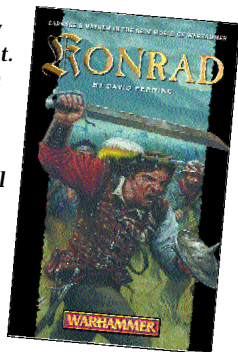


KONRAD

Book One of the Konrad trilogy by David Ferring

KONRAD FIRED AGAIN. Another black arrow found its target, this time in the creature's throat. Blood spurted as the arrow drove itself through the fat furry neck and into the trunk behind, nailing the beastman to the bark.

Both of its arms – the one with spiny claws, the one without – went to its neck, trying to pull the arrow free. Its body twitched spasmodically, there was a liquid gurgle deep in its throat. A final gush of blood pumped from the neck wound, both arms dropped to its sides, and then the thing became absolutely still.



IN A TIME of blood and darkness, the mutated hordes of Chaos rampage across the borders of the civilised world, sowing death and destruction in their wake. Driven by the power of his own mysterious destiny, Konrad continues his fight against the evil forces that seek to destroy the Empire – but at what cost to his own soul?

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from KONRAD

IT WAS NOT yet dawn by the time he reached the bridge and started to cross the river. The great moon, Mannslieb, had already set. Its lesser companion, Morrslieb, was at its smallest and gave even less illumination than usual.

He stopped halfway over the wooden bridge, leaning on the rail and waiting several minutes until the sky began to lighten before venturing any further. Then he headed up the hillside towards the forest, moving as slowly as the sun seemed to rise. It was a winter sun, low and dull.

His breath condensed in the cold air, and he shivered momentarily.

The rags he wore did little to keep out the chill. His old boots were padded with cloth from within, partly because they were too large for him, and wrapped in more strips of fabric on the outside, in a vain attempt to keep out the wet. But the grass was saturated with morning dew, the ground thick with mud, and his boots were still wet from the previous day.

He hardly noticed. This was how it had been all his life, or for as long as he could remember. It seemed that from the first day he could walk, he had come here alone, barefoot in the dust or trudging through the squelching mud.

It would get worse before it got better. The ice and the snow which were to come over the next month or two would make his daily task even more difficult.

He stared into the forest, trying to penetrate the thick boughs, sensing what was hiding deep inside. Even on the

brightest summer day, the forest was a dark and dank place where light seldom penetrated.

Most of the trees had shed their leaves, but this somehow seemed to make them even more dangerous. Without the foliage, hiding places were fewer. Yet the trees themselves became more threatening, their thick trunks and bare branches like some kind of living creatures, waiting to pounce.

All was quiet, but he was not fooled. The woods were alive with all manner of beings. Insects and birds and animals, the normal kind of wildlife. Then there was the other kind, the kind which was anything but normal.

He was scared. Out here, he was always afraid. When he was younger, he had thought that he would lose his fear with the passing years. Instead, the opposite had happened. Then, he had been scared of the unknown. Now, he knew more of what he might be up against – and so he was even more afraid.

Probably that was why he was still alive. If he were not always alert, ever vigilant, he would have been dead long ago. Taken by one of the *things* that lurked in the depths of the twisted forest.

None of the men from the village ever came here alone. When they entered the woods, they did so in groups, and they made sure that they were heavily armed. The woodcutters were always guarded when they set about their work, felling a clump of trees to clear another area of forest.

But these precautions were not enough. Last year, a group of six woodsmen from the village had entered the trees early one morning. By evening, they had not returned. They never did. All the search parties ever found were a few scraps of bloodied clothing.

He blew on his hands for warmth, rubbing them together for a minute. His dagger was tucked inside his tunic, and he pulled it out. The knife in his right hand, the coil of rope in which to tie the firewood in his left, he finally stepped towards the trees on the edge of the forest.

Every day he entered at the same point, took the same route. He knew each tree and root, every sapling and bush. If something were not right, he would know instantly. But every day he had to diverge more from his regular path in the search for wood.

It was always a search. There was no point in breaking off branches because, even at this time of year when they seemed so dead, they would not be dry enough to burn. He was as much a hunter as those who stalked wild animals for food, shooting the elk or the boar with their arrows.

The trees at the edge of the woods were widely spaced. The deeper one went, the more closely packed were the ancient boughs, as though they too huddled close for protection from the beings that dwelled within their depths.

But such defence seemed no more successful for the trees than it was for the woodcutters, because every so often one of the mighty trunks lay stretched out on the ground, as if a victim of the forest's unknown predators.

He had seen the *things* many times, sensed them far more frequently. He had no idea what they were or what they were called, and he did not want to find out.

To him, they were all monsters, and he preferred to keep as far away as possible.

Neither human nor animal, they were like a hideous cross between the two, as though spawned from some obscene mating. Creatures of fur and flesh and feather, hands and hooves and horns. Yet they were stupid. Their mutations seemed to have bred out all their natural senses. They had neither the brains of humans nor the instinctive awareness of animals.

Many a time he had been within a few yards of such loathsome creatures, with only the trunk of a narrow tree for protection, but they had neither seen him nor heard him nor smelled him.

If one ever had, then he would have been dead. This was why he had grown ever more cautious. His luck could not hold for ever.

His pulse began to race as he reached the edge of the forest, and he gripped the hilt of his knife even tighter in his sweaty palm. All thoughts of the cold were banished from his mind. He moved slowly, but his head kept turning from side to side, listening, while his eyes darted about even faster.

There was nothing to hear, nothing to see – but he knew something was there.

Not too far ahead, one of the *things* lay in wait. Perhaps it was lurking in ambush, knowing that he came this way every dawn. Or perhaps it was simply chance that had brought the being to this point in the forest, some fifty yards away.

Although out of sight because of the trees that stood between, he could visualize it crouching near the gnarled roots of a forked trunk.

He also waited. He had learned to be patient. That too had saved his life on many an occasion.

He stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe in case the vapour from his nostrils signalled his location, his heart thudding faster than ever, his mouth dry but his body damp with sweat.

The creatures were mostly inhabitants of the night. During the hours of darkness they crept towards the village, searching for any unpenned animals. With the arrival of daylight, they retreated to the forest. But day or night, they were equally deadly.

After what happened the previous year, a hunt had been organized to clear the forest. There had even been soldiers brought in. He had never seen such a wonderful sight. They had ridden into the village, the sun sparkling on their armour, their bright pennants flowing behind them. Until that day, he had hardly considered what existed beyond the village. He wished he could have been a soldier.

Some of the troops were billeted in the inn, much to his master's displeasure, whose contribution to the clearing of the forest was to pay for their board.

But he was delighted, because he could listen to the soldiers' tales of life outside the valley, of things he had never heard or imagined could exist. He had happily polished their helmets, burnished their armour, groomed their horses.

Some of them even gave him pennies, the first money he ever owned. He buried the brass coins in the stable, near where he slept, because he knew his master would take the money from him and beat him. He had been beaten regardless, but he had kept the money.

He had also kept a dagger, which he stole from a captain who had never rewarded him even with a word of thanks,

despite all the work he had done. He wanted something from the outside world – and he had never seen such a strange knife, either before or since.

The handle was made of some kind of white bone, carved into the shape of a serpent's head, but it was the blade which made the weapon unique. Instead of having straight sides from hilt to point, both cutting edges were made up of a series of curves which rippled closer to one another until they met at the tip.

The troopers had swept through the forest, clearing the woodlands of the creatures. But the forest stretched for ever, and before long the *things* returned again.

Now there was one nearby, waiting as he waited.

He heard a sound and he spun around, because it came from behind him, towards the village. It was the sound of a horse, its shod hooves clattering across the wooden bridge a few hundred yards away.

He narrowed his eyes, focusing on the rider. It was very rare for anyone else to be up so early. Often, he would have collected a huge bundle of firewood and been back in the village before anyone else was about. This was more rare in winter, however. Because of the fewer daylight hours, more people were awake at dawn.

He recognized the rider – he recognized everyone from the village – and she was the most unlikely person to see at this hour of the morning.

He would have expected her to lie in bed very late, while her father's servants did all the work and tended to her every whim. She lived in the manor house at the head of the valley. Her father owned that, as he owned the rest of the valley. Everyone in the village lived on his land; even the innkeeper had to pay rent for the tavern.

She was dressed in white furs, and her horse snorted as it cantered over the narrow bridge. She halted for a few seconds, looking back in the direction she had come, then tugged on the reins, turning her mount's head. But she did not turn the steed completely and return to the village. Instead, she rode towards where he was.

And where the *thing* was!

ALTHOUGH HE HAD been watching her, he had not forgotten the creature. He was totally aware of it – while it, in turn, was totally oblivious of him. But it had heard the rider, and it started moving towards the edge of the forest.

The boundary had been pushed back over the years, further and further from the river, to leave a wide area of hillside stretching up from the water's edge.

The rider could have chosen to keep to the track by the side of the river. She did not. For some reason, she rode up the slope.

Her route took her parallel to the forest itself, closer to him, while the *thing* closed upon her.

It was still beyond his line of sight, but he could tell that the being was cutting diagonally through the trees in a route that would take it towards the rider.

She rode on quickly, confidently. He watched, waiting for her to realize what was happening, to wheel her horse and gallop away. But she kept on coming, as though unaware of the danger.

What was she doing? Why was she out here all alone?

He continued to watch, trying to work out what was happening. The creature was very close now. She would have to flee almost immediately, or else it would be too late.

Then, suddenly, he guessed the awful truth: she did not know! She had absolutely no idea what was about to happen.

But he did. He knew exactly what would occur. His head turned as he followed the track that the *thing* must take. In a few seconds the creature would be upon her, leaping high and toppling her from her mount.

He sprang from the trees and into the open, and he ran, dropping the rope, shouting out a warning, heading straight for where the inhuman assailant would launch itself at its helpless victim, yelling out again, telling her to get back, back, closing the gap, wondering if he could possibly reach her before the creature did, but knowing that he could not achieve the impossible – because what he had observed was inevitable.

She saw and heard him, because she reined in her horse as he sped towards her. But it was too late, already much too late.

He had halved the distance between himself and her by the time the monster burst from the forest. Then he saw it for the first time, really saw it, as it leapt into the air.

It was repulsive, a mockery of both the human form and a parody of all animals: a huge body covered in matted dark grey fur; a face like that of a dog, but with horns and long fangs; short limbs, ending in claws and talons – but it also gripped a rusty sword.

It roared as it jumped, springing up at the rider. She was leaning back, tugging on the reins, and instead of carrying her straight out of the saddle, the *thing* knocked her aside. She toppled to the ground as her terrified horse reared up and then bolted.

The monster also landed on the soft earth – but before it could turn upon its defenceless prey, he was there.

He dived upon its back, his left arm going around its neck, tugging its head upwards, and his dagger plunged into the creature's throat.

It screamed and writhed as its blood fountained from the wound.

He drove the knife into its tough hide again, then again. At each stroke, the creature screeched out its anger and its agony, and it twisted and turned, finally throwing him off.

It was far bigger than he was. Even without its blade, a single blow from one mighty paw would have crushed him.

He rolled aside as it staggered upright. One forearm went to the gash in its neck, as if trying to staunch the flow of blood. The blood was as unnatural as the being itself, a sickly yellow-green colour.

The brute stared at the wetness on its paw, seeming not to understand what it was. It opened its mouth to bellow out its rage, and more vile blood trickled from between its canine jaws. Its eyes narrowed as it stared at its tormentor, and it lurched towards him.

He felt the fetid odour of its hot breath, and he gagged. He was smaller, but he was faster. He dodged aside, avoiding the slicing sword. He had seen the blow coming.

But what he did not see was the whiplash of the creature's long, thin tail, which caught him around the ankle and

dragged him to the ground. He landed with a thud, tried to roll away – but could not. The snake-like tail had him gripped tightly.

The creature had become still, glaring down at him. Its blood dripped onto his tunic, the liquid hissing as it burned like acid into the worn fabric. He wriggled and squirmed, unable to tear himself free from the snare around his foot.

The nameless predator loomed above him, its bulk blocking out the dawn sun. Trapped by its ominous shadow, he felt cold, colder than he had ever felt in his whole life, colder than he would ever feel again – because surely this was the end of his life.

All was dark. He could see nothing, nothing now and nothing ahead, nothing but the monstrous shape above him.

But he refused to surrender without a fight. Instead of trying to pull away from the tail which held him chained down, he slid through the mud towards the creature, kicking his leg forward, gaining a little bit of slack, then grabbing the slimy tail in his left hand – and hacking at it with the knife in his right.

One slash, two, three. Three more cries of agony, each louder and longer than the previous one. Then the tail was severed. Blood spurted and splashed over his hands, but he ignored the pain as the foul liquid ate into his skin.

The monster lurched towards him, its sword swinging wildly. Instead of attempting to dive away, he sprang upwards to meet it, holding his dagger in both hands – and the thing impaled itself on the point of the blade.

The knife sank into the tough hide up to its hilt, and the being's wounded scream was more agonized and fearsome than ever. It dropped its own weapon, and its razor-sharp talons clawed frantically towards him.

He weaved away, slipping beyond the reach of the creature's final clawing grab. It slammed heavily into the ground, and the whole forest seemed to shake with the impact.

It lay on its side, still and silent.

He stood several yards away, also still and silent, ready to leap away if it should so much as twitch a single muscle. Its eyes were still open, staring at him, but after a few seconds they began to glaze over.

He rubbed his hands on his clothes, trying to ease the pain of the liquid fire which had burned into his flesh.

He wondered what to do, and he glanced around warily. If there were more of the creatures near, they would soon smell the blood. They had no loyalty to their kind, and here was a feast for them.

His knife was embedded in the being's chest. He had to retrieve the weapon, but he still did not want to go too close to the monster.

HE HEARD A movement behind him, and he spun around rapidly, poised for escape. But it was only the rider, who was by now sitting up.

'My clothes!' she said. 'They're ruined!'

She was clad in rare white furs. Her coat, trousers and boots were covered in mud. Would she have preferred blood? Her own?

'Help me up!'

For the first time he wondered why he had done what he had, risking his life to save her. It was such a stupid way to behave, he thought. He had not thought, however – that was the answer.

He had acted instinctively, his body controlling his behaviour, not his mind.

'Did you hear me? Help me up!'

She was human. That was another part of the answer. All humans were allies against every other living being in the world.

'Where's my horse?'

He ignored her and stepped towards the dead creature. He had to retrieve the dagger. It was all he had.

She suddenly screamed, and he sprang back in surprise, thinking she had seen the monster move.

'Is it dead?'

She had become totally still, her eyes fixed on the thing's corpse. It seemed that she had only just noticed it.

He picked up a stick and moved closer again, prodding the creature. There was no response. It was dead. It had not the brains to pretend.

'What happened?'

The fall must have stunned her. As well as not seeing the fight, she could not remember the creature knocking her from her mount.

He heard the suction of the mud as she lifted herself up, then the squelch of her boots as she walked slowly towards him. He bent down over the creature, holding his breath because of its obnoxious stink. He seized the dagger hilt with both hands and tugged as hard as he could. It would not budge.

He turned his head for a breath of fresh air, braced his feet against the dead monster's torso, then tried again.

'What are you doing?' She moved closer for an answer to her own question.

There was a slight movement of the knife. He wrenched again. Then he felt a pair of arms around his waist, pulling him, pulling the dagger, and the blade began to slide slowly free. Suddenly it was out. They both toppled over backwards.

He prevented himself from falling and managed to retain his balance, but she let go and ended up on her back in the dirt again. He ignored her, examining the knife.

The weapon seemed undamaged. He had never used it before, not like this. He had only ever pretended, played at fighting, attacking logs and ambushing trees. But he had never risked blunting the rippled metal by cutting wood or even stabbing the point into a sapling.

He stared down at the dead creature, and he felt triumphant. He had fought with a being much bigger than himself, and he had been victorious. He leaned forward and carefully wiped his blade on the monster's dark fur. When it was clean, he tucked it into his belt.

He prodded the sword with his foot. It was chipped and corroded. He did not need it, did not want it.

Then he turned and looked at the girl. She was about twelve years old, which was his own age – or so he believed. Her hair was short and jet black, her eyes dark, her skin very pale – where it was not splattered with mud.

This time he did help her up, his bare hands around her gloved ones, and he winced as her fingers gripped his injuries.

'Oh!' she gasped, staring at the fresh wounds.

He tried to pull away, but she kept hold of his hands, then she stared into his eyes. He looked away, not meeting her gaze.

'You're the boy from the inn. They say you can't speak, but you shouted to me. It was a warning, wasn't it?'

He made no response. He tried to pull loose, but she was holding his wrists.

'Wasn't it?' she prompted.

He nodded.

'You have my eternal gratitude,' she told him. 'You saved my life.'

He shook himself free. He had to go. He had firewood to collect. He should not be here, not with her.

If his master found out, he would be beaten, beaten more than usual.

'Give me your hands!'

It was a direct command, the kind he had obeyed all his life. He held out his hands to her.

She tugged her white kidskin gloves off with her teeth, then took his right hand between hers. She was almost the same height as he was, although her hands were smaller – and warmer.

She raised his hand to her mouth, blowing between her fingers onto his sore flesh. It seemed that her palms became warmer still, heating his hand as if it were in front of a fire.

She said something, a few soft words which were too quiet for him to hear. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and released his hand. The warmth had numbed the pain caused by the creature's venomous blood. She took his left hand and repeated her actions.

He looked down at his hands and gasped in amazement. The wounds had closed up, scar tissue had formed: they were already healing!

He stumbled back a few paces, in a way more afraid of the girl than he had been of the monster. She was as unnatural as the creature had been: she was a magician...

'Don't tell anyone,' she warned, and put the index finger of her right hand to her lips. Then she smiled. 'If you can tell anyone, I mean. You shouted a warning, but did you use any real

words? Or was it just a senseless cry, like an animal? Can you speak, boy?’

‘I... I speak,’ he whispered.

‘What?’

‘I speak,’ he said louder, defiantly.

He spoke to himself when he was alone in the forest, but this was the first time he had ever let anyone else know that he could do so.

Until now, the only sounds that he permitted to escape from his lips were the yells of pain when he was whipped. Not that the beatings hurt very much any more; he was used to them.

‘My father will reward you,’ the girl told him.

‘No! Tell no one!’

‘Why?’

He shook his head, not wanting to explain, not knowing how to. No one must know what had happened. His master must not find out that he had a knife, that he could speak. He glanced over at the dead creature.

‘A beastman,’ said the girl.

Beastman. He remembered now. That was the name the soldiers had used when they had hunted for the creatures which had slain the woodsmen.

‘Part man, part beast,’ she continued. ‘There are all sorts of them in the Forest of Shadows, I’ve been told.’ She glanced into the closely packed ranks of dark trees. ‘I hope there aren’t any more of them around.’

‘None near,’ he said.

‘You can’t be sure,’ she answered, then she looked away from the woods and back at him. ‘But you are sure, aren’t you? You know. You knew where that one was before it could even be seen. How?’

‘I saw.’

He had seen it – but she had not. That was why the creature had been able to come so close to her.

And that, he realized, was why those six tree cutters had died. They had not seen the beastmen which had stalked them through the forest. The same must have been true of all the others who had been abducted and murdered by such creatures.

She was watching him, looking into his eyes again. He glanced away, and after a moment she did the same.

'Where's my horse?' she asked.

He turned, searching for it. 'By river,' he said, pointing.

'Good,' she said. 'I'll be in real trouble if I lose that animal.' She glanced down at her mud-encrusted furs. 'I shouldn't be out here, so maybe it would be best if we both kept quiet. But what about that?' She gestured towards the corpse of the beastman.

'Soon gone,' he told her.

The creature was nothing but dead meat. Within a few hours, the bones would have been picked clean by the carrion eaters. A few hours more, and even the bones would have been devoured.

'Will you come with me to my horse?'

It was more than a question, less than an order. He nodded his agreement. She picked up her fur cap from the dirt and walked away.

He glanced at the sword. He did not want to touch it, but neither did he want to leave it there. Some other beastman would find it and use it. He tugged his sleeve down over his palm, then picked up the weapon.

He followed the girl to the river bank, then threw the blade into the middle of the river.

When they reached the grazing horse, he cupped his hands so that she could use them as a step up into the saddle. She did not move. He raised his eyes and saw that she was looking into them once more. Her gaze flickered from his left eye to his right, then back again. He stared down at the ground, waiting for her to step into his hands. She finally did and mounted her horse.

He wiped the mud from his palms on the sides of his leggings, then glanced at the scars on his hands. When he looked up at the girl, she put her finger to her lips again, bidding him to remain silent.

But he was always silent. Or had been until this morning.

Even though she was splattered with filth and mud, she seemed so poised and elegant. In comparison, he was like a beggar dressed in filthy rags – yet he supposed that was almost what he was.

'I won't forget this,' she told him. 'My father can't reward you if he doesn't know, but I can. Is there anything you need, anything you want?'

He shrugged, not knowing what to say. He had nothing, had never needed more than that. He did have his dagger, however, and that was what prompted the thought.

'Arrows,' he said. 'And bow.'

She nodded, a half smile on her pale and muddy face.

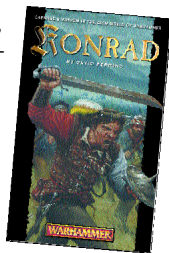
'You shall have them,' she told him. 'My name is Elyssa. What's your name?'

The adventure continues in
SHADOWBREED!

Read the Saga of Konrad by David Ferring

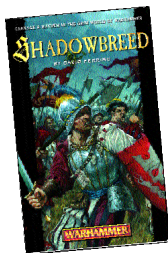
KONRAD

DEEP IN AN isolated corner of the Empire, the young Konrad is flung into a life of desperate exile after the village where he has grown up is razed to the ground by marauding beastmen. In a constant battle for survival, he must seek the answers to his mysterious past in a savage land teeming with the foul servants of the Dark Gods.



SHADOWBREED

IN A TIME of blood and darkness, the mutated hordes of Chaos rampage across the borders of the civilised world, sowing death and destruction in their wake. Driven by the power of his own mysterious destiny, Konrad continues his fight against the evil forces that seek to destroy the Empire – but at what cost to his own soul?



WARBLADE

THE FORCES OF Chaos tighten their grip on the Empire. Beastmen and skaven run rife in the Old World, slaughtering all who oppose them in the name of their foul gods. As a deadly endgame is played out, Konrad struggles against desperate odds to thwart an evil plot to corrupt the very heart of the Empire. He cannot fail, or the future of humanity is doomed.

