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DOCTRINE

By Jerrod Cotosman

Buzzing flies filled the yard, tracing lazy ellipsis through the air in the late September afternoon. They landed on the corpses and walked daintily across the ruined faces and the blackish dried blood before taking off and circling again. The smell was bad and hung over the place like a cloud, a miasma that the flies found more attractive than their usual favorites, the horses. Five bodies lay strewn in the dirt, torn and savaged as if by wild animals. A man, a woman and three children, all beginning to bloat after a few weeks unburied.

Wachtmeister Stefan Dobja pursed his lips and tried to ignore the stench as he surveyed the wreckage of the farm. It was a difficult task when what he really wanted to do was move away from the horrible sight and take a few breaths of fresh air. His dark blue dolman seemed to suck in the day's heat and the shirt beneath was already soaked in sweat. It would be a mercy to shed the jacket, but he resisted the urge. Discipline was the key and he needed to set an example for the rest of the men. Imperial Hussars did not go about looking like slovenly brigands or Russians.

Two of the younger troopers had been sick and thrown up the remains of breakfast in the field beyond the split rail fence that enclosed the farm yard. Normally the veterans would have hooted at and mocked the new men, but today they stood silently, eyes drawn to the carnage. This was no place for joking, not with the farmer and his family torn to pieces and left to rot in the sun.

A senseless crime, something far beyond the norm even in a region as known for its brutality as Transylvania.

Korporal Maryk approached from around the far end of the barn, saluted Dobja and made his report. “Only farm animals, Wachtmeister, and they are all dead. Torn apart like the family.”

Dobja nodded, turning his back on the rest of the patrol so they couldn’t hear or read his lips.

“Tracks?”

Maryk shook his head, his face tan and weathered beneath his slouched cap. “Nothing that looks like boots or hooves. Some kind of large animals have been at the bodies – probably wolves. It’s been dry, though, and this happened weeks ago.”

“But we still have the tracks at the head of the valley?”

“Yes. They picketed their horses where the road turns toward the Principalities. They must have stopped for a day or so, but the tracks lead clearly off to the south.”

Dobja spat in the dust. “They did this. They wouldn’t have stopped here otherwise. They stopped to rob these people and when they didn’t find any gold, they killed them. Butchers.”

“Dirty Vlachs,” the Korporal agreed, using the common term for the local inhabitants.

Dobja took off his shako and ran his hand through rapidly graying hair. While he had allowed the men to wear forage caps as a concession to the heat, the Wachtmeister made no such

accommodation with nature. The shako was a black felt cylinder about seven inches in diameter and secured by a leather chinstrap. Regardless of the weather, the hussars would see a short, wiry man wearing the proper uniform, the regimental dark blue breeches and dolman with white buttons and facings.

“Let’s move out and get back on their trail. I want to camp a long way from here tonight.”

Maryk nodded and motioned for the men to mount. The operation was done quickly and efficiently, the ten horsemen winding their way toward the main road. None looked back and soon all that was left in the valley was the silent dead and the flies keeping them company.

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The trail grew warmer and a man with sharp eyes could spot the tell-tale signs as he followed along behind. A discarded blanket, a worn boot or a bent horseshoe peeking from the brush spoke clearly to one who knew what to look for. What originally had begun as a response to Turks raiding across the Military Border had turned into a hunt for bandits terrorizing the Transylvanian hinterlands. The province had always gravitated toward Budapest and troops had been requested from the Banat district since the local militia was of dubious quality.

Dobja’s men were part of a squadron of the Szekeler-Grenz-Husaren regiment. The Szekeler was composed of Hungarians, the poor cousins of an Austrian Empire that looked north to its former glory in Germany. Operations in the mountainous regions near the border necessitated breaking the hundred-and-eighty man squadron into component parts, each wending their way along the narrow passes and high alpine meadows.

These were places where the few villagers were sullen and suspicious, more likely to greet strangers with the sign of the evil eye than open arms. Superstition ran deep in the dark forests and

trackless dells where corpses were buried face down and men whispered of things like the vrykoulakis and wampyr. Tales for children that were easily laughed off in the barracks at Temesvar, but took on a life of their own in the wild darkness with wolves howling as you huddled around the campfire.

Stefan Dobja had no time for such things, however. After twenty-five years in the Emperor's army he had advanced as far as a Hungarian farm boy could with no true war in which to distinguish himself. Life in the cavalry was a series of patrols and boring camp duties, broken by the occasional raid or reprisal against one of the Empire's more aggressive neighbors or chasing petty bandits. He had been trained since he was sixteen and would rely on those lessons learned in decades past from men now long dead. He had been dealing with various forms of irregulars and brigands all his life and these were no different.

As he led his men through another defile, Dobja began to catch the scent of the enemy. Of course he couldn't really smell them yet, but it was a sense of anticipation, a psychic whiff of disorder that floated back down the trail. Butchers and breakers of the Imperial peace, he would run them to the ground like the dogs they were. Cavalry doctrine taught how to deal with their like and he ran through the steps in his mind as the sweat beaded his forehead beneath the rim of his shako.

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“Form up! Form up!” shouted Dobja, wheeling the unit into a semi-circle in the high meadow. He drew his saber and pointed it at the men scrambling for their horses below, almost three feet of steel gleaming dully in the alpine sun. Each of the other nine hussars had unslung their carbines and were drawing beads on the Vlachs. The bandits were large hairy men, clad in a variety

of dull colors of shabby clothes that seemed to barely cover their frames. Caught unawares, their first thought was flight.

The saber was absurdly light, an extension of his arm and he felt the flush of excitement that he always did when action was upon him. Dobja's blood was up and he wanted nothing more than to charge down and bury the blade up to the guard in one of those butcher's chests. Except that was not the right thing to do, it was not doctrine. Cavalry charges were for battles with regular enemy forces, not bandits in the mountains. The manuals specified that the proper way to deal with irregulars was to form a line and exchange volleys. Only after the enemy was sufficiently depleted would you press home the attack, otherwise you ran the risk of being ambushed in unfavorable terrain. Proper adherence to doctrine was necessary.

"Fire," he shouted and swung the sword downward. The air was immediately filled with the crack of the carbines and the acrid smell of gunpowder. One of the Vlachs toppled off of his horse with a large ragged hole in the back of his jacket. The rest turned and fled and the hussars followed after, reloading as they rode which was not easy. The guns were muzzle-loaders which necessitated pouring the powder down the muzzle and then ramming the ball in afterwards. If the flint for the firing lock was still intact after all of that, a man could finally take another shot.

So the hussars properly adhered to doctrine, pursuing the bandits and firing as they went. Two more of the enemy were hit over the course of the chase. One died instantly when a ball pierced his neck. Another was shot in the back and fell beneath the hooves of his fellows. Dobja couldn't tell if the man was still alive and didn't care. If there was time afterward, they would come back and collect the body.

But the enemy horses were lean and fast and marksmanship suffered at a gallop. The Kavalleriestutzen was not the most accurate weapon under optimal circumstances and at least seven of the bandits made their escape. There was a cave at the end of a long meadow and they quickly disappeared within. As the hussars reined in their horses, they could see the Vlachs pushing boulders across the mouth of the opening and soon musket balls began to cut the air.

Dobja cursed and pulled his men back out of range. The day had soured and now he would either have to wait out a siege or storm the place with near equal numbers. He shoved his saber back into its sheath in disgust and ordered the rest to make camp. He had followed the manual, had applied the standard doctrine and no one could fault him for that. Yet something felt wrong, something gnawed at the pit of his stomach and he could not shake a vague feeling that he had made a mistake.

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The flickering light played across Dobja's weathered features as he stared into the fire. Maryk sat next to him, the two apart from the other men, sharing in the familiarity that came to veterans of so many campaigns. Though not exactly friends, they had come into the cavalry around the same time and had served together on many occasions. Maryk was tall and thin and his uniform did not quite seem to fit, but Dobja had never found the man wanting in duty and ability.

"Do you remember when they told us the stars were different here high in the Carpathians?" asked Dobja quietly.

Maryk snorted. "Yes. Well they told us a lot of things like that to make sport of us when we were younger, Wachtmeister. The stars look the same to me as they do down on the plains. We're closer up here, that's all."

The Wachtmeister nodded thoughtfully, chewing on a piece of dried beef. Some of the men smoked and the smell of their cigarettes drifted across the campsite. Maryk lit a small wooden pipe and began to blow smoke rings into the night sky. Dobja watched him out of the corner of his eye. He had been taught long ago that a leader cannot show fear or doubt in front of his men, but it was not a trick that had come easily. The Korporal was much better at it than his commander.

The doubts were there and he sat and worked over the events of the day in his mind, going through each like a workman ticking items off of a list. Karolyi had been sent back down the trail to find help. There was no guarantee the man could track down one of the other platoons soon enough to matter, but it had to be done. It was important to report that the unit had made contact with the enemy. The Wachtmeister also had sent a scouting party around the mountain and it hadn't discovered any hidden exits. That was good since Dobja would have felt like a fool if the Rittmeister arrived to find him watching an empty cave.

But the most important question had to do with his handling of the engagement. Should he have charged? He had followed Imperial cavalry doctrine: do not melee with bandits. It was a good rule, for too many cavalry officers had gotten visions of glory dancing in their heads and their commands had paid the price. Dobja had never lost a unit and did not intend to this time. Following doctrine made the Empire great and its army efficient. Discipline was the backbone of an effective unit and it had to start at the top. Yet...

“Maryk?” he said.

“Wachtmeister?”

There was a pause and Dobja struggled for a way to ask the question. He wanted to know the Korporal's opinion on the afternoon. Such an easy thing to ask between two men on the street

or in a tavern, yet the army brought a gulf between any who were not of the same rank. Cursing his lack of ability with words, the Wachtmeister finally managed to speak.

“This afternoon... It seems I could have handled the situation differently.”

Maryk raised an eyebrow. “We fought as we always have in the mountains. We fought how we were trained.”

Dobja shook his head and spoke softly, so none of the others could overhear. “We could have pressed the issue and cut them to bits.”

“Yes, Wachtmeister. We could have also been ambushed if there had been more of them. At even numbers, drawing sabers and charging would have been taking a chance. Here we have reduced them and they are trapped and probably running low on food and water. When they come out of that cave and make a run for it, we will have them.”

Dobja nodded. “We did follow doctrine.”

Maryk rose. “I will take the first watch with Szerdzy.” He paused, staring at the other man. “Is there something else, Wachtmeister?”

“No, no. Nothing else. I will relieve you in two hours.”

Maryk moved off and Dobja sat for awhile longer staring into the fire. The Korporal was good at his job, but he tended to only see what was directly in front of him and left the other issues to his superiors. It was a traditional mode of thought in the army, but Dobja did not have the luxury of letting the Rittmeister decide since the man could be fifty miles away right now.

The wood in the fire popped and the noise seemed loud as a gunshot in the silent valley. He glanced up and saw Maryk walking toward the wooden barricade the hussars had thrown up in front of the camp earlier in the afternoon. It was comforting to have the Korporal on the watch – between

the two of them they should be able to alternate throughout the night. Maryk certainly believed that things had been handled properly but... should he have charged? The thought would not go away and he suppressed a sigh, although no one else was close enough to hear it.

Yes, no matter what Maryk thought he should have sent the hussars forward with sabers drawn. None of the Vlachs had swords- the best they could have done at close range was rifle butts and boot knives. The veterans in the unit would have held the attack together and Dobja was confident that the rest would have done well. After all, he had trained them.

They could have decimated the bandits and chased the rest back into the cave and finished the murdering bastards there. Then this stalemate wouldn't exist, but he had missed the chance and the moment was gone. Now he had to wait out a siege and hope help arrived before the Vlachs tried to breakout. They would come out soon since they couldn't have much water. The numbers would be about equal but the Vlachs would fight with all the desperation of wild animals battling for survival. It was a bad situation with no hope of improvement in the near future.

What made things worse was he had gone strictly by the book and it had failed him. For the first time following doctrine had not been the correct path. He could not remember that having happened before and it begged the question: If what had been successful all his life no longer worked, what did that mean for the future? He was no closer to finding an answer when the silence of the night was broken by a wolf's howl.

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The sentries crouched against the rough breastwork and kept watch in the darkness. There were two of them, guarding for two hours at a stretch before being relieved. The cave mouth sat back between two spurs of the mountain that formed a tunnel leading to the entrance. Flickering

light danced off of the walls, a faint glimmer of the bandits' fire across sixty yards of alpine meadow gradually descending to the first line of trees where the cavalry was camped.

Korporal Maryk had drawn the first watch along with a trooper named Szerdzy. The mountains were silent, except for the wind ruffling the branches of the evergreens and tweaking the pine needles. There was no movement or noise from the cave and even the horses picketed back in the trees were not stirring. It was a stalemate and the troop had settled down for the siege. The Vlachs couldn't get out without being seen, not with the flat ground and the full moon.

From several valleys over, a wolf raised a long, mournful howl that reverberated off the rocky slopes and cliffs, filling the night with its despair. A few others joined in and Szerdzy felt the skin rise on his arms. There was something eerie about hearing that noise out here in the middle of nowhere.

Maryk sensed his companion's discomfort. "Don't worry, wolves don't attack people. Not unless they're starving and it's been a long winter."

The younger man nodded back, feeling reassured. No matter how chilly it was at the moment, it certainly wasn't winter.

Then another sound rent the night, a horrible scream that seemed to go on and on. It came from the cave, echoes bouncing crazily off the confining walls. As it continued, the sound changed, becoming deeper, guttural like the howl of something damned. Another joined it, and another and the horses began to whinny and nicker. Confused grunts and groans came from the rest of the men who were waking up to the racket.

"Jesus and Mary," said Szerdzy. "What is that?"

Maryk didn't answer because his gaze was locked on the cave. Something had changed, it was darker and the bandits' fire was suddenly hidden. His view was blocked because something fast and dark was coming across the meadow. The Vlachs were finally trying to break out of their trap.

"Attack! Wachtmeister! An attack!" he shouted then tracked his Kavalleriestutzen on the first figure. Even in the moonlight, the targets were hard to pick out because they were coming fast. Why are they so big?

"Dear God..." whispered Maryk and his finger slackened on the trigger.

They were big, dark and fast and they were running on all fours. Shreds of clothing hung loosely from their bodies, as if rent by an explosion. Triangular heads with flat noses bent close to the earth to catch the scent of their prey. Yellow, feral eyes gleamed in the darkness.

Maryk had time to scream and squeeze off a wild shot before they were upon him.

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Dobja was on his feet before the first shot was fired. The howling rose to a crescendo, echoing from inside the bandits' cave, blending with the wind and the frantic whinnies of the horses. The animals were pulling at their lines, eyes rolling in fear at the predatory cries and Dobja couldn't blame them. In twenty-five years, he had been the length and breadth of the Empire and never heard anything like it.

That isn't just wolves, he thought, then pushed it away. The damn mountains were making him think like a Transylvanian. Before you knew it, he would be making the sign of the evil eye to ward off the Vlachs as if it was 1445, not 1845.

"Attack! Wachtmeister! An attack!" Came the shout from the watch.

Hurry. Form them up. Discipline.

"Hradetsky! Get the horses! The rest of you form up! Get into line! Folea get up, damn you!"

Crack! Crack! Shots echoed from the breastwork. Dobja drew his saber in one hand and his pistol in the other. The line was forming now, and ragged as it was, it would have to do. There was no time to mount for a proper action. In the distance, the wolves still howled, but the other sound had stopped. Even with the wind shrill in his ear, Dobja was puzzled. Why don't I hear their horses? Are they foolish enough to break out on foot?

Maryk's scream interrupted his thoughts, an incoherent wail that was echoed by Szerdzy and lost on the wind. Dobja couldn't make it out and didn't have the time to care, for the Vlachs were upon them. He raised his saber as dark shapes swarmed over the breastwork.

"Fire!" he shouted and swung the sword to emphasize the command and the volley ripped through the darkness. The smell of black powder was thick in the night air and the range was nearly point-blank, but the bandits didn't slow because they weren't bandits anymore. In an eye blink, Dobja had to swallow everything he had said about superstitious Transylvanian peasants. A learned man might have appreciated the irony, but then again a learned man might also have gone numb at the sight of such an impossibility. Fortunately for Dobja, his imagination was sufficiently constricted to accept the inclusion of being attacked by wolves that walked like men with a minimum of disruption. Or perhaps his reflexes just took over.

The line crumpled as the beasts overran it. Seven of them, matched against the remaining hussars. Some of the cavalry tried to draw their swords, some turned and ran, but the result was the same. Powerful arms swatted aside weapons and drove sharp claws home into vulnerable flesh.

Seven-foot tall shapes grappled with their smaller adversaries and bore them to the earth, where sharp teeth could rip out their throats.

Dobja watched the disaster unfold as if from a distance, remarkably calm amidst the chaos.

Discipline. According to legend the only way to kill a werewolf was with silver, and Imperial cavalry were not equipped with such weapons. Doctrine said that when faced with an unbeatable enemy, one should cut his losses and withdraw. This time doctrine was right and he shouted for the hussars to fall back.

Suddenly a huge shape loomed in front of him, seeming to stretch up to the stars with yellow eyes reflecting the full moon. Muscles rippled beneath its shaggy chest and the rags of a pair of blue trousers barely clung to its legs. Dobja's nose wrinkled at the smell. The thing stunk like an unburied corpse and as it reared to strike, he raised his pistol and calmly shot it in the left eye. The full moon went out and the man-wolf toppled backwards and crashed to the dirt, the snarl dying in its throat.

Maybe you don't need silver after all, he thought as he watched the thing kick out its last moments. Yet he had no chance to see if it turned back into a human or not. The gunshot had attracted unwanted attention and there was no time to reload. Dobja dropped the useless pistol and hoisted his saber. Yellow eyes tracked him and dark shapes moved forward, claws gleaming in the dim light.

Then they were gone as something big and brown rushed between him and the beasts. The horses were free and racing for their lives. They screamed and kicked at the werewolves as they passed by, some toppling to the ground as the things leapt on their backs biting and clawing.

Another horse streaked past and Dobja made his move. He dove on top of it and locked his fingers in its mane. The horse screamed as its head jerked back from the weight, but it seemed to know that the penalty for stopping would be a horrible death and it forced its way forward. Dobja righted himself and pressed as flat as he could on the animal's back, trying to be as small a target as possible. A man-wolf appeared on the left and leapt toward him, but the horse dodged at the last moment and the beast hurled past, claws tearing fiery furrow in his leg.

For one terrible moment, the Wachtmeister's grip loosened and he started to slide off his mount. Then he regained his hold and pulled himself upright, teeth clenched against the pain in his leg. The monsters were gone and he was clinging bareback to a runaway horse racing down the mountain side in the darkness.

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The flies were back again, sluggish in the morning but drawn to the carnage. Dobja shook his head and grimaced as he stepped wrong on his injured leg, winding through the debris and corpses. His men, his horses and one of the enemy, the Vlach he had shot last night lying still with a red-rimmed hole where the left eye was. The pistol was on the ground nearby and he picked up the gun and tucked it in his belt.

There was an empty feeling in his stomach only partially due to the loss of his pack during his flight. He was accustomed to loss but the sight of his men slaughtered, dark blood staining their dolmans and trousers threatened to overwhelm him. The fiends had been at them and the weak part of his mind tried to look away, but he wouldn't let it. No, he would record what was done here and store it away in memory until the proper time.

Maryk was dead at the barricade, his eyes wide and staring in terror and Dobja bent down and closed them. He waved the flies away and winced at the pain in his leg as he shifted his weight. The man deserved a Christian burial. All of his hussars did, but there was not time. Ever since he had felt the beast's claws rake his leg a clock had begun ticking in his mind.

He wondered about the old legends, which ones were true and which ones were not. In the end, there was no point in worrying about it since he would find out during the next full moon. He had not needed silver last night to kill one of the beasts, but none of the other hussars had done so and he couldn't believe that all of their shots had gone wide. Maybe he had been lucky enough to shoot the thing right through the eye into the brain. He could not count on being that lucky again.

So he would try the silver first in bullets and on the tip of his sword. He knew a man in Timisoara who might be able to make those things. Once he was properly equipped, he would pick up the trail again and follow it to the end. The butchers would not escape justice while he still lived.

The morning sun shone over the rim of the mountains and down into the valley and Dobja hoisted his pack and began walking toward the trailhead. Twenty-five years in the army and now he set off on his own to finish the job. He had about a month until the next full moon and the Imperial bureaucracy would only hinder his chances. For the first time he was going against the book, he was disregarding doctrine and despite the pain in his leg and the disease that even now might be coursing through his bloodstream, he felt good. After a few minutes, he began to smile.