striking thing about it was his grotesque, swollen head which rose up far higher than was usual for its kind. Rider and mount sat stock still on the rock. Then, slowly, the chief raised his axe into the air. The orcs roared, thrusting their faces in between the shield wall so they looked like hideous,

bellowing gargoyles. They crashed their weapons together and howled in celebration of the coming slaughter. Trolls swung their weapons about — caring little if they hit nearby orcs — working themselves up into a fury. Wolves barked and the goblins, seeing the strength of their army grew a little courage and capered about, making obscene gestures to the men before them. The din they made was atrocious and Sigmar saw many of his warriors look about themselves in fear.

‘So that is the creature who would conjure such a storm of blood as to drown the whole Pass in it. Blow your horn,’ he ordered his thane.

A long note sounded across the Pass. All eyes turned to Sigmar who stood tall on the Eagle’s Nest, the cloak he had made from Skaranorak’s hide billowing around him and Ghal-Maraz gripped firmly in his hand. When he spoke, his deep voice carried easily from one side of the Pass to the other.

‘Today is a reckoning day, for we face our most dangerous enemy. I speak not of the rabble of greenflesh over there, I speak of the fear that we all battle within our hearts. It is fear that will be the ruin of us. Look to your right and see the face of your comrade. Protect him with your shield. Turn the cleaver and the spear and keep the line true at all costs. The tribes of men stand together and before us none shall prevail. Raise your swords and defy those that have laid us low for so long. Never again shall mankind shrink before his enemies, for united we have forged a line of steel and united we will win!’

His soldiers roared in delight, crashing spears against shields and stamping their feet. When they turned back to the foe their

faces were free of fear. The front ranks anchored their spears into the ground and thrust them out before them with a solid *clacking* sound. Swordsmen drew their swords, some licked the blades and other kissed the hilts. Archers nocked arrows and drew back their bows.

The orcs settled back on their powerful legs, shields closed, spears angled forward, presenting a dark forest of rusty blades. Goblins peeked out from behind their boulders and prepared their missiles, cruel smiles on their lips.

It was the berserkers who charged first. Without a word of command, all four hundred set off towards the centre of the orc line, running past the cavalry and speeding up as the distance to the foe lessened. They began to scream, mouths stretched wide, streaked with blood and spittle. They lifted their swords and axes over their heads.

The goblin archers cackled and stepped out from behind their refuges, squinting down their arrows, taking care to aim at the approaching berserkers who were running very swiftly now with rage in their eyes. The berserkers wanted first blood and they were going to get it.

Some of the goblins lost their nerve and set loose their arrows too early, but their missiles clattered harmlessly among the rocks in front of the now sprinting berserkers. They tried to nock more arrows but their fingers began to shake. They looked up to see the rushing men — with faces filled with hatred and throats filled with ululating war cries — almost upon them. The braver of the goblins fired a volley but looked on aghast as not a single arrow made its mark. The berserkers worshipped powerful war-gods, some say they bowed to the altar of

deities darker than most would serve, and that day the divine reached out its shield and protected its most savage servants.

The goblins backed away, eyes fixed on their encroaching doom. Then, with the fury of Ulric himself, the berserkers were among them. With tremendous speed the berserkers slashed about themselves with their swords and axes, scything through necks and hacking through legs without breaking stride, they leapt in the air, thrusting their blades through necks and eye sockets. The goblins shrieked and threw themselves on the ground, discarding their weapons and voiding their bladders. The berserkers paid them little heed and jumped over them, for they knew their blades thirsted for the taste of orc blood. As they sprinted on they drew their blades across their throats in a mime of their deadly intent.

The ores growled deep in their throats, others lashed about themselves, howling in fury. Battle was about to be joined.

Sigmar watched in astonishment as this tiny contingent of his army led the charge. He could see the line of ores ripple and become disorganised. The shield wall opened up in places as undisciplined ores broke through the front ranks, eager to meet the humans head on. They raised their weapons in the air, bellowing and gnashing their teeth.

'So much for the discipline of your army,' Sigmar said with satisfaction as he watched the orc war chief dismount to rage and scream at his captains to get their troops back in line. But it did no good, for the savage beasts had the scent of blood in their nostrils and nothing could stop them. Sigmar saw a chance and leapt on it.

'Sound the charge,' he cried. 'Send forth the cavalry. Lower lances and break them all!' His thane blasted a low note on his horn, which was taken up by all the war-callers. The sonorous note echoed around the valley and the horsemen grinned. Pendrag and Wolfgart raised their lances and cried: 'Charge, men of the Unberogens!' and their call was taken up all along the line. The cav-



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alry cantered forward, bridles clinking as the horses bucked their heads, eyes wide, mouths frothing, eager to be run out.

The berserkers and ores hurtled towards each other, blood as equally savage in their veins. The berserkers' faces were contorted with fury and the ores' hideously elongated as

their huge jaws distended with guttural howls of delight.

Both sides watched in awe as the lines smashed into each other with the sound of thunder.

The berserker chief was the first to make a kill. With a leap and a cut of his razor sharp sword he clove the head of an orc from its shoulders, and around him his brothers swooped and thrust with their weapons, hacking flesh and splitting bone. Berserker fury is tempered with a martial skill unmatched by any orc and Sigmar marvelled as he watched them twist and turn, stabbing and thrusting at the greenskins.

For the first minutes of the battle, men watched entranced as the berserkers cut a swathe through the orcs. But the warboss saw this too and knew what to do. At its signal the front ranks of the orc spearmen began to jog forward. The boss could see that in open ground and with room to move, the berserkers had the advantage, but faced with a solid wall of shields they would be hard pressed to make their valiant swordplay count. The spearmen sped to a run, keeping their line. The berserkers, caught up in their battle lust, were unaware of the approaching menace.

Sigmar watched his cavalry close on the foe.

'Too slow,' he muttered. 'They are too slow.' He leapt onto his horse and before his advisors could speak he said: 'I will not leave my men to face the enemy alone.' He rode towards the brewing storm.

Pendrag couched his lance under his arm and narrowed his eyes. His ears were filled with the thunder of hooves and the battle cries of his men. On the left flank he saw

the light cavalry speed ahead, loosing arrows into the orc line, then draw their swords. The Talcutens stormed forward, their keen lances lowered and their silver armour ablaze in the sun. He grinned, heart pounding in his chest.

A horse pressed in close to his and he saw that riding it was Sigmar. All the horsemen cheered when they saw him, resplendent in his armour, Ghal Maraz held aloft and lust for victory blazing in his eyes. 'S'blood,' Pendrag thought, 'the gods have armoured him in thunder and put lightening in his veins!'

The horsemen charged past the berserkers who were finishing off the last of the first orc wave, licking their blades clean and banging their chests with their shields. As they stalked after the cavalry the other troops who had formed up with them arrived, for they were also thirsty for blood.

The orc spear hurlers halted. All they could see was a line of horsemen at full pelt bearing down upon them. Their captains shouted orders and they locked shields, plunged their spears into the ground and thrust them forward. More orcs were ordered forward to strengthen the line, but it was too late. The warboss looked on appalled as the cavalry collided with his line.

The tremendous momentum of fully armoured mounted warriors pulverized the front ranks. The heavy lances split the shield wall which buckled and broke apart and the horses crashed through into the thick of the orc line, spear hafts and orc skulls disintegrating under the impact. Horses screamed and lashed out with their hooves, foam frothing on their lips. Men

whooped and thrust down with their swords. Battle proper had been joined.

Sigmar swiped his shield into an orc's face, crushing its nose and sending him sprawling into the dirt. He swung the Skullsplitter under another orc's chin, lifting it bodily from the ground to smash into a huddled group of goblins. He urged his horse further into the press of bodies. The momentum of the charge had halted and fighting was now a close and dirty business. Lances and spears were eschewed in favour of swords, axes, hammers and maces and the air was thick with cries, shouts, sweat and blood.

Sigmar had Wolfgart on his left and Pendrag on his right and they fought with barely matched fury; Wolfgart snarled as he sliced off an orc's arm and Pendrag roared as he turned away a spear with his shield and skewered his aggressor with his sword. Sigmar looked behind and saw with relief how his heavy infantry were speeding towards the shifting battle line.

He could see that the centre of the cavalry charge had all but swept away the orc spearmen, but the light cavalry on the flank was having a harder time of it. Their horses were unarmoured and they lacked the initial devastating impact of the lance. The orcs were driving forward with their poleaxes and pikes, impaling horses which reared up, throwing their riders.

The light cavalry began to fall back. They were being cut down by the furious orcs who drove their spears into the riders and sent cackling goblins under the horses to hack at their tendons and bellies with knives. As the riders wheeled their snorting horses, treading rough shod over their fallen comrades. The orcs flooded forward, eager to

press the attack. Then the human infantry struck.

Headthrowers capered towards the orcs, swinging their grisly missiles around their heads and then flinging them with all their might. By the time they hurled themselves into the breaking orc line they had a spiked head in each hand that they used like maces.

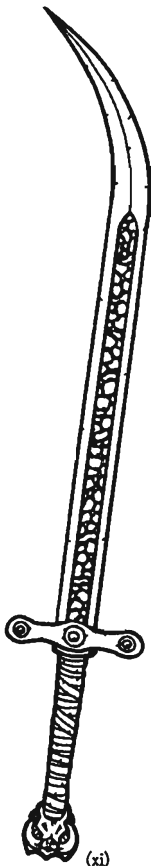
Wailing harpies shrieked at the top of their lungs as they laid into the orcs with long knives and wooden maces, and orc helmets were no protection against the blazing attacks of the firebreathers. Bladder hurlers threw their missiles filled with fermented urine which blinded and burned when they burst.

The sheer ferocity of the attack caused a shudder down the whole orc line. Seeing it buckle, Sigmar put his war-horn to his lips and blew a long rallying cry and the men redoubled their efforts. Sigmar's heart leapt as he saw Queen Freya's chariots crash through the orcs, sending broken bodies spinning through the air as the scythed wheels spliced through bone and hacked off legs. And all the time the charioteers loosed off arrow after arrow, each one finding its mark with deadly accuracy. The orcs began to fall back in disarray.

'Sweep round, my warriors!' cried Queen Freya. 'Drive the green scum into the dirt.' With magnificent discipline the chariots wheeled about, scattering the remaining orcs and spitting dirt into the air. With a crash like a rock-fall the chariots battered into the rear ranks of the orcs. Beset from all sides they panicked and were cut down by Sigmar's rampant army.

Sigmar stood triumphant upon a carpet of dead. His horse reared up, its hooves

stained black with orc blood. His warriors cheered as the last of the orc vanguard was shot down by Queen Freya's markswomen as they fled towards their lines. Sigmar raised his hammer into the air and it



glowed in the sun. He stood up in his stirrups and roared in defiance at the orc warboss.

It sat unmoving on its mount, staring down at its adversary. As if in reply it held its axe over its head and slowly lowered it so it pointed towards the horsemen. The main orc battle line began to advance. As they moved forward more appeared from the depths of the Pass. Goblins scampered down the cliffs with knives in their teeth and more wolf riders loped into view.

Sigmar realised that the army of orcs ranged before him was merely a vanguard to a much larger force. His defeat of the first wave was but a skirmish.

Wolfgart cantered over to him, nervously rubbing his elbow where Sigmar had struck him all those years before. 'They are testing our strength, lord. By Ulric, we will be hard pressed to see this day through.'

Sigmar gazed at the solid wall of shields as they advanced up the slope like an unstoppable wave. 'This is work for the infantry. Get the cavalry behind the lines. It is time to test the mettle of the tribes' foot soldiers.'

Sigmar wiped orc blood from his face and allowed his bleeding arm to be bandaged up by Eoforth.

'Sire, I beg of you to stay away from the fighting. We need you to direct the battle from here.'

'I will not stand idle, telling my men and women to fight to the death without showing them that I am also willing to accept the same fate.' Sigmar took a long swig from an ale filled goatskin, swilled

it round his mouth and spat into the grass. It was stained red with blood. 'Besides, I cannot feel the tide of battle if I am not amongst the fighting.'

He gazed down from the Eagle's Nest at the battle below. The sun was nearing the tops of the mountains, staining them red. Already long shadows were lengthening across the blasted field. After the exhilarating rush of the first encounter, the battle had changed to a brutal, close affair. The orc and human lines had met with a terrible clash and now they ground together, spears thrusting and jousting; men pushed forward with the flat of their shields and orcs hacked with cleavers and axes. The front line of warriors stood, their legs braced, spears held out before them, jabbing and thrusting with their stout handled weapons, their broad shields protecting them and the man to their left. Behind them men thrust down over their heads with their spears, skewering orcs through their faces, and the back ranks braced their shoulders to keep the line from breaking as the orcs pressed their savage assault.

Captains in the rear echelons of the army ordered reserve contingents forward when they saw the line begin to break. The press of bodies was so tight that even when men were killed, their corpses were held upright like the living dead.

Sigmar could see that the line of his warriors was but a thread when compared to the orcs and he marvelled that it held at all. Arrows darkened the air as both sides fired volley after volley. There was no need for marksmanship, for there were so many orcs and men that few missed.

The bloody battle ground on throughout the afternoon, until stars began to appear in

the deep blue sky. By now the combatants were toiling and slipping on a carpet of broken corpses and screaming wounded. The humans and dwarfs were inflicting terrible losses on the orcs and the line was just holding, but the orcs had an army of numbers uncountable and endless waves of reinforcements were sent forward to shore up the line.

Sometimes the battle line would break and men would flee, so groups of cavalry would charge forward and crash into the whooping orcs, cutting them down until fresh spearmen could be mustered to fill the gap. Thank Ulric for the anchor rocks, Sigmar thought, for they are stopping the whole line from breaking apart.

Minutes dragged by and turned into hours and the air was filled with the sound of steel ringing on steel. Men were not shouting anymore — unless it was in pain — for they were too weary. A reek of blood and fear pervaded everything and all the time the human line got thinner and the reserves dwindled.

Sigmar refused to stay behind the lines and he leapt into the fray wherever the fighting was bitterest. Many was the time that he turned the tide where it seemed all was lost. Once he rode to the far left flank where Menogoth slingers and war dogs were battling with goblin archers who were pelting the infantry below with arrows. His contingent was set upon by many goblins riding slaving wolves. They slew his bodyguards and were about to kill him when King Marbad leapt into the fray and drove them off, but a goblin shot an arrow through his neck, killing him. In a rage, Sigmar stove in the goblin's brains.

At that moment, standing over the body of King Marbad, Sigmar knew what

he had to do. It was time for him to end the slaughter once and for all.

Sigmar drew his horse to a halt behind the centre of the heaving battle line. He saw the backs of his warriors straining to hold position. Men sat slumped in groups around him, nursing their wounds or resting from the toil of battle. Those that saw him nodded in deference, but Sigmar could see defeat in their eyes. He dismounted then ran full pelt towards an anchor rock, leapt upon it then dived into the middle of the orc mob, screaming and whirling Ghal Maraz in a circle of death.

Black blood splattered as dozens of orcs were felled. They rushed forward to destroy this mad man, but the Skullsplitter smote all with great violence and Sigmar set about his bloody business with gusto. All who witnessed this extraordinary act were astonished and the men redoubled their efforts against the orcs. They cried: 'Sigmar! Sigmar!' and began to force the line back towards the mountain.

Sigmar's generals saw what had happened and ordered all reserves to the front of the line. They knew this was the moment of reckoning, when the outcome of the battle hung in the balance. Cavalrymen mounted their exhausted horses and readied themselves for the final charge.

Ghal Maraz swung left and hacked right, striking and smashing as Sigmar wielded it with the strength of a new-born god. His arms were as strong as steel and as supple as a freshly strung bow and his heart was fire and brimstone. Forward he

strode, deep into the orc army, smiting everything dead within the length of his reach, forging a bloody swathe towards the mountain where the warboss watched.

Trolls lashed out with their crude clubs, but Sigmar crushed their skulls, dashing out their tiny brains. Arrows bounced off his blood-drenched armour and cleavers were turned aside by the hatred in his gaze. Soon, orcs began to run from the fury in bronze and they began to waver.

Champions from the other tribes also leapt into the orc line. Berserkers roared and hacked with their sharp-edged shields, war dogs snarled and bit, harpies screeched and stabbed with their dirks, wolfkin howled and slashed with their claws, Menogorth Myrkinmen pulverised bones with their spiked maces and down the whole line orcs began to take backward steps.

But cries issued from many men's throats when they saw the warboss wyvern take majestically to the skies and make for Sigmar, who stood alone, surrounded by thousands of greenskins.

Sigmar was covered in so much blood that he thought that he might drown. He stood on a mound of dead orcs, severed heads and shredded limbs. His axe swung about him as he dispatched greenskins by the dozen. He seemed possessed of a god-like strength coupled with an unholy rage. Black viscera and gore dripped from him as he hacked and thrust with his hammer whose taste for blood could never be quenched.

Orcs clambered up the pile of dead to reach him, only to be maimed and brought low by the towering king who cast a giant shadow over the battlefield. His chest

heaved, his teeth were bared and his eyes were white orbs of fury in a face lathered in blood; he looked like a vengeance daemon from the old legends.

And then the orcs stopped attacking. The heaving mob that pressed against the pile of corpses backed away, their war cries silenced. A great shadow accompanied by the sound of beating pinions fell over Sigmar.

Sigmar looked up and saw the looming shape of the warboss bearing down on him on its mighty wyvern. The chief of men raised his hammer and waited, his face grim. The wyvern fell like a thunderbolt from the sky, wings wide, jaws agape. Its claws were stretched out to claim him, the hooked barbs aimed to crush his skull and eviscerate his stomach, but Sigmar parried the blow with his hammer and dived to one side.

The gigantic beast landed on the body pile, causing a landslide of orc heads. It turned to Sigmar and screeched as he scrambled out of reach of its claws and the warboss's whirling axe. The wyvern lunged forward, head low, shoulders high, teeth snapping and eyes aflame. Sigmar drove his hammer forward but it slipped from his grasp, so slippery was it with blood.

The wyvern reared up before him and the warboss howled triumphantly, for the great warrior who looked set to humble his army had lost his potent weapon and would now surely die.

Sigmar drew his sword and readied himself for the final, lonely struggle. The wyvern hurled itself towards him.

A javelin struck the wyvern in the flank, followed by another. The beast

careered away, lashing at the weapons with its forelimbs. Men appeared on top of the body pile brandishing their weapons and then they fell upon the beast with savage war cries. Sigmar saw an Unberogen strike with an axe, a Teutogen thrust with a spear, an Endal and an Asoborn fire arrows, a fierce Thuringian claw with his bare hands, a Cherusen batter with a mallet, a Taleuten pierce with the top of a cavalry lance, a Brigundian thrust with a dagger, a Menogoth and a Merogen hammer with maces and an Ostagoth and a Udoeses hack with bastard-swords. They sliced and hewed at the beast with all their might until it crashed to the ground, stone dead.

The warboss, trapped under the stricken beast struggled to free itself. Sigmar stood over it, it stopped and fixed its glowing red eyes on him. The glow lost its lustre as it recognised its defeat and impending death. It bared its teeth and growled. Sigmar raised Ghal Maraz over his head and brought it down, staving in the orc's head in a shower of blood and brains.

For a moment, silence reigned over the field of battle and then each man and woman raised their weapon and roared their triumph at the orcs who stood aghast at the death of their chief. They began to back away, to turn and run up Black Fire Pass that had spawned them. Without a word of command the warriors of the tribal alliance, led by Sigmar, gave chase and hacked them down.

And so the greatest army of orcs was defeated by the first alliance of the tribes, and thus was the Empire forged.

Sigmar Battles Nagash, Lord of the Dead

The dark episode when mankind teetered on the brink of destruction, as taken from Griegheim's Fables.

After the Battle of Black Fire Pass the goblinoids scattered and there was much rejoicing, for Sigmar's people believed that their time of strife was over. In King Sigmar they had a just overlord and the tribes all revered him. He was crowned Emperor by the High Priest of Ulric and the land stood in awe of the great warrior king who had delivered them from destruction.

But peace was not to last, for the land was full of the enemies of the sons of man.

It came to pass that Sigmar heard tell that the Crown of Sorcery — a powerful artifact that granted great strength and wisdom to the sovereign who wore it — had fallen into the hands of the dread necromancer Morath, who had taken it in his stead from the wizard Kadon whom he murdered.

The lofty, pearl tower in which Kadon had once practiced his marvelous arts was



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now a blackened thing, sulking under a sky forever roiling with storm clouds. Dark things were drawn there by Morath's necrotic ways and his malign influence was felt for many miles around.

So Sigmar set forth with an army and lay siege to Morath's tower. For many days the armies of the living fought those of the

dead, until Sigmar himself clove the iron gate in two and did meet with Morath on top of the tower. Black lightning enveloped them as they fought and those below were for a time blinded by the majicks and deafened by the noise.

At last, Sigmar threw Morath from that high place and he was broken on the ground.

Sigmar took the Crown of Sorcery for himself and grew very powerful. All marvelled as the jewels glittered like stars on his noble brow. But rumours of this wondrous thing travelled far and the agents of the undead had spirited away to the land to the east of Araby, where the bones of long dead kings stir restlessly in their sarcophagi.

Cruel Nagash, lord of all things dead, heard that the Crown had been found. He gathered his armies to him and set forth. It was his Crown, forged by his craft in an age long past and he desired it for himself again, as with it he would be able to enslave the living and extend the cold hand of death over all the world.

Into the lands of men his army marched and such was Nagash's power that the dead stumbled from their tombs to swell his ranks still further. None stood before him and he struck terror into the hearts of the living. Many died just at the sight of his ghastly visage.

His armies spread across the land, isolating villages and towns then strangling them in an inescapable noose. The sun was forever hidden by swarms of bats, insects and beasts that flew on pinions of bone. One by one, the scattered candles of man were snuffed out.

Sigmar knew what it was that Nagash wanted, and why. But how could he defeat





of strange design and their eyeless skulls were adorned with tall gear of blue and gold. Vampires sat on their steeds, cold eyes fixed on Reikdorf and their noses filled with the scent of blood.

Reikdorf was swollen with refugees who had fled there before Nagash's army and every street was filled with terrified folk who whispered prayers to their gods.

Nagash stood before the gates. He appeared to those who could bear to look at him as a black pillar of shadow and chill. He seemed ethereal, for his robes rippled and flickered with ever-changing runes and swathes of sable smoke flowed down from his gaping mouth to envelop his feet in its coils.

such a powerful foe? These warriors were not orcs, mere animals to be felled with spear and sword. These were the undead and fear was their weapon. Sigmar knew not what to do.

In the dead of winter, like a black shadow, Nagash's army fell across Reikdorf. Wraiths and wights swirled in the sky, filling the air with their icy cries. Undead corpses shuffled and moaned, vacant eyes blind, their jaws chewing on flesh they had yet to capture. Skeletons marched in serried ranks, clicking fingers clutching weapons



He floated over the ground and where he went rock split open, as if unable to bear his presence. Insects crawled from the earth and scurried about him, worms writhed and boiled as if in ecstasy. Nagash had no need for air, but he breathed on the gate and the wood began to splinter and crack as if a great frost gnawed at it.

'Man is cattle,' he breathed.

The folk in Reikdorf smelt the rot of their race's corpse and were afraid. And then Sigmar knew what he had to do. He left the Great Hall and gathered his folk about him: warriors, scouts, advisors, farmers, saddlers, women, children, merchants, woodmen, artisans and all those who had living blood in their veins, and when he spoke his voice carried to every corner of the city:

'People of Reikdorf,' he said. 'We are besieged by an army of the dead. Cruel Nagash, first of the necromancers, has come here to take the Crown of Sorcery, with which he will enslave all the lands of the living. I for one will not stand aside and let him do this. I know the fear that consumes your innards like a snake, but have courage, for we are living folk. The blood that runs in our veins is hot and vibrant, our souls are free and we are slaves to no one. It is they outside that shuffle and wail, crawl and cower under their dark master, who fear us. Take up your weapons and rally forth with me to meet this foul army. Together we will defeat them and send them screaming to the underworld that waits to consume them. Rally my Unberogens, rally to me!'

With that, Sigmar strode through the cheering crowd and ordered the gate be opened. He ran out, Ghal Maraz in his hands and faced the undead lord like an

avenging fury. Behind him poured his people — noble born and peasant, old men and boys — charged out together, shoulder to shoulder with courage in their hearts and war cries on their lips.

All night the fighting raged and never did the Unberogens falter. Sigmar was always in the thick of things, the Crown of Sorcery shining bright on his brow and his hammer hacking this way and that, cleaving and hewing wherever it landed.

When the fighting was at its fiercest the two leaders met, the lord of men and the lord of death. And such a titanic battle it was — Nagash with his long sword edged with death and Sigmar with Ghal Maraz. But such was Nagash's rage to see his crown worn by a living man that he was distracted, he tried to take it with outstretched fingers of bone and Sigmar brought him low. Ghal Maraz lunged into Nagash's black cuirass and he was sent shrieking back to the land of the dead.

Without their dark master to bind them together, the army fell into dust to be spread far and wide by the four avenging winds, and thus was Nagash's foray into the lands of men thwarted.

Sigmar was heralded again as the savior of the land and he presided over the fledgling Empire with a just heart and a strong arm. Men prospered and knew that none could defeat them with a leader such as King Sigmar.

Years passed and many dangers were faced and defeated, but after a time Sigmar knew that it was time for him to depart. And thus we come to the final story in the Life of Sigmar.

Sigmar Leaves His Empire

In which the greatest man who ever lived looks once more at his land and then departs to join the pantheon of the gods.



here comes a time when every man's tale must end. So let us end this book with the last story of them all. It is the simplest of His deeds and yet the most mysterious. It is the tale of when Sigmar left us, in order that He may return again, when our need is greatest. No one can say how Sigmar chose His time to leave, for although He was an old man, His years and trials had not robbed Him of His strength or vigour.

On this fateful day He took up Ghal Maraz and walked out of the Great Hall. He passed Wolfgart and His chosen bodyguard who were roaring with laughter at some jest or remembrance of times past. He strode down the path towards the market square where folk haggled and bartered with loud voices and much good humour. He passed them, smelling roasting meat and hearing the merrymaking of children

playing in the gutters, as He had done in His youth so many years before. Down the streets He walked, where men sat and gambled or sparred with one another and womenfolk talked with babes on their hips or prepared food for the next meal, or, having already cooked it, ate broth and beans out of earthenware pipkin balanced on their knees. Girls sat in groups, busy over fine embroidery. Sigmar saw life carry on in all its vibrancy as He walked by, unnoticed by all.

Out through the iron bound gate He walked and down the well-worn track. Carts rumbled past bringing trade and wealth into the town. On either side the fields were tended by men and women, sowing seeds from baskets hung around their necks. Children ran behind them, beating drums and yelling to frighten off the greedy crows that circled overhead. He saw sheep and goats grazing peacefully, overlooked by shepherds.

Then into the forest He plunged, journeying eastward towards the mountains. He



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passed foresters as they cleared the track of fallen branches and laid traps for game. They carried hunting bows and axes and were accompanied by slaving hounds. But the beasts picked up no scent and Sigmar blessed them silently as He passed.

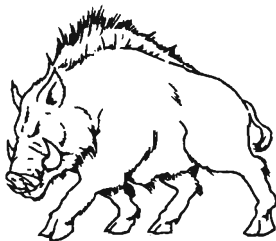
When He emerged from the forest onto the eastward plain He was no longer alone. To His left trotted a wild, grey-headed wolf, and to His right there was a giant boar with black tusks. As He set off up the hillside they followed at His heels faithfully: the wolf with his wildness and courage, the boar with his wits and tenacity.

When Sigmar reached the top of the hill, He turned. Before Him and sweeping out to the north and west was the forest. Cutting through it in all directions were roads. Every town, village and settlement was connected. Travellers and tradesmen moved like ants over them, spreading news and prosperity wherever they went. Troops of warriors tramped and cavalry cantered about the land lending the populace

protection from danger. Smoke rose high in the sky from the villages — which were burgeoning into towns, which in their turn were growing into cities — and wherever Sigmar looked He could see the strength of mankind grow.

Through Him, the tribes were united in a common cause. Enemies lurked everywhere but together men would overcome them. Sigmar looked at what He had forged with His strength, cunning and courage and He knew His work had come to an end. It was time for others to take up His mantle and forge an indomitable Empire. He held aloft Ghal Maraz in supplication to the indomitable will of humanity and as a final farewell to the people He loved. He had only one last journey yet to make.

Behind Him rose the heads of the Worlds Edge Mountains. He turned to them and without a backward glance marched towards His final destiny and His place — earned through great deeds, unsurpassed courage and much bloodshed and pain — in the everlasting pantheon of the gods.



(ii)



(Plate VI)

Appendices

Appendix I

List of Plates

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Appendix II

List of pictures

Warrior and the Land

(i) *Long-hafted Axe* – A typical axe used in Sigmar's era. Note the snake design on the blade.

(ii) *Priest of Ulric* – On festival days, priests of Ulric adorned wolf skins and paraded through the streets. It was traditional for any man bearing arms to offer gifts, in return for the priest's blessing.

(iii) *Wild Wolf* – A personification of Ulric, god of war. Wolves were feared and respected, and many warriors adorned themselves with wolf iconography to bring them fortune and strength in battle.

The Birth of Sigmar

(i) *Wise Woman* – Women such as these were believed to be able to divine the future, cure sickness, lay curses, deliver babies and were sometimes worshipped as goddesses.

(ii) *Scrianii Flesh Eater* — These disgusting creatures inhabited much of the land around the river Reik, living a savage existence and eating the flesh of their own when other food was scarce. They were driven into the Brackenwalsch during Redmane Dragor's purge. There they dwindled, menacing those who strayed across their path.

(iii) *Ghal Maraz* — The mythical weapon gifted to Sigmar by King Ironbeard after his daring rescue from the orcs. All enemies fear this powerful hammer, for the runes encrusted over it are potent indeed. It is now a symbol of our great Empire.

(iv) *Criminal Being Branded* — Law and order were harsh in Sigmar's day and it was believed that the punishment should fit the crime. It was common practice among the Brigundians to brand a cattle thief with the same mark burned into the animals of the herd he tried to rob. The criminal would then be obliged to live among the cattle until it was time for the slaughter.

The Hammer and the Hill

(i) *Human Settlement* — Most villages in Sigmar's time looked like this:

wattle-and-daub huts encircled by a wooden stockade. Important buildings like stables and the Great Hall were constructed in the centre of the settlement.

(ii) *Disembowelment* — A traditional form of execution in the Cherusen tribe was to slice open the living victim's abdomen and remove the intestines. Death was excruciatingly painful.

(iii) *Villein* — Most folk who worked the land wore simple smocks made from rough fibre. Their livelihood depended on the weather and the earth's bounty, so these folk showed great respect to the gods of nature.

Sigmar and Blacktusk the Boat

(i) *Spear Fishing* — A common method of catching fish in many of the tribes was to use a spear or stick with a fire-hardened point. The fisherman would stand stock still in the water and wait for a fish to happen past. Then, with speed and accuracy, he would thrust down and impale the luckless creature.

(ii) *Sigmar and Blacktusk* — Sigmar's encounter with Blacktusk has been rendered many times by artists over the years. In some provinces the tale goes

that Sigmar faced a bear, but the most common version involves a giant boar with black tusks and red eyes.

(iii) *The Hunt* – Hunting was a popular pastime of the nobility, and was also – as it still is – an important part of putting food on the table.

(iv) *Death and the Gourmand* – It is important to honour the gods when food is plentiful, for it is by their grace alone that bounty falls in our laps. Death awaits those who covet food for themselves alone and who feast without grace and appreciation.

The Battle of Astofen Bridge

(i) *Feasting* – Feasts were held to honour the gods, the dead, or victories in battle. Traditional food at the time was rich and spicy, and vestiges of the style can still be found in dishes in some of the more rural parts of the Empire.

(ii) *Unberogen Horse Archer* – Unberogen horsemen were second only to the Taleutens. Mounted archers could close with the enemy, firing arrows on the charge then set about them in close combat with supreme martial skill.

(iii) *Sigmar's Banner* – Sigmar's battle banner went with him wherever he did, held

aloft by Pendrag, his most fearsome bodyguard.

(iv) *Taleuten Warrior* – Tough warriors who were adept at fighting with hammers, even on horseback. Note the close mail shirt.

(v) *Dancing Bear* – Street entertainment was varied and vibrant, just as it is today. A favourite was the dancing bear, the bigger and wilder the better.

(vi) *Northman Warrior* – The savage men from the northern territories were expert horsemen. These ferocious marauders would often foray south to burn, murder and plunder. King Björn died fighting men like this.

Sigmar and King Ironbeard

(i) *Orc* – The scourge of humanity. Sigmar bested these foul creatures on many occasions.

(ii) *Sigmar's Bodyguard Helmet* – Sigmar's elite bodyguard wore ornate armour and helmets fashioned to resemble Blacktusk the boar. Unberogen craftsmanship was the best in the land, due to their close relationship with the dwarfs.

(iii) *Asoborn Horseman* – Asoborn skirmishers were unparalleled in their use of the javelin. Their savage aspect and fearlessness

on the charge were well renowned. Note the intricate tattoos, worn to honour the gods.

Sigmar Sends Tribute to the Taleutens and the Asoborns

(i) *Master of the Horses* — Horses were valued highly by our forebears, for with these noble beasts did they farm, travel and make war. The Unberogens were among the finest horse-breakers. Masters of the Horses were important people in tribal life, for by their skill was the livelihood of the people ensured. War was fought from the back of a horse, and strong mounts were essential for a tribe's success.

(ii) *Sigmar Receives an Emissary* — Diplomats were sent from one tribe leader to another in order to offer alliances or trade agreements. Proper rules of conduct had to be followed, with great deference shown to the receiving chieftains.

(iii) *Man Ploughing* — Most folk in Sigmar's day were employed in the fields. It was back-breaking work and labour lasted from dawn until dusk.

(iv) *Tree Felling* — Plenty of wood was essential for a tribe's growth. The area around a village stockade was often

cleared of trees so the wood could be used to build, and so that attackers could be seen from some distance. Those woodsmen who ventured into the forest had to be ready to fend off attacks from wild animals, beastmen and mutants.

(v) *Execution* — In Sigmar's day, many crimes were punishable by death. In the Taleuten tribe, the sin of lying with another man's wife was decapitation. The body was then buried and the head strung up in a tree, thus ensuring that the deceased soul would wander forever, blind, deaf and dumb, unable to find its way to the realm of the dead.

Sigmar Battles Skaranorak

(i) *Beastman* — The forests were infested with dark creatures, but Sigmar's constant purges ensured the lands were safe from their depravations.

(ii) *Berserker's Shield* — Shields used by the fearsome berserkers were often fashioned with a spike at each end, so it could be used as an effective melee weapon.

(iii) *Piper* — In the Endal tribe, boys were often used to pipe orders in the field of combat. They walked on stilts so they could see over the heads of the fighters and relay reports to the captains.

(iv) *Crucifixion* – This terrible form of execution was meted out by both the Menogoths and the Merogens. The victim would slowly suffocate as his lungs collapsed under the pressure of holding his body weight. Death was slow and agonizing. Suffering was increased in many ways: legs were sometimes broken, the face torn by hooks, or honey smeared on the face to attract insects.

(v) *Ox and Cart* – Note the twin-tailed comet symbol.

Battle of Black Fire Pass

(i) *War Dogs* – Many tribes used dogs in their wars. These ferocious mastiffs were trained to lunge for men's throats, and horses' bellies and legs.

(ii) *Goblin* – These cowardly creatures fight alongside orcs, often carrying bows.

(iii) *Cherusen Horn Blower* – Cherusens were fond of riotous music, and their war-bands were always accompanied by drummers and horn blowers. The noise they made was supposed to wake their ancestors' spirits from the grave, so they could watch their progeny fight.

(iv) *Ulrican Pilgrim* – In Sigmar's day the Cult of Ulric was the most widespread religion. Pilgrimage routes criss-crossed the

land and the folk who trod them often adorned themselves in wolf pelts. Many spent years travelling from shrine to shrine in an effort to honour their god.

(v) *Man in Pillory* – Humiliation was often used – as it is now – to punish folk for crimes. Passers-by were invited to throw refuse at them, and often dead animals were tied to the pillory to make the prisoner's time in captivity even more horrible.

(vi) *Flagellants* – It is interesting to note from this woodcut that religious fanatics – known as flagellants – are not just a recent plague on the land. This woodcut shows men in the act of self-mutilation in the name of religion. It seems the folk in Sigmar's time were just as prone to fanaticism as they are today.

(vii) *Savage Headthrower* – These men struck fear into the hearts of those they fought. After throwing grisly missiles into the foe they would bludgeon them to death with pickled heads run through with spikes. Many men would desert an army if they learned they would be facing headthrowers in battle.

(viii) *Warrior Priest* – The Cult of Sigmar is the most prevalent religion in the Old World. The warrior priests of Sigmar are fearsome men whose life is

dedicated to spreading the word of Sigmar, and bringing the hammer down on all non-believers.

(ix) *Mountain Man* — Because of the constant warfare and upheaval of the time, many folk were persecuted and driven into the wild places of the land. There they would become savage, eating what they could and living like animals.

(x) *Taleuten Shield* — This glorious shield is typical of those carried by Taleuten Snake Warriors. They were renowned for their speed on the strike, and their fearlessness on the battlefield.

(xi) *Hyrkelblade* — The famous swords used by Taleuten warriors. The sharp curve at the tip of the blade allowed the wielder to hack behind enemy shields, striking off their arms.

Sigmar Battles Nagash, Lord of the Dead

(i) *The Sun, Moons and Comet* — Man has long looked to the skies for inspiration and clues to what the future holds. In Sigmar's day, wise men could divine the future by tracking the path of stars and how they related to lay lines on the ground. The art is mostly lost now, but some scholars still uphold the belief that

future ages can be predicted by the ancient art of star gazing.

(ii) *Unberogen Warrior* — Ferocious fighter from Sigmar's own tribe. Note the wolf motif on the shield.

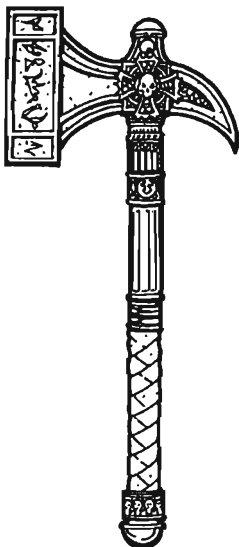
(iii) *Undead* — The walking dead have haunted the lands of the living for centuries, and few creatures stir more fear in a man's soul than a vision of what will happen to them when they too, inevitably die.

(iv) *The Withered Tree of Hope* — It is said that at the end of the earth is a tree, from which all life springs. When it withers, so the end of the mortal races is assured. Another tale tells that Sigmar Himself visited the tree, and saw that its leaves were beginning to curl and go brown. It was then that He promised to return when mankind's need was greatest.

Sigmar Leaves His Empire

(i) *Sparring Warriors* — Combat was an important part of life in Sigmar's day, so all men would spar to improve their martial skills.

(ii) *Wild Boar* — A favourite animal to hunt, due to its size and ferocity. The boar was held in high respect by the hunter cadres of Sigmar's time.



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