

Manuel Dornbusch

A SILBERHEIM FRAGMENT

THE WRONG RIGHT CHOICE



BEYOND WORLDS

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THE QUARRY

»You lot are like the candidates at Grindquarry: »Are we done yet? Is that enough marble now? When do we finally get to face Morga's Claim?« Bunch of washerwomen! Except Firehead here—at least he keeps his bloody trap shut on this pointless trek,« I shout back over my shoulder. Every five hundred paces they get on my fucking nerves. Unbearable.

»So you do agree with me, Blue?« Reddeck asks spitefully. »Ha! Then the dar are mine, lads. Hand them over! I shall invest them honourably for you in the brothels along Toilstead and in Sunback.«

»No, we serve the Crown, we serve Southcrest, and the sons of Morga will carry out every order they are given with all due zeal, and we are all grateful ...« Loud laughter agrees with me before I continue: »... for this magnificent opportunity to bring honour to the Elite, secure our borders and wade through bento shit. All in the faint hope of killing that dangerous roguebear which supposedly tore apart those oh-so-poor, defenceless Nyvilans. So: for Morga!«

»For Morga!« powerful voices answer in chorus through the little wood of dense, crooked trees, which we are trudging through in full armour.

I cannot help grinning, for I know full well that my dutiful cry has just cost Reddeck the winnings he thought were safely his. But as a loyal standard-bearer of the Elite, duty to the bitter end is the second-last thing I can give. Though secretly I too think this patrol is bollocks. Still, what must be done must be done.

»Do you lot honestly believe a bear tore them apart like that? Sounds more like the work of some sadistic—«

I interrupt Reddeck again, this time with a clenched fist raised above my head. My troop obeys and drops to its knees under cover. There is something ahead. I cannot make it out properly; they might be partisans. After all, on the road here to the borderlands by the Duskwoods, I received an important piece of information that must be delivered straight to the commander. I see only shadows. Quickly, I extend my thumb and little finger from my fist. That tells the men I have spotted something within sight. Then I raise a flat hand and flick it forwards three times to indicate distance and direction. Finally, I cross my forefinger and middle finger. Whispers break out behind me.

»Thirty paces ahead, moving north, about as many as us,« Yulen Schnapphorn, my adjutant, explains to the others behind us. He will take over this troop in a few darkenings, when I can finally go home to my beloved Backfields.

My heart pounds. Faster and faster, until I can almost hear it beating in my ears. They are none of ours, that much is certain. Nor are they likely to be those long-limbed, pointy-eared wretches beyond Duskfringe. They do not come this far south; they have trouble enough north of here, on the far side of their river. They could be robbers. Smugglers or escaped gladiators. I count six or seven shadows slipping behind the last trees and making for the palisade.

We must move quickly. I turn and look upon my kneeling followers. Good lads, every one of them. Capable men. Far from home and counting on me. Fourteen expectant eyes stare back. I simply have to decide. »Fuck it. Whoever they are, we'll take them,« I hiss over my shoulder, loud enough for every man to hear it from my own mouth. A collective nod passes through them. Their souls are in my hands now. Was that wise? We have no mounts, are not fully armed, have no marksman among us and have been on our feet for some time. But there is no room

for doubt here. I have made the decision, and I shall get these men safely back to Morga's Fist and soon return to my wife and my lad. So the little sod can one day become a worthy member of the Elite himself. It is time to lead, and lead I shall.

The standard-bearer goes first, as he always has. As was custom even in the days of the First Merlon. I take up my spear, fasten the blue banner of Tower and Merlon to its upper rings and draw the sword on my left. »Follow me!« I shout, taking the first steps towards the edge of the wood. Driving out every dark thought, casting aside anything that stands between me and victory. My sword thirsts for blood, my coat for another honour, and the king for glory.

I make good progress, moving through the branches with my head held high. Nothing and no one frightens a Blue. I have been trained too well, schooled and forged for this very purpose. From the cradle onwards, through quarry, foundry, Morga's Claim along Victoryvein and, at last, the Academy. My men, too—young in years and old in experience—rely upon me, and I can rely upon them.

Onwards, onwards, ever onwards. I can already see the bright rays of the sun and, some distance away, the wooden palisade rising to protect the realm of those tree-huggers. But there is something else. Running, I narrow my eyes and lift my sword hand to shield the right one from the glare. Wading through the undergrowth in armour is hard, and I am slowly running out of breath. Still, nothing gives a man his second wind like a proper scrap. One more great stride and ...

A loud crack suddenly betrays my presence and position. Damn it, I stepped on a branch. Menacing hisses and terrifying sounds carry down from the little rise towards us. I see blue-black outlines by the wooden wall and hear blades scraping. Now even I feel uneasy. My excitement climbs beyond measure. Until now, there was still the faintest chance that they were not truly enemies, but the matter is clear. No one lays a hand on this border, and those things plainly mean to

get inside. Not while I am here. Not while we are. »Form up! Make a line! Follow me—we'll have them!« I shout so loudly that the first birds burst from the crowns into the sky.

All eight of us charge up the little rise, and with every stride that carries me ahead of the others, I pray no bolts or arrows come flying at us. It is too late to turn back now. I am running roughly in the centre of the assault line, but sprint the final paces ahead, for the banner must be the first thing the enemy sees. My comrades lag a few steps behind as I cross the last short rise of close-cropped grass and the palisade towers before me. Instinctively, I drive the spear as deep into the earth as I can and let the flag of our Skymerlon fly in the warm east wind. Then I draw my second sword and take in the scene. If only I had turned back ...

»What in all the world is that?« someone screams behind me, and six or seven loathsome beasts, crouched by the palisade and clawing and hammering at it, turn their foul, misshapen skulls towards us.

If ever there was a time to piss myself, this was it. »Reeeeeeeeeender!« I scream, more from terror than in the name of Code and Zeal. Ash-pale, eyeless maws hiss at me, then begin to move.

»Shields and spears!« one of my followers cries in a breaking voice, and those soulless bastards hurl themselves at us.

My heart is about to tear through my ribs, and I feel that miserable paralysis they tried to beat out of us from childhood. Yet here it is. It weighs down my feet as though they had been cast from lead. It dries my throat as though I had swallowed a fistful of senju powder. It floods my ears with pounding and locks every muscle tight, as if they were Nyvilans who simply refused to do as they were told.

The pack of rabid Render does not form ranks before my eyes, but hurls itself gleefully straight into the outstretched spears. Like madmen worshipping death and lusting for pain. Kerran, on the far left of our line, is the first victim. I cannot do a fuck-

ing thing. The foremost monster leaps onto Kerran's long spear and is caught upon the first barb halfway down the polearm. Scrabbling wildly for him with its claws, it hauls itself inexorably closer. The spear seems only to feed its frenzy and rage instead of keeping it at bay. Kerran screams. The sound goes through me to the marrow. I suffer with him, but I must not close my eyes. He is dying here because of me. Because of my incompetence. My decision. My wrong decision. Another monster rushes at him from the left and tears a generous chunk of flesh from the soldier's flank with its long claws. Despite the mortal wound, he remains standing. He holds fast. A light in the darkness. The Render bends down and closes its ravenous maw over the open wound. Sickening groans and croaking sounds rise as the abomination begins to gnaw the man alive. Kerran Laudrer had not been with us long, but he was a good man. A capable lad, the pride of his family, the first of them to enter the Elite instead of having to toil in wretched agriculture. Look at him standing there. Both hands still tremble upon the spear while the other beast drags itself towards him along the shaft despite the barbs.

He vomits a gout of blood onto the living green of the grass. One of the men behind him seems to have broken free of his stupor and, with a loud battle cry, drives his sword down into the Render's back. Its face smeared with blood, it releases Kerran's flank at once and falls motionless to the ground. Must have been Heggitt, judging by the broad shoulders. Kerran sways and staggers, spews thick red blood before him, yet still holds the spear. Condemned to death, robbed of his future, he simply refuses to fall. I am trembling harder than he is. Still he stands.

But the Render is already within striking distance and draws back its claws. Kerran does not even flinch now; he surely cannot. Every muscle must already have locked solid. Rigid with pain and fear, he does not so much as raise an arm to protect

himself when the claws come down. No. He stands and does not move.

I shake off my panic and take a first step towards him, meaning to help, when a broad two-handed sword crashes into the creature's ribs. Though the blow comes too late to save Kerran, the beast gives one last threatening hiss, then slashes his throat open with its sharp claws, like a kitchen knife through ripe fruit. A seemingly endless torrent of blood sprays over the Render as it curls up lifelessly. The last thing I shall remember of that cheerful, proud young soldier is the inhuman swallowing noise from his torn throat as he sinks to the ground.

But he stood until the bitter end. Whether from terror or to buy us a few precious heartbeats makes no difference. No more of my lads dies so helplessly. »Slaaaaaughter them!« I scream, at last master of my body once more. Like any weapon, hardened and made to drive every enemy of the kingdom back into its place. Living or dead, I do not give a shit any longer. I turn sideways and narrow my profile as one of the beasts charges me. My eye guides my hands. I wait patiently, wait until the last moment, then spin lightly about my own axis and let the attacker's blow pass through empty air.

There it is. The sound of swinging steel. Hissing and screams. At last we are fighting. Battle-lust surges through every vein and drives out every fear. We are no flock of sheep. We are the bloody shepherds. In the midst of my turn, I swing both blades and carve two deep furrows into the abomination's leathery hide before crossing my swords above me to catch another's paw. It all happens with furious speed. Cuts, steps, frantic movements, ducks, lunges and blows follow one another without order. We drive them back towards the palisade, and with every turn I try to glimpse the flying banner from the corner of my eye. It spurs me on. Death stinks all around me. I have already put down two of the monsters. The third falls when Heggit's sword joins mine to sever its hideous face from its misshapen shoulders.

»Aaaaaaah!« I hear Heggit scream moments later from the far side of the palisade. The Render have torn a breach through it. I strike faster until the creature before me briefly exposes its flank. There. Now. The moment has come. I hurl myself shoulder-first into the stinking beast and drive it to the ground. Then I fall upon it and bury the point of my sword deep in its skull, sending thick black blood spraying across my cheeks as though even in death it means to voice one last contempt for life. I glance around and am forced to see five dead Render and as many fallen comrades soaking the ground before the wooden wall in blood. Yulen whimpers and weeps softly, covered from head to foot in deep cuts that have turned his insides out. He is done for.

A clatter and a screech, like a pointed stone dragged across iron, tear me back into a world where Heggit and I seem to be the only ones left. Arms hanging limp, I stumble through the gap in the wall while my guts turn, twist and turn back again inside me. Heggit lies dead on the ground, face-down, his back laid open. Not even the greatest roguebear could have torn such a gash. The creature responsible still sits astride him, ripping apart the protective metal and slashing again and again with its long claws, one of which has already broken off.

Not you too, my friend. There is no saving them now. Revenge and retribution drive me. Two remain: one leaping at me, the other still crouched over my comrade Heggit. I fling the sword in my left hand hard past the oncoming Render, seize the polearm leaning against the wall behind me and hurl it with all my strength at the monster only a few paces away. Struck, it falls flat upon its back and stops twitching faster than my body obeyed the commands I gave it when I first saw these beasts.

Now I charge my dead friend and the creature. It notices me, abandons the corpse and slowly crawls to meet me. »That's for you, Heggit!« I scream loudly enough to raise little waves upon Lake Morga itself. Then I leap. Sliding feet-first towards the filth, I swing my sword while reaching out with my left

hand to pull my second blade from the ground. Then it appears above me: that unimaginably hideous mask with its hundreds of needle-thin teeth. Its drool drips into my face, and I drive my blades from its head towards its legs. I grip the hilts so tightly my wrists might splinter at any moment while the steel shears through rotten flesh, tissue and bone. The beast hisses. I am beneath my opponent's torso now and still sliding onwards while it sails over me. Once more I feel fierce resistance, but keep the swords thrust resolutely upwards. As resolute as Kerran and my men, who held fast until the end. I too hold fast, but then my hands cramp and the swords fly from them. The resistance vanishes from one moment to the next, and I scramble to my feet and turn.

There lies the Render. Its arms and legs cleanly severed by my blades, it twitches like a trout on land. I catch my breath, brace my hands upon my thighs and look across at my dead brother-in-arms. »Before it gets me, you die, you vicious fucking freak,« I snarl at the limbless filth and move towards it. The few steps feel as long as a ride along Silverford. I shall die for this. I want to die for this. Here and now, beside my brothers. But I cannot. I must not. First I have to report what happened before I follow my comrades into eternity.

It lies helpless before me, twitching with its maw stretched wide. I clench my fists; the hatred is about to burst out of me, as my heart nearly did before the battle. I kick. My iron boot smashes again and again into the creature's grotesque face. Again and again I kick until nothing remains above its neck but a dark mass. Every kick feels better—like justice and release, satisfaction and revenge. Afterwards, I stagger back towards the breach in the palisade to end Yulen's pain, if he is still suffering. I do not want to know. But after making nothing but wrong decisions, let this be the first thing I do right.

The banner, so proud and exalted where it stands, fairly shames me. I have brought the Elite neither honour nor glory. One more step takes me to the other side of the palisade, and

I see the whole extent of it. Stark, cold and merciless, until sickness rises in me. I vomit onto the ground as Kerran did before me—not blood, but all my failure and the contents of my stomach—and wish I might choke upon it there and then. Through watering eyes I look guiltily at Yulen, but he no longer moves. The rest lie still and rigid in pools of their own blood, almost peaceful after their agony, when something suddenly clatters and rustles behind me. I cannot see properly as I turn. My eyes are still filmed with tears from vomiting. *Is that Heggit getting up?* I wonder, wiping the filth from them. The supposedly dead man gives himself a brief shake, darts sideways and snatches a sword from the ground. It seems I overlooked one of those revolting beasts, but Heggit drives the blade square into the face of the monstrosity that appeared before him from nowhere, then lets the weapon fall with the Render. He pulls the polearm with which I felled one of the beasts from the corpse beside him and, without paying me any further heed, runs straight towards the quarry. *What is he doing?* No matter why he is still alive: it is a miracle, and my chance to bring at least one of my men home. *I have to follow him,* a voice inside me screams. On the way, I snatch up two axes lying nearby instead of my swords. I can still bring one man back, so I drag myself after him. »Heggit, stop! Wait!« I shout as loudly as my throat allows, and follow instead of leading ...