

Dust and Blood

by Ricardo Federico

Captain Julan Daemus stood outside the command tent, numb to the cold rain. Once you get to a certain point of saturation, discomfort no longer matters. Misery becomes a companion, a sigil to wear on your mud-splattered uniform and remind you of where you belong. And where you want to be.

“Captain?”

Daemus turned to face the soldier addressing him, a smooth-faced lad in a conspicuously dry uniform and a corporal's insignia on his collar.

Damn, I'm getting old.

“Major Bartmae is ready to begin, sir.”

Daemus took a lingering look at the unbroken ranks of iron gray clouds that had been dumping sheets of rain on them since before dawn. Then he tipped his head forward, emptying the brim of his hat, and followed the corporal inside.

The Major leaned over a crude wooden table, studying a map. The canvas tent walls glistened in the dancing light of a half dozen oil lamps, tendrils of black smoke crawling up the sloping walls toward a single smoke hole. The sputtering of the lamps was accompanied by the constant sound of dripping water.

“Major.” Daemus said, saluting.

Bartmae looked up from the map. He was a tall man, and stoutly built. Not much older than Daemus, the Major's head was covered in coarse gray stubble. Deep lines creased his face and converged around his eyes, which were bright, focused, and shot through with red.

“Daemus,” Bartmae said, straightening and holding out his hand.

“How fares the illustrious Hawk Company?”

Daemus smiled, shaking the Major's hand. “The Fourth is fit enough, sir, if not a little waterlogged.”

“We're all ready for some dry weather,” Bartmae said, releasing Daemus's hand and turning back to the map. “But still, the rain has likely restricted our enemy's movements as well. And for that, if nothing else, I am grateful.”

Daemus scanned the other officers standing around the table.

Bartmae's aide-de-camp — a tall, dour lieutenant who scowled a lot but said little — stood beyond the Major's left shoulder, brushing stray raindrops from his immaculate tunic. On Bartmae's right were Caul and Lazaner, captains of the other two companies huddled outside in the rain. In their faces Daemus saw some of his own fatigue and concern. None of their contingents were at strength, the total force comprising just under five hundred men. It should have been closer to seven hundred. They had been bivouacked on the steep slopes of the southern Krell for three days now, growing restless despite the drills and constant patrols Bartmae dispatched into the surrounding hills and hollows. Finally, it seemed, orders had come through.

“Our mission,” Bartmae began, “was to reconnoiter a two-league radius from our current position, to explore intelligence that there was significant Jandut activity in the area.” He paused, looked around the table.

“As you know, we found nothing. Not so much as a track on a footpath. I've reported to General Slakis and our new orders arrived this morning. The command believes that extending our mission further north into the Krell would represent an unacceptable risk for a force of our size. I concur. We're too big for stealth and too small to function as a primary attack element, and without a means to provision we can't go far anyway.”

Bartmae looked around the table, making eye contact with each of his officers before continuing.

“You're also all aware that we've had no seer or mage attached to this unit since spring, and I grow weary of not being able to probe these forested hills that have blinded us for more than a fortnight. The veil hangs heavy here, and to a man we've felt it growing heavier over the past few days.”

A drip of water splashed on Bartmae's shoulder and he cast a rueful glance up at the leaking canvas.

"Especially with this damnable rain. So, we're heading back to the Laurenth River to rendezvous with elements of the Fifth Battalion, re-provision, and await further orders. Questions?"

No one spoke for a long moment. The rain surged, battering the tent in a low thrum.

"The sooner we're out of this place, the better," Caul said. "When do we move, sir?"

"We'll wait for the weather to break." Bartmae replied, and saw the immediate reaction on the faces of his officers.

"I know, gentlemen. I'm as keen to take leave of this place as you are, but it would do no good to march in these conditions.

Terminate patrols. Recall the pickets to a hundred paces from the perimeter and let the men rest. I want them ready to move once the rain stops."

"Yes, sir."

Bartmae dismissed them. They were filing through the tent flap when the young Corporal caught Daemus's sleeve.

"The Major would like a word with you, Captain."

Daemus returned to the briefing table and Bartmae gestured to his aide, who for a moment looked as if he did not understand. Then comprehension spread across the lieutenant's face and disappointment darkened his features. He stepped to the tent flap, shrugged into a rain cloak, and donned a wide-brimmed hat before leaving.

Bartmae watched the flap close.

"Julan, I need to know something."

"Sir?"

Bartmae rubbed a hand over the gray stubble on his head.

"I need to know the Hawk are ready to fight."

Daemus hesitated.

"Sir, we're as shorthanded and ill provisioned as the other companies. Still, like Caul and Lazaner, we will fight when the time comes. You know that."

“No, no,” Bartmae said, shaking his head. “That's not what I mean. Something's brewing, we can all feel it. I don't know what's coming but I do know the Hawk is the most experienced company under my command — hell, in most of the Tiliad army — and I have a feeling we may need every bit of that capability, that reputation, to see us out of these hills and back to the Laurenth.”

Daemus exhaled, his shoulders sagging a little.

“Sir, we'll do our best as always, but I'll not needlessly risk my men — ”

“We've discussed this before, Captain,” Bartmae said, interrupting. “I'm not talking about sacrificing anyone. But as Captain of the most experienced element of this unit, you must accept the Hawk's responsibility to bear a disproportionate part of the burden for the unit's overall safety.”

Daemus was shaking his head, looking at the ground. They *had* discussed this before, and on more than one occasion. Every one of those conversations had ended with an impasse, an agreed stalemate. He could already sense it would not be so today.

Bartmae set his bright, bloodshot eyes on Daemus, looking him right through.

“I need you ready to fight, Julan. That's it — no reservations, no hesitation, no holding back. Come what may.”

“I understand, sir,” Daemus said. He offered a quick salute and turned on his heel.

Out in the slanting rain Daemus scanned the sodden camp perched along the steep slopes, rows of small tents rendered insignificant by the backdrop of hilltops and ridges stretching to the nebulous gray horizon. He hunched his shoulders beneath the cloak and began sloughing his way toward the Hawk banner.

Back in his tent, Daemus shrugged out of the dripping cloak and hat. Then he crouched at the tiny, folding table that served as his desk. He retrieved a parchment from an oilskin pouch, unrolled it and spread it on the desk. Taking up a quill he dipped it into the well and forced himself to write.

Dear son, he began, I hope the tide may finally be turning and that we will soon take our leave of this foul place...

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Daemus stood beside his horse, rubbing the animal's neck and feeling the subtle bulge of the letter folded inside his tunic. The horse snorted and stamped, refusing to be calmed. The entire force was assembled in a steady downpour, every eye trained on the eastern horizon. Not long after the evening meal the horn had sounded, calling the men to formation. Major Bartmae announced that one of the patrols had not returned at the appointed time — that one of their mounts had wandered back into the camp, riderless. The Major's clenched jaw told Daemus there was more to that story.

"Strictly as a precaution," Bartmae said, "we will remain on alert until we account for that patrol."

"They probably found a hunter's cabin and are curled up by a warm fire," someone muttered from the ranks.

"Quiet there!" Juko snapped. The veteran First Sergeant scowled over the heads of the men.

Daemus wished he could believe the patrol had been so lucky. Still, there wasn't much to do but wait. They were good at that. Juko got the men of the Hawk settled. In one last, defiant pulse the storm blew itself out and big gaps started showing in the clouds.

The transition in the weather was so swift it would have been unsettling if it weren't so welcome. Within a quarter hour they were treated to a picturesque sunset after what seemed an eternity of punishing rain. The clouds dissipated and a rainbow arced across the sky. Birdsong echoed off the hilltops as the sun made a late but much-appreciated return.

Even as the red orb melted into the western horizon, wisps of thin, gray mist threaded up from the steep hollows below the camp. An insidious sensation rippled through the ranks as the mist formed itself into a solid, seething wall that issued from the deep places like smoke from a funeral pyre. Juko sniffed the air and spat, shaking his head.

“What is it, Top?” Daemus asked.

“Fear, sir,” Juko whispered. “The men are afraid of whatever's out there. And I can't say I blame them. I wish the bastards would show themselves.”

As if in answer a lone cry went up from the troops. It was Tomlai, fresh-eyed and vigilant, his outstretched arm pointing down the hillside. Then everyone saw.

Immense and muscular, the Merbreth burst from the fog, running on all fours. Even by Merbreth standards the brute was huge, half again as tall as the largest of the Tiliad soldiers and weighing three times as much. The apparition burst from the wall of swirling mist, dragging tendrils along behind as if it had just torn through the Veil itself. Indeed, more than a few of the Tiliad men thought that was just what had happened — that the Veil was torn and a demon had been loosed upon them. While no demon, the lone Merbreth would give an entire platoon all the fight they could handle. They were cunning creatures that the Mist Mages had enslaved as elite foot soldiers — formidable, expendable infantry in their relentless campaign against the Tiliad armies.

Fear blossomed as the Hawk company watched the beast explode from the mist and lope across the grassy span separating them from the swirling gray wall.

“Stand to, boys!” Juko growled to the lead element. “Spread and attack on my command, three-prong front and two in reserve!”

The men spread out as ordered, weapons at the ready. The Merbreth catapulted forward, its momentum staggering. When less than half the distance remained the beast threw back its head and loosed a howl to stir the dead.

Worse than the haunting call, though, was the reply. With the echo yet bouncing around the hills, four more Merbreth burst from the mist, each bearing a leathern breastplate emblazoned with the jet mark of Shadowhall. Behind them, staying at the periphery of the undulating cloud but making sure to be seen, the inevitable Mist Mage lurked, translucent in the dying sunlight. The mage wore a crooked and malicious smile.

“Dust and Blood,” Juko murmured.

The First Sergeant of the Hawk stood with his men, watching the lead Merbreth bursting up the slope. Together they heard the beast's massive lungs pumping like a bellows, felt the tremor of its feet and fists pounding the earth through the soles of their boots. A black wind raced ahead of the Merbreth and Juko could smell the thing's fur, matted with the blood of men. The coppery scent mingled with the fear coming off the men around him, a fear so palpable it became a tangible thing, something to be tripped over, impaled upon.

The Merbreth was a dozen paces away when Juko issued the command for the crossbowmen to fire. A dozen bolts tore into the Merbreth's flesh, launching tufts of its fetid fur into the air like dandelions on the wind. The beast lurched with the impact, faltered but a step, then resumed its collision course with the forward element of the Hawk.

Twisting, the Merbreth reached behind its back and grasped at something. Daemus squinted to see what weapon the beast would choose. Instead, it uncoiled, launching an oblong object at the nearest Tiliad, who had but an instant to brace themselves before the projectile struck.

Even as the object hurtled toward the men, spinning and tumbling, a spark of recognition flared in Daemus. He stiffened as the men locked shields in time to share the force of impact. Still, a few were knocked back a step by the blow. Stunned and hidden behind the shield wall, the men could not see what had struck them.

But from where he stood Daemus watched the broken body of one of the missing scouts bounce off the shields with a sickening pop, then crumple to the ground.

The Merbreth struck and three men died instantly, crushed beneath their own shields. Then it was among them, swinging a cudgel two spans across at its head. Helms and armor shattered, bones vaporized, and blood flew. The men of the Hawk were in total disarray, their activity dissolved into a singular effort to avoid the

Merbreth. The screams of their comrades rang in their ears even as blood and bits of flesh rained upon them.

Not an arm's length from where Juko stood shouting unheeded orders, the Merbreth's cudgel caught Tomlai a glancing blow upon the shoulder. The soldier was flung like a child's toy, striking Juko and knocking the first sergeant to the ground. Juko scrambled to his feet, sparing a glance at Tomlai. The boy was hurt and shaken but alive. Juko turned to keep the beast in sight. Dozens of crossbow bolts protruded from its blood-slick hide and there were several Tiliad blades broken off in its flesh. The Merbreth had hardly slowed, though, and was still swinging its weapon with deadly efficiency.

"Turn the damn thing!" Juko shouted. "Pikes now! Attack the rear and retreat!"

A few of the men, grim-faced and bloodied, heard the order. Sheathing their swords they took up pikes and gathered just beyond reach of the cudgel, moving to stay behind the Merbreth. They circled and watched, gauging the rhythm of its swings. With a shout, they plunged forward as one, driving the iron tips of their weapons into the flesh beneath the Merbreth's arms where the muscle was thinnest. One of the pikes broke off harmlessly but two found their mark. The Merbreth spun with startling speed, its massive arm shattering the wooden pike shafts. The movement drew the pike heads deeper and the beast howled in pain.

"Again!" Juko cried. "Circle in! Keep it turning!"

He raced about, gathering pikes and shoving them into the hands of his men. Some of the pikes he picked up off the ground, others he had to wrest from the death grip of the fallen.

"Give when it advances but strike quick from behind! That's it — dance with the bastard, boys!"

At the crest of the hill, Major Bartmae watched the scene in helpless desperation. The surprise attack was exacting a heavy toll. The Hawk had been hit hard by the hulking, lead Merbreth. Within moments a score of soldiers were down, and Juko only now

appeared to have gotten the men fighting again. The other companies were faring no better. The Merbreth were wreaking havoc and inflicting heavy casualties. Worse yet, the brutes weren't Bartmae's only concern. He kept prying his eyes from the carnage on the hillside below to the Mist Mage hovering at the edge of the trees. It floated languidly back and forth as though pacing. It was waiting, and it was patient. Bartmae cursed under his breath. He had no Druid to combat the Mage's sorcery. Weakened as they would be by the Merbreth's attack, they would be ripe for even greater damage once the Mage decided to engage.

A flash of movement from the melee caught the Major's eye. Daemus was riding hard down the hillside, the black Hawk guidon flapping above him. The Captain stood in his stirrups, screaming something Bartmae could not understand. A moment later Daemus reached the knot of his company that surrounded the Merbreth. He rode a full circle around the group, the black Hawk held high. The Merbreth watched, studying the newcomer.

Bartmae grimaced. It was no time for foolish heroics.

On the field below, bloodied and close enough to feel the heat radiating off the Merbreth's heaving body, Juko looked up at Daemus and smiled.

"Ready pikes!" he shouted.

The Merbreth lunged forward, enraged by Daemus's taunt to the exclusion of all else.

"Now!"

Juko surged forward with his men and a dozen pikes drove into the Merbreth. It howled with rage and stumbled, its momentum too great to stop.

Tomlai had regained himself and was watching, coiled with a longsword poised at his damaged shoulder. The young private sprang as the Merbreth passed, bringing the sword across his body and up in a sweeping, fluid arc. Daemus saw the dull glint of the blade in the instant before Tomlai plunged it into the Merbreth's left thigh. He saw the red-smearred blade come out the other side as it

pierced sinew and muscle then sunk deep into the sodden ground.

The Merbreth delivered a vicious backhand that caught Tomlai full in the face. The boy's head snapped backward with sickening finality, eliciting a defiant cry from the battered men of the Hawk.

Pinned by the longsword, the Merbreth's lunge at Daemus came up short. The formidable muscle of its skewered leg made a tearing sound against the unyielding steel, but held. The beast loosed a howl of rage and pain. The Hawk converged with their own answering shout and in the span of a few breaths the Merbreth was pierced a score over, awash in its own blood.

Juko and Daemus pushed their way into the circle as men hacked at the dying Merbreth, extracting vengeance for their fallen comrades.

"Save your strength!" Daemus shouted, "There are two more of the damn things yet standing! Form up to help the others!"

But the men's bloodlust was high. They had seen their own fates too clearly and were slow to stop. Juko bullied his way toward the beast, pulling men away and cracking them with the back of his hand.

Issuing a torrent of curses and threats, Juko soon restored a sense of order to the Hawk. By the time they were loosely formed into platoons, one squad had raised a pike bearing the head of the slain Merbreth. It took two of their biggest men together to hold it steady, but they waved the grisly trophy like a talisman. A feral shout went up from the men of the Hawk and was soon taken up by the other companies. Their cries echoed off the hillsides and bounced back, multiplying their diminished number. On Daemus's command the Hawk set off toward the nearest embattled contingent, led by a bristling vanguard of pikemen.

The Hawk had advanced but a few strides when a haunting call drifted up from the fringe of the wood below. The remaining Merbreth paused, cocking their massive heads, then broke away as one and loped off down the hill. A moment later they were swallowed along with their master by the silent, swirling mist.

A hush fell over the carnage, lingered well after the Merbreth's abrupt departure. Those still standing stared down the hillside, trying in vain to pierce the gray fog. They were waiting for something to come back and finish them — the Merbreth, the Mage, or something worse. A tense minute passed, then another, and the haunting sounds of the wounded and dying swept into the void.

Daemus turned his horse back toward the killing ground where more than a third of his men lay, the air thick with the stench of riven bodies. He rode in silence, pausing here and there to look at the Merbreth's heinous work. Men lay everywhere, broken and contorted, the ground slick with blood. The few healers left to the Hawk were doing their best to triage, forced as always to become unwilling brokers of life and death.

Daemus did not stop until he came to Tomlai's body. The boy lay where he had fallen, although someone had afforded him the courtesy of closing his right eye. The left side of the boy's face had all but disintegrated when the Merbreth struck him, revealing a shattered jawbone and broken teeth. There was blood smeared across most of his body but the lad still looked almost serene. A lone fly landed on the boy's arm, crawled in frantic circles. Daemus looked up to the twilight sky. Soon the carrion birds would come. A tremor racked him, forcing his eyes shut until it passed.

The Captain of the Hawk slid from the saddle and fumbled in the folds of his blood-spattered cloak. He knelt beside the body and watched his traitorous, trembling hands doing their work from what seemed a vast distance, as though they were not his own. Daemus stayed but a moment, his hand lingering on the boy's motionless chest, then hauled himself back into the saddle.

He guided the mount through the remnant of his company. Every face — young and old, dead or alive — reflected Tomlai's youthful features. Reaching the stone-spiked ridge he dismounted, dropped heavily onto a flat, gray rock and stared out over the wilderness spread before him, his back to the battlefield. The Hawk guidon leaned in the stirrup strap, forgotten, as the Captain hung his head and stared at the sparse wet grass.

Daemus pressed his arm against the cloak and drew a sharp breath at feeling a void where the letter had been.

