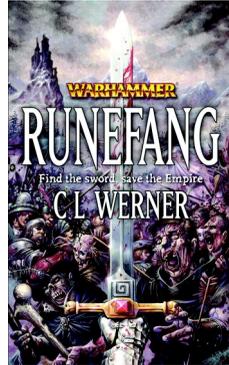


RUNEFANG

A Warhammer novel

By C.L. Werner

The mighty province of Wissenland comes under attack from an undead horde, led by a seemingly indestructible wight lord whose deathless forces vanquish all who oppose them. The fate of the state lies in the balance and as the Imperial troops are pushed remorselessly back, the elector count and his advisors come up with a desperate plan. They must find the missing Solland runefang, for with this legendary weapon they will surely win the day. Baron von Rabwald and a small force of men head into the mountains to seek the sword, unaware that a rival band of warriors dogs their steps. Can Rabwald and his men find the runefang and emerge from the mountains alive, let alone get the sword back in time to turn the tide of battle?



Runefang is an explosive tale of fantasy adventure from C.L. Werner, author of the Witch Hunter novels.

About the Author

C. L. Werner has written a number of pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications, including Inferno! magazine. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer world.

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PALACE OF THE PLAGUE LORD

BLOOD MONEY

BLOON AND STEEL

BLOOD OF THE DRAGON

The following is an excerpt from *RUNEFANG* by C.L. Werner.
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ARMIN VON STARKBERG strode from his tent, nodding to the page who held the flap for him. The page was a young, dark-haired boy, perhaps only a few winters younger than Armin had been when he'd earned the spurs of a knight. The thought gave him pause. Would that be the legacy of this battle? A host of squires and pages given their spurs, not because of some act of valour, but simply to fill out the ranks of a depleted order? Armin clenched his hand into the sign of the goddess Myrmidia to ward away the ugly image. The man who rode to war with his head full of doubt and defeat only brought his fears to fruition.

The knight stood just outside his pavilion, letting the breeze brush along his closely-cropped skull, feeling the unseen fingers of the wind tease across his patrician features. Eyes as blue as the waters of the Reik studied the cluster of tents that surrounded him, a field of black and red pavilions that swarmed in every direction, blotting out the larger camp that surrounded them. As he watched, each tent disgorged its occupant. Tall and broad of shoulder, their faces weathered by years of strict drill and discipline, their quality tested in a dozen campaigns across the province, these were the pride of Count Eberfeld's army, the razored edge of Wissenland's sword. Armin felt his chest swell as he looked on them, their red armour shining like rubies in the fading light of day, their surcoats as dark as the descending night. Upon the breast of each surcoat, picked out in golden thread, was the image of a sword.

That was who they were, Armin reflected. That was the legacy, the heritage that rested upon their shoulders and within their souls. For the sons of the Solland, the scarred frontier of Wissenland, there was no greater honour than to wear the red armour and the black surcoat, to be admitted into the almost sacred ranks of the Order of the Southern Sword. The knights could trace their history back to the very founding of Solland, and they had been there to the very end, when the orcs had come with fire and steel to lay waste to the province and slaughter its last lord, the Count Eldred. The order had endured their realm's destruction, transferring their loyalty to the lords of Wissenland when that province absorbed the ruined carcass of Solland into its domains.

An older knight, his dark hair peppered with lines of silver and a nest of crows' feet stretching from his eyes, approached Armin. The veteran dropped to one knee as he reached the younger warrior, setting his helmet on the ground beside him. Armin nodded and motioned for the knight to rise. Of the three marshals who commanded the order, it was old Eugen Grosschopp whose council he valued and trusted the most. As the youngest hochmeister in the history of the order, Armin often felt the weight of tradition and precedent working against him. In another order, perhaps it would not have mattered, but the Order of the Southern Sword was fanatical about its traditions, even maintaining the archaic title of hochmeister for its leader where other knightly orders had adopted the convention of placing Grand Masters at their heads.

There were some within the ranks who still resented Hochmeister Mannstein's appointment of one so young to be his successor. Even on the eve of battle, Armin had heard such rumblings within the pavilions of his warriors. Marshal Eugen was not one of them. He valued the hochmeister for his abilities on the battlefield, his fitness to lead and his bravery in combat. Eugen didn't care a goblin's backside about how many years a man had under his belt, or how many titles he bore before or after his name.

‘Your report, marshal,’ Armin said, addressing the older knight. Eugen set his helm beneath his arm as he stood, fixing the hochmeister with his dark eyes.

‘The men await your pleasure, my lord,’ Eugen said. Armin looked past the marshal and watched as, across the camp, squires in the livery of the order led massive warhorses towards each tent. Powerful, majestic destriers, the smallest seventeen hands high, the steeds of the Southern Swords were the finest in Wissenland, perhaps the finest in the Empire. Tradition held that there was a bit of Bretonnian courser in the pedigree of the order’s destriers. Armin did not know. He did not think that anything but the grace of the gods could produce such magnificent animals. They carried the heavy steel barding that covered nearly their entire bodies as though born into the metal skins. They would show little more strain even with an armoured rider astride their back. The quality of any body of cavalry was decided by the kind of horses that carried the riders into war, and by the kind of men who rode their steeds into the fray. It made Armin proud to know that even beside such destriers, the Knights of the Southern Sword were not found wanting.

‘Count Eberfeld has given us the centre,’ Armin reminded his marshal. ‘Ours is the position of honour. All eyes will be upon us. Remind the men that it is not their honour that will be judged today, but the honour of the order.’

‘They know the oaths they have sworn,’ Eugen replied. ‘No knight of the Southern Sword has ever forsaken his duty.’

Armin watched as the knights mounted the small wooden ladders their squires placed before them and lifted their red-armoured forms into the saddles of their steeds. Like statues, the destriers stood silently waiting for the jostling bulks of their riders to settle into the leather stirrups and wood-framed seats.

‘You have heard the rumours circulating through the camp?’ Armin asked by way of broaching the subject. He knew that Eugen would not be so remiss in his duties as to fail to become familiar with the mood among the common soldiers in Count Eberfeld’s army.

‘Spook stories and old wives’ tales,’ Eugen sneered. ‘Even our squires are too stout to be troubled by such gossip!’

Armin nodded his head, but he had his doubts. The reports that had come back from General Hock’s scouts were troubling. Since the first attack had been reported, seven towns and villages had been razed, not so much as a dog left alive within the smouldering ruins. If the perpetrators had been beastmen or orcs, or even a free company turned brigand, Armin would never have questioned the valour of his men, but the things that were despoiling Wissenland were none of these, at least, not any more. The walking dead, abominations from beyond the grave, that was what was menacing the people of Wissenland. Against any mortal thing, the courage of the Knights of the Southern Sword was beyond question, but faced by these deathless horrors the courage of even the bravest man might falter. Even the most stalwart heart might know doubt.

The supernatural was nothing new in the long history of the order, but the menace Wissenland now faced was very different from the shambling mobs of decaying corpses called up by the curse of a witch or the malice of a vampire. These things marched with purpose, with some dread simulacrum of discipline. By night, they marched in ordered ranks, crushing anything too slow or too stubborn to flee from their path. By day, they rested within fortified encampments.

Armin felt a chill run down his spine as he recalled the deserted camp he had seen, the earthen berms and deep trenches, the palisade of sharpened logs and the cunning arrangement of gates within the defences to allow the occupants swift egress from any of the four sides of the fortification. General Hock had balked at the prospect of laying siege to one of these encampments, for how could one starve into submission a foe who was already dead? Worse, the best soldiers in the assembled Wissenland force, the three knightly orders that had answered Count Eberfeld’s call to arms, would be squandered in such an engagement. The power of the knight was the cavalry charge, which was impossible to execute against an immobile fort.

So it was that they had marched ahead of the undead host, anticipating its ghastly movement across the land. By day, the dead camped, but by night they marched. General Hock intended to bring his army smashing against the lifeless legion while they were strung out along the narrow road, which they had been following since the destruction of the village of Dobrin, before they reached the town of Heufurth.

The Order of the Southern Sword would spearhead that attack. Watching his knights slowly form ranks on the parade ground just below his pavilion, Armin knew that he could ask for no finer warriors. They would play the part they had been given, and all the horrors of Khemri would not hold them back. Armin quietened his fears. Young or old, he was their hochmeister and they would look to him to lead the way.

Armin drew a deep breath, holding the air within him for a long moment before letting it out through his teeth. Eugen gave him a curious look.

‘It is good,’ Armin told him.

‘What is good?’ the marshal replied, not understanding.

Armin looked down at his men, at three hundred of the best cavalry known to man. They had fought in many battles, in many lands. From the Siege of Averheim to crushing the orc warhost of Uhrghul, the knights had never faltered. They had upheld their oaths to Wissenland and done their duty to their adopted liege and lord. This time was different, however. This time they were fighting for something more.

The hochmeister turned his head and smiled at Eugen. ‘It is good to feel the air of Solland in my lungs again. Now, let’s to our horses and show Count Eberfeld how hard the sons of the Solland fight for their own!’

THE KNIGHTS OF the Southern Sword formed ranks, steel-tipped lances standing rigid and proud in their sheaths, their black pennants fluttering sombrelly. Eugen sat to Armin’s left, his company of knights given the honour of leading the charge by their hochmeister.

To his right, was Johannis Roth, the hero of the Battle of Meissen, where the tide had finally turned against Warlord Uhrghul Skullcracker. In recognition of his bravery, Johannis had been given the duty of bearing the order's standard into battle.

Armin felt the bittersweet pang of nostalgia and loss as he looked upon it, a tattered length of singed fabric, its scarlet field splotted with blood stains and pitted with ragged tears. Yet the standard held a respect that was beyond the rich finery of a nobleman's banner. It had been part of a tapestry that had adorned the halls of the Counts of Solland, one of the few things that had been recovered from the ruins of Pfeildorf after the horde of the Ironclaw had ransacked it in the aftermath of the Battle of Solland's Crown. There was power in the threadbare tapestry, an echo of the glory and strength that had been Solland, a strength the men who fought beneath it could feel flowing through their limbs, infusing their hearts with an iron resolve.

Beyond the ranks of his knights, Armin could see the rest of Count Eberfeld's heavy cavalry forming up: the Geschberg Guard, their massive warhammers slung from the horns of their saddles, their features hidden behind the extravagantly horned great helms they wore; the Sablebacks, their ranks filled with the nobility of Wissenland, the polished steel of their armour gleaming with a blue hue beneath the rising moon, their fur cloaks billowing about the hindquarters of their massive coursers. To the other side of Armin's knights were the Kreutzhofen Spears, commoner cavalry maintained by the merchant guilds, mounted on swift-footed rounseys, and armoured in stiff brigandines of canvas and steel, their slender weapons a pale echo of the enormous lances carried by the knights.

Armin turned in his saddle, glancing over the heads of the knights behind him, watching as the count's infantry trudged into position, fixing every company in his mind. A battle was decided not only upon knowing where the enemy was, but where your allies were as well. He could see the halberdiers from Grunwald and the spearmen from Beroun. There were the grimy archers that had mustered in the Sol Valley and marched to answer the count's call to

war. He could see the swarthy crossbowmen who had marched down from Kreutzhofen alongside the cavalry, their felt hats and elaborate uniforms betraying a touch of the Tilean about them, and the Brotherhood of Schwerstetten, a regiment of mercenaries drawn down from the Reikland border by the smell of war, their ranks sporting men from a dozen lands and weapons from a dozen more, their hawk-eyed Captain Valdner studying the battlefield with a tactician's eye.

Beside the mercenaries were Baron Ernst von Rabwald's men-at-arms, a mixed force of halberdiers and crossbowmen, the mounted baron looming above his soldiers as he conferred with his officers.

The last group to move into position was one that did much to bolster Armin's confidence: a gang of stocky, broad-shouldered dwarfs pushing a trio of wide-mouthed cannons into place upon a small hillock. Armin did not know what strange paths led the dwarfs to be employed in Count Eberfeld's army, what curious circumstances had drawn them down from the Black Mountains, but their fire-belching artillery was a welcome sight. At the Siege of Averheim, Armin had been on the receiving end of dwarf cannons and so he had a first-hand grasp of the terrific impact they could have on any battle. It would be nice to have the formidable guns as allies rather than foes this time.

Upon another hill, the sapphire banner of Wissenland fluttered above a golden pavilion. Even from a distance, Armin could make out the hulking figure of General Hock leaning over his map-strewn table. Count Eberfeld would not be far away, surrounded by his advisors and guards, monitoring every turn in the battle, wishing every moment that he was riding with his Sablebacks rather than conferring with strategists and trying to decipher Hock's maps.

The battlefield showed General Hock's eye for an advantage. The count's army occupied the high ground, giving the Wissenland commanders an unobstructed view of the pastureland that straddled the Heufurth road. Beyond the pastures were thick stretches of forest. Hock's scouts had been watching the hideous army for days, reporting on their movements. The lifeless warriors displayed a

rigid, slavish adherence to maintaining their ordered ranks. They favoured open ground where their files could maintain formation, going to great lengths to avoid broken ground and obstructions. Indeed, when such elements proved unavoidable, the entire army seemed to undergo a sort of fit as it slowly adjusted to the change in its regimen. Like puppets dancing on strings, the dead army wasn't terribly good at accepting sudden adjustments in its performance.

With the forests forming a distinct limit to the battlefield, Hock intended to exploit it to the fullest. They would funnel the dead army into a killing ground from which there would be no escape. There was always a mind guiding such hideous monsters, an inhuman intellect that stirred them from their graves and set them upon the living. Necromancer, vampire or warlock, Count Eberfeld was determined that whatever force had gathered the abominable army would not slip back into the black shadows of night. The cavalry would bear the brunt of the attack, smashing through the centre of the enemy formations. The breach the knights created would be exploited by the infantry following behind. Like a butcher's cleaver, the cavalry would cut its way through the enemy, breaking its lines and re-forming ranks on the far side of the disintegrated formations of the lifeless warriors. The horsemen would form a wall, blocking any chance for the enemy to retreat back down the road. The infantry would press against the disordered ruin the knights left behind, pushing it towards the wall of cavalry and the knights' waiting swords.

Armin smiled as he recalled the plan. It was the same strategy Hock had used against the beastmen of Thugok Festerhorn when the brutish warherds had menaced Steingart. The slaughter of the mutants had been so decisive that Count Eberfeld had promoted Hock to the rank of general. If it served him half as well today, there would be titles and lands in the general's future.

Night strengthened its hold on the land, the last rays of the dying sun a distant memory. The warm autumn breeze grew cold, biting at the face it had earlier caressed. The horses of the cavalry companies whinnied and stamped their hooves, protesting at the prolonged

exposure to the cooling darkness. Among the infantry there aroused a surly murmur that their officers never could quite silence completely. Even some of Armin's knights grumbled under their breath when they thought the marshals were not listening. Armin knew it was only nerves, the jitters that shivered through any army as it waited to do battle. In many ways, combat was never so hard on a soldier as waiting for the fight to begin.

An excited tremor ran through the army as a pair of riders appeared on the Heufurth road, but the excitement abated when it became obvious that the men were alone. As they rode past the line of knights, Armin saw that the men wore scruffy leather hauberks, brambles and dust clinging to their beards. More of General Hock's scouts, riding back to report to their commander. The wild-eyed look on each scout's face, the way he lashed his steed with savage disregard, told Armin that whatever news they brought, it was of great import. Had the army of the dead turned from the Heufurth road? Was it no longer marching relentlessly towards the battlefield that Hock had so carefully chosen?

Armin's fears for the disposition of the enemy were silenced by the flag that rose to replace the sapphire banner above Count Eberfeld's golden pavilion. It was a silver pennant and upon it were two symbols: the fang of Ulric and the spear of Myrmidia, the god and goddess of war and conflict. With the battle flag raised, every man in the army knew that the wait would soon be over.

As Armin looked back from the count's pavilion and the raising of the battle flag, he witnessed a sinister change crawling across the far side of the road. Where the path passed around the bend of the forest, a thick mist had appeared, almost glowing as the moonlight shone upon it. Another murmur passed through the ranks of the Wissenlanders as they watched the eerie fog billow out from beyond the trees. Horses stamped and snorted, but this time it was not idleness that disturbed them. Armin could feel a new chill to the air, a clammy coldness that was not the natural cool of night.

Silence descended once more, and this time it took no officers to enforce it. Every man in the Wissenland host watched tensely as the

glowing fog continued to roll down the road, billowing out to stretch from the forested slopes to the east to the thick woods on the west. It spread across the pastures, like some ethereal tide, washing remorselessly forwards, drawing nearer to the waiting soldiers and knights.

Dimly, at first, a sound rolled out from the fog. It took Armin a moment to identify it, but at length he decided it was the rattle of armoured bodies marching on the hard-packed earth of the road. No other sound accompanied it: not the snorting of draft animals, not the shouts of officers, not even the cough of a marcher choking on the dust of the trail, but only the rattle of jostling armour. Like all Wissenlanders, Armin was a pious man, but his prayers were normally voiced to Taal and Rhya, Myrmidia and Shallya. Now, only one god pulled at his devotion, the one who was all but forgotten in this age of strife. With his hand, he made the sign of Sigmar Heldenhammer, the first emperor, the man-god who had driven the black lord of the undead from the lands of the Empire and who had preserved civilisation against all the horrors of Old Night.

Shapes appeared within the fog, spindle-thin and moving with a ghastly precision that sent a fresh thrill of anxiety quivering through Armin's belly. The knight realised that no mortal host moved like that. The shapes might be mirror images of one another, for all the difference there was in their motions. They were not many, staggered out in a long line. Armin could see some that appeared to be mounted, though upon such lean, scrawny steeds that the knight could not grasp how the animals could support their riders. Then, through the opacity of the mist, Armin found his answer, instantly repenting his curiosity. He had expected horror, he had heard the tales of the nature of the foe the count had called upon them to fight, but there was no way a man, however disciplined, could prepare himself for the flesh and blood reality behind the horror.

No, not flesh and blood: only bones. The rider he saw through the fog was nothing more than a skeleton, its body absolutely picked clean of skin, meat and muscle. Upon its skull, it wore a strange, high-peaked helmet, stained almost black with decay. Around its

waist, it wore a chain belt from which was suspended a quiver that slapped against its thigh bone. The horse beneath it was likewise stripped bare, an equine apparition, as removed from the trappings of the mortal coil as its repulsive rider, the last sorry remnants of tack and harness hanging in rotten strips from its skull.

There were dozens of the silent, skeletal riders, their fleshless steeds moving in a grotesquely slow manner, as through straining to cross a greater distance than the mortal terrain Armin's eyes could see. Beyond them marched small clutches of infantry. Devoid of the strange helmets of the riders, the infantry sported grimy bands of iron and bronze around the crowns of their skulls. Strips of festering leather hung from their midsections, pathetic reminders of the armour they had worn in life. Each of the infantry carried a quiver like the horsemen's, but much larger. Armin could see large shafts protruding from the decaying quivers, another shaft gripped firmly in each skeleton's right hand. The knight was perplexed by the strange weapons. They were too big to be arrows, too short to be spears and certainly lacking any kind of edge, Armin could not decide precisely what the things were meant to be.

For what felt like an eternity, the Wissenlanders watched the ghastly army march, spellbound by the unreal horror of that silent legion. Then the silence was shattered with a resounding boom from the hill. Fire and smoke belched from the mouth of a cannon. In rapid succession, the dwarfs fired the other guns. Havoc smashed into the spindly shapes marching through the mist, as the deadly salvo bore home. Against a fortification, the dwarfs would use huge balls of iron to batter down walls of stone, but against less formidable targets they had turned to fiendish innovation. It had been called 'chain-shot' during the Siege of Averheim, a pair of fist-sized balls of pig-iron fired from a cannon, a length of chain fixing the two spheres together. When blasted out of a cannon, the iron spheres spun end-over-end, the chain hurtling along with them. The effect of the chain-shot smashing into a company of knights was hideous, the chain slashing through the legs of horses and men like a farmer's scythe through a field of wheat.

Now, the chain-shot worked its awful potency against the undead warriors. Armin could see scores of them drop as the cannon-fire slashed through them, spilling them in jumbles of shattered bone and crumbling armour. Infantry or horseman, the chain-shot took its gruesome toll, leaving inhuman corpses and equine carcasses littered across pasture and path. Yet still no cry went up from the enemy ranks. The dead that had been struck down fell in silence, giving no voice to the violence of their destruction. Only the rolling echoes from the cannons gave testament that the Wissenlanders had indeed struck the first blow.

The colour faded from Armin's face as he saw some of the toppled skeletons rise once more, to crawl towards the count's army, leaving their dismembered legs behind. The sight was one that threatened to unman every soldier present, driving home the horror they faced. Men who had looked death in the eye many times, who had struggled against the inhuman barbarity of orcs and the abominable cruelty of beastmen, felt the icy touch of fear clawing at their hearts. This was something more than death, something obscene and vile beyond description. Where other men found terror in this realisation, Armin found determination.

'Men of Wissenland!' Armin roared, his voice carrying like the boom of the dwarf guns. 'Do these wraiths unman you? Do they fill your hearts with fear? Think how much greater the fear will be when it is your wives and daughters who cower before them!' The hochmeister drew his sword, the blade singing with a metallic rasp as it cleared the scabbard. 'Strike, you dogs! Strike and send these wretches back to their tombs! For Count Eberfeld! For Wissenland! For the ghosts of Solland, strike these wretches down!'

The hochmeister set his spurs into the flank of his destrier and with a surge of motion, the massive animal was rushing towards the mist. Armin's ears filled with the thunder of hooves as his knights galloped with him. Around them, the remaining cavalry was charging forwards, weapons at the ready, war cries filling the air. Behind them, the infantry surged forwards, to cover the flanks and rush into the holes the knights would create in the enemy line. The

voices of Armin's knights lifted in song as they charged, the bittersweet ballad called 'The Lament of Solland'.

Ahead of them, the ragged clusters of walking dead reacted to the charging knights with slow, precise deliberation. The infantry, those that had been left whole in the aftermath of the cannon-fire, crooked their arms back with an eerie unison of motion, the strange short, fat-bodied spears clutched in their bony claws. Still maintaining their hideous silence, the skeletons sent their javelins hurtling across the field towards the onrushing cavalry.

The iron missiles crashed against the thick steel armour of Armin's knights and the heavy barding of the destriers, their pointed tips blunting against the armour and glancing harmlessly into the dirt. Against the lightly armoured Kreuzhofen horsemen, however, some of the iron pila struck home, stabbing into unprotected flesh, ruining shields as the cumbersome iron shafts became embedded in the wood. More troubling to the knights were the mounted archers, firing their compact bows with a cold, emotionless precision. More than a few steeds were brought down, bronze-tipped arrows sticking from throat and eye. In the rush of the charge, the thrown riders were smashed beneath the hooves of their comrades.

The charging knights lowered their lances as the hochmeister's voice rang out. Like the fangs of some great beast, they were thrust at the silent, deadly foe. A promise of death cast in steel and carved from oak, the men who bore them intended to visit, in full, their capacity to ruin.

Even as the knights smashed through them, the skeletal peltasts and undead horsemen continued their missile fire. Armin saw that they were nothing more than skirmishers, ranging out ahead of the main army, which he observed as a stretch of shadow slowly crawling out through the mist. Where mortal skirmishers would have broken and scattered before the cavalry could reach them, the peltasts held their ground, hurling pila until the very moment when their brittle bones were shattered beneath the charge. They made a sickening contrast to the men and greenskins that Armin had ridden down in his time, barely jostling his steed as the huge destrier

smashed through them, breaking apart like bundles of sticks as his lance found its targets.

Soon they were beyond the skirmishers, rushing towards the main enemy formation. Armin saw that there was little visual unity to the skeletal warriors they quickly closed upon. They carried a riotous mixture of weapons, from rusty old swords to worm-eaten scythes and blunted wood axes. He saw the squat shapes of dwarfs, the horned skulls of beastmen and the hulking bones of orcs mixed among the ranks of those skeletons that had once belonged to men. Whatever their shapes, however, and whatever the weapons gripped in their withered talons, they moved as one.

As the charge bore down on the undead host, Armin saw that they did not present a single battleline. There were holes in the formation, curious gaps in their defence. The hochmeister felt a tinge of alarm as he saw the strange deployment, but it was much too late to turn back the attack. The Knights of the Southern Sword smashed into the skeleton warriors with a thunderous impact, hurling shattered bones into the air, grinding skulls beneath hooves and impaling rotten ribcages on lances.

Then they were through, their charge carrying them past the massed ranks of the undead. The sudden absence of foes was almost more shocking than the initial impact of the attack. Armin saw a second line of undead warriors, as curiously arranged as the first, with pockets and gaps between the units. These differed from the motley rabble of the front line, however. Each of these skeletons was encased in a rusty iron breastplate and wore a heavy iron helm with flaring cheekguards.

Enormous rectangular shields, which Armin could liken only to Tilean pavises, were held against their bodies as they marched. Armin noted at once the arrangement of these better-armed skeletons. They were positioned in such a way that they approximated the gaps left in the first line. Before Armin could make sense of the observation, the knights were past the second line and crashing against a third. Armoured like the second line, these were arranged in the gaps left between the units of the second rank,

approximating the positions of the front line. It was like the arrangement of squares on a chessboard, though how deep the pattern might continue, Armin did not want to consider.

The charge had lost much of its impetus after its brutal passage through the front ranks. Smashing into the shield wall presented by the third line, many of the horsemen floundered, unable to punch through the undead warriors. Only the Knights of the Southern Sword had the power to smash their way through the third line, battering their way through ironclad husks of men fifteen deep. When they had won clear, Armin risked a look back, watching as the survivors of the charge silently and steadily re-formed their ranks, ignoring the broken carcasses of their fallen. A chill went up Armin's spine as he realised that the first line would be doing the same. Indeed, by straining, he could see the second line merging with the first, forming a single uninterrupted front, like a gate being slammed shut behind the knights.

Armin bellowed a command to his men, urging them to awareness of their danger. Then he saw it: a fourth line of skeletons, their ranks staggered in the chequerboard fashion of the others. They were yet more heavily armoured, their scrawny frames draped in scales of bronze and iron, their skulls encased in rounded helms with skirts of chain and horsehair plumes. They bore thick round shields of iron, if anything more massive than the rectangles carried by the middle ranks. Immense spears with barbed tips projected out from over the rims of their shields.

With the same eerie unison, the armoured skeletons turned towards Armin's knights, the only cavalry that had won clear of the third rank. Relentlessly, they converged upon the knights, striving to pin them with their backs to the quickly re-forming third line. Armin's bellowed commands became desperate shouts, urging his men to wheel their steeds into the swiftly narrowing gap between the units of the fourth line. There was no thought of challenging the massed ranks of the armoured spearmen. Grossly outnumbered and with the momentum of their attack already lost, Armin had no delusions about how his knights would fare against that field of

spears. They had to drive through the fourth line before they could close ranks and cut off their chance for escape. The knights heard their hochmeister's orders, spurring their warhorses to follow his lead. The rearmost riders were cut down as the undead units converged, pulled from their saddles by the barbed spears, the bellies of their destriers slashed open by the corroded polearms.

The tattered standard fluttered forlornly above the riders as they plunged through the gap. Lances were cast aside and swords drawn, as the knights slashed at the skeletons that closed upon them. Armin's ears filled with the shrieks of horses and the cries of men as they died upon the ancient spears of the revenants. Still they drove onwards, steel flashing through the mist, shattering mouldering bones with every strike. Armin thought they would never win clear. Then, suddenly his warhorse plunged into open pasture, grinding the helm of one last wight beneath its hooves. Johannis Roth smashed his way to Armin's side. Then Eugen joined him with a few dozen others. Behind them, the ranks of the fourth line became a solid wall of bloodied bronze and grinning bone. For an instant, Armin felt the urge to turn his men around, to charge back into the enemy with their silent, mocking smiles, but such mad thoughts died quickly. Armin felt as though his entire body shrivelled with the magnitude of his despair. Through the mists, he could see thin, shadowy shapes.

They had won through the fourth line only to find a fifth. Horsehair plumes and barbed spears slowly resolved, as the shadows marched out of the fog.

THE CROAKING OF crows was a ghastly din that scratched relentlessly at Armin's mind. The morning sun was a smouldering crimson flame on the horizon, like a pool of molten blood. A crow landed on Armin's shoulder, stabbing its beak cruelly into his cheek. Armin growled at the carrion eater, struggling to crawl away from its vile attentions. The black bird cawed angrily and hopped off its creeping perch, choosing to fasten onto the arm that the hochmeister left behind him.

Loss of blood caused sparks to dance before Armin's eyes. His brain felt numb, unable to focus on the horrible things his eyes tried to fill it with. He could not summon any sense of intimacy for the broken, mangled things that were strewn all around him, the carcasses and corpses of his knights. Dark blood bubbled up from some ruptured organ, spraying from Armin's red-stained teeth. He flopped down on his back, blinking as the gory spittle dripped down into his eyes. He had just blinked away his own gore when his gaze set upon the figure standing with its back to the rising sun, the rays turning its bronze spear into a shaft of fire, its plumed helm casting dark shadows over its skeletal face. One of its comrades stood beside it, one of the walking damned. Armin idly wondered if they were the ones that had slain him. He wondered if there was even enough life left within their bony husks to know any sense of accomplishment from killing the hochmeister of the Order of the Southern Sword.

The numb detachment that befuddled Armin's mind was burned away as an icy chill swept through him. The blood that still clung to his veins grew cold and his eyes grew wide in terror. The croaking of the crows was drowned out by the thunder of his failing heart. The scream that tried to rip from his throat froze in paralysed lungs.

A shape loomed between the two skeletons, glaring down at Armin. Beneath the shadow of its hood, the knight could see amber witch-lights glowing in the sockets of a leering skull. He had the impression of an armoured body encased in black scales, of iron-clad claws closed around a bladed staff, of a ragged crimson cloak that billowed around the apparition, moved by no earthly wind. The thing stared at him for a time, and Armin could feel his soul shrivelling with each passing breath. Somehow, even as he felt his spirit being devoured, Armin understood that he was already dead. In the last moment of clarity, Armin von Starkberg felt the true measure of terror.

After a time, the apparition turned away from the dead knight, leaving the crows to their repast.

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