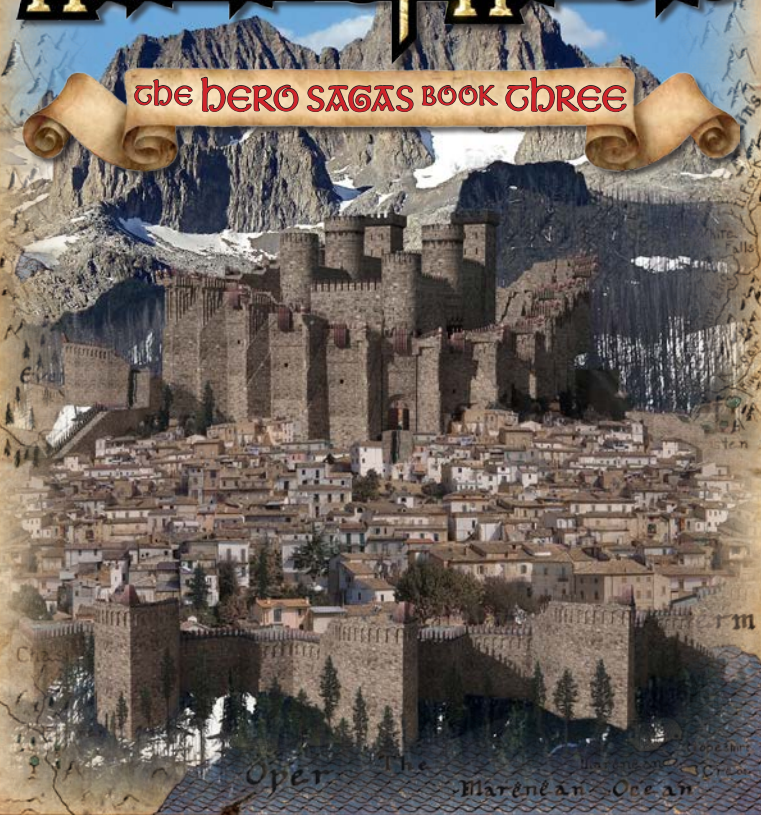


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RÜNEHELM HELMET OF HEROES

THE HERO SAGAS BOOK THREE



Michael Reed McLaughlin

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RÜNEHELM

HELMET OF HEROES

Book Two

of

THE HERO SAGAS

written & illustrated

by

MICHAEL REED McLAUGHLIN

ସମସ୍ତ ପ୍ରାୟାସ ସମ୍ପନ୍ନ ପ୍ରାୟାସ ଉପକ୍ରମ



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CHAPTER 0NE

A BAG-FULL 0F G00DIES

Four weary companions emerged from the catacombs below the Temples of Āsārē three days after crossing the fiery chasm that separated the inner Imperial Tombs from the outer crypts. First came Mītāk, tired and haggard but with Mēl Mārra supporting him at his side; behind them followed the Ēlf, Dēlfēn, worn wan and thin, yet his stance and stride were still tall and proud; and then lastly, his thick fingered hands shrouding his close-set gray eyes from the bright sunlight, out stepped stout Hārbōr, his beard perhaps a little less red-orange than when he had first descended into the darkness to face the many dangers below the Temples of Asārē, his grim Dwārvān countenance hard-set and stern as he squinted in the intense light, but he was exceedingly glad to see the sun once more, nonetheless. (For even the most Dwārvān of Dwārves will yearn for the open air and the feel of a fresh breeze upon their ruddy faces after such an extended sojourn under mountain or hill.) This had been the first time that Mītāk had spent any length of time away from sun, stars, and moon, and he, even more so than **TŌTH KHWĀGĒN**, was well pleased to find the day fair and the weather pleasant upon their return to the World Above, free at last from the stifling darkness and claustrophobic environs of the ancient subterranean catacombs. Of course it was the young Ēlf who had missed the sunlit world the most. Indeed, Ēlves will seldom venture below ground at all—and not unless in great need—for they loathe to spend even a single day

without sight of the bright heavens above or the chance to dance in the soft rain if neither sun nor stars be out. And for the companions, it had been a full dozen days without the feel of bright Vītālūs's rays upon their faces or the gentle touch of the wind in their hair or the play of rain upon their cheeks.

"*Vītālūs, Cāthēr Ē Rēga, Mīs Dī Ēyā Dān Āndēlmān!*"⁷ cried Dēlfēn. "Vītālūs, fair and regal, father of life be praised!"

Mītāk and the others had not expected to find two more members of their original companionship waiting for them outside the labyrinth's entrance in Dale Öraith (and most certainly not Mērāk's new Wood Ēlf wife, Ā mbrēella); thus they were overfilled with joy to be unexpected reunited with their suddenly sundered friends and new relations. They hugged each other and shook each other's hands and then hugged each other again. To behold a departed brother's face once more when once the hope of ever doing so again had seemed certain folly, to look into an absent friend's eyes after such long separation were sights more worthy of celebration and joy even than to once again behold the warm sun or look at the clear blue sky.

But Xärgôn's visage suddenly turned grim when he realized that Zôr-wind was not among the returning companions. "Fay, good friends. Was then our great wizard the sad victim of his own baneful prophecy?" he asked, expecting to hear that "The One" who would not live to see the quest's end had indeed been the foreboding magic wielder himself.

"We know not ZÖTÖR's fate, and I fear for the worst," replied Härbör dourly.

"Fear not," responded Mītāk. "I know he yet lives; however, he now has gone where we cannot follow, and for his part in our quest he must walk alone awhile."

"I am relieved to hear that he is at least still alive," said the cleric, though his face still reflected grave concern. "Yet what then of our primary goal and of the talismans he journeyed so far in hopes of discovering here in Asäre? Indeed I speak most particularly concerning that one ancient and ominous device he hoped to find long hidden among the halls of the forsaken kings of **RRÖTGHÖRRÄTH**. Was our quest in vain, or know you not? For you have not hitherto spoken of it."

"Apparently, we do not yet know that, either," said Härbör, indicating Dēlfēn and himself. He took a step closer to the Ēlf. "But 'tis certain, Mītāk most likely kens something concerning the object in question and

⁷ *Vītālūs Cāthēr Ē Rēga, Mīs Dī Ēyā Dān Āndēlmān!* {H.Ē.} ("Vītālūs fair and regal, father of life be praised!")

will forthwith deliver up the knowledge of it he has seen fit to keep for himself alone until now."

Miták looked at the Dwärf. Härbör seemed glad to have left the dark passageways behind, though Miták wondered if the old **KHWÄGÈN** would not rather have been in deepest **FHÈLHDSFHÄR** than any other place in **Índrèl** at that moment.

Then Miták looked at Dèlfèn, and it seemed to him that just from standing a brief span in the warm glow of **Vítalüs**, the lithe Èlf's youth had already much returned to him in the mere moment's respite since their egress from the black catacombs, while Härbör (and he, he supposed) still looked pale and haggard. As if by some ancient magic, Dèlfèn's long curly hair suddenly shone radiant and golden once more in the bright sunlight and seemed to almost glow with warmth and vitality. His skin was once more like pure porcelain, where only moments before it had appeared as callow and dull as wet chalk.

Miták examined his hands. They were covered in nicks and bruises. He could see blue veins through the colorless skin. A quarter-moonth ago they had been tan and rugged and callous.

His thoughts were interrupted by Dèlfèn.

"Truly, Miták, curiosity is a vice known to Èlves as well as to Men and Dwärves. Yet the Star-Children have also come to learn that in due time the knowledge of all things is revealed, for good or for ill. You will suffer to reveal what you will suffer to reveal when you will. Yet, whether we have suffered in vain... or no, I should like to know the-now; for, I would set my mind to the next task at hand if our mission was accomplished successfully. My liege, the Princess, has not the luxury of patience, I fear, nor can her father's plight be put off any longer."

Miták nodded. Härbör seemed well pleased that Dèlfèn had sided with him in his endeavor to extract more information from their young leader concerning the state of their quest.

"All in due time, gentles. I will speak of **Zörwind** and of what I deem our next move should be, anon," said Miták, moving them a little ways away from the dark mouth of the tunnel they had just left behind. "But first, let us hear of **Mérák's** journey and of what has befallen **Xärgôn** since we parted ways. When we have heard what King **Jöràn** intends to do and whether or no **Xärgôn** has accomplished his own task, then I shall treat on what I know. Hopefully, I will be able to answer all of your questions then, Härbör, Dèlfèn," he said nodding to each of them.

"Ere that, even, let us have a bite to eat and drink," suggested **Mèl Märä**. "For my gullet is empty and my throat parched."

"Ach! A noble proposition," said Härbör. "And just a nip of ale might, perchance, help my patience wax a tad."

Mītāk laughed and nodded. So, they walked to the camp the cleric had taken up, where Mītāk and the others had built a watch-fire on the night Zōrwind's quintessential projection had sent the young Hero's Spirit winging to Ärqüävëä in the body of a Mëlëza falcon.

Brief introductions were made for those who had not met before and Mël Märra's and Ämbrëëlla's full-fledged memberships in the company established by those who vouched for them, (Mītāk and Mërāk respectively).

As they ate the first fresh meat and herbs many of them had tasted in days, Mërāk recounted for the others his frightening experiences with the High Dāmānīt, DāmānGörgönīt, and then with the Ägöyül. He spoke briefly of his trials in Äzmadüs's dark dungeons (though too recent still were the deep pains he had suffered there to share them in any great detail with others), and even as he recalled them a sharp hurt returned to his shoulders and he rubbed his wrists unconsciously. The less he said, however, the more clearly the others imagined the anguish and agony he had endured in the bowels of the Dark Keep, for they saw, unchecked in the eyes of the youngest member of their company, the suffering still burned into his mind and heart. Mërāk recounted in detail rather how he had met Ämbrëëlla there in the dungeons and how together they had escaped with the mysterious aid of someone within the castle above. Then he went on to reveal how he had actually met Ämbrëëlla the day before, but had temporarily lost his memory after suffering the evils of Äzmadüs's heinous torments and tortures. Lastly he spoke of meeting up with Légërdëmān, former Hero Unto the World, and told what they had discovered concerning Jōrān and Ärqüävëä, (though he did not yet reveal the Hero's true identity nor that he and Mītāk were indeed Légërdëmān's very sons).

After relating all this, it was Mërāk's suggestion that they delay not a day longer but should rather make for Ärqüävëä as soon as possible. It was his belief that they should join up with the forces there preparing to march against Äzmadüs, with or without any of the weapons or marvels they had sought in the catacombs.

Next, in the gifted manner of a talented minstrel, Xärgön delivered up his rede to the other companions in the form of a lengthy lay he had composed. He sang for them the tale of his journey to the High Èlvān kingdom of Èstërëä and of a secret task he needst accomplish there within the enchanted Evermore Forest, (though he still did not reveal to the others the details of his quest for the blue rose, as he had already confided in Mītāk). He sang to them only of his victory in acquiring a mighty talisman in the Timeless Realm, a labor he had been commanded to accomplish by one of the Lōrëen Themselves. And lastly he sang of his

subsequent journey north to Asärê, leaving behind the green cobblestone roads of a land and a kindred and a king he loved as dearly as his own life. Of the rescue of Tënüm-Bänk, he sang then also; and as if she had heard the cleric's words, the proud black-crested falcon soared down out of the blue, right on cue, to land upon his outstretched hand.

"This is a marvel indeed," cried Mîták at the arrival of the golden bird of prey. "'Twould seem Tinbâstêân's wing has healed well and swiftly."

"My skills lie not only in the art of healing Men but also in the essence of healing itself," replied the cleric, "and therefore I must admit that I played some small part in her speedy recovery."

"May the *Lôrêân* be thanked, then," acknowledged Mîták, "and thee also.

"Dearest Bird, I am indeed glad to see you alive and well." He stroked the falcon's back and she suddenly fluttered up into the air only to land upon his shoulder, where she was most often wont to be seen in after days, if not awing in the wild open sky. For though Xärgön had healed her and befriended her kindly, there was a deeper bond between Tinbâstêân and Mîták, with whose Spirit she had shared her very body, once upon a time.

"All well and good—the bird lives," declared Härbör then. "Now let us delay no further and hear your full story, Mîták. Tell us all what happened when you and Mël Märä went back in search of ZÖTÖR. What did you really find in the Imperial Tombs, that you were so quick to flee hence without the company of my dear friend and yours?"

Mîták did not speak for a moment but looked Härbör in the eyes. He looked at Mël Märä next, and she smiled back at him reassuringly. It was no easy task trying to fill Zörwind's boots, being required to be a leader, and now having to hide the same terrible secrets the magic wielder had once been forced to keep to himself. But though such boots felt far too large for him, Mîták knew he would have to be the one to rise to the occasion and lead the other companions in the wizard's stead, if they would still follow him after he had told them what he was about to reveal.

Now, at first he had intended to just tell all, to throw everything out into the open and let come what may. He hated secrets and wished Zörwind had done the same from the beginning. But then Mîták discovered, for the first time, why the mysterious wizard had made his ill-boding prophecy, requiring each companion to pledge himself regardless of the foretold risk, yet had keep secret from them just who the One should be, though indeed he knew the detail plainly himself. It had not been simply to find out who among them was committed nor was it done just to warn them of the danger ahead nor even to prepare them for the certain

disaster. It had been done simply because Zôrwind was just like the rest of them. He could not bear the awesome burden of leading another to certain death without at least revealing to that individual that he was being led even unto the grave. Then the Doomèd One could walk behind the wizard knowingly, and Zôrwind could lead the One on without remorse or guilt. The ill-Fated individual would *have* to at least be made aware of his imminent threat, but how selfish would it have been for Zôrwind to take away from that person at least the hope of a brighter destiny ere their certain demise should come?

At last Mîtāk spoke. "I am sorry, my friends, but the time has come for you to judge me by what you have seen in me thus far—good or evil, given to wisdom or folly—and simply heed my words in faith accordingly. Methinks I should *not* reveal all that I know at this time, and indeed thus do I choose not to reveal all that I might. Zôrwind is alive; this much I have already spoken. But whether or not any of us here shall ever see him again in this world, I cannot guess; nor do I dare even hope to. More than this, concerning his fate, I therefore cannot yet reveal..."

"Or *will* not," quipped Härbôr. He had been perhaps the closest to the Argent Wizard, though Xärgôn had known the magic wielder the longest among them.

"Be that as it may, we shall continue straightway to Ärqüävêä," went on Mîtāk, taking the Dwärf's accusation in stride, "and must needs leave Zôrwind now to whatever fate the Lôrêän have decreed for him."

Härbôr was fuming. "Can you offer no more assurances than these: that ZÔTÔR lives and we must trust you upon our faith? Mark you, he would never have abandoned you like this to the black pit of Asärê!"

"We are not abandoning him; we must simply continue without him, or he must simply continue without us, which ever way you see it. But know you this, it is his will that we do so."

"Can you offer any reason whatsoever why he should wish to be left for dead like this? 'Never leave a soldier behind!'"

Mîtāk was impressed with Härbôr's stubborn determination to not abandon his old partner, but he had to simply reply: "No."

"Then..."

Mîtāk placed his hand on Härbôr's shoulder. "Dear KHWÄGËN, again and again you prove yourself a worthy friend and companion to the wizard in your devotion and persistence; but here must you trust a new friend and companion, (and if you cannot, then at least trust old ZÔTÔR's judgment, who placed me in command of our small company). We must depart forthwith—with or without every member of that company."

Härbör considered this a moment then stated plainly: "If you command me leave him behind, I will do so without question; for it is a soldier's first duty to obey. But you have heard my protests and noted my reluctance to do so, and these will stand as a testament to him should you be deceiving us, be he already a resident of the Realms Beyond or yet alive; therefore, let it be marked that I stood against your plan to leave him behind. And know you this, young Mîtāk: old ZÖTÖR comes to know the truth of *all* things the sooner or the later, for he is as great a wizard as he has been a friend to me, and that is no small remark."

"The truth of all things." Mîtāk nodded. "*Truth*. Not a simple thing to know, I should think, when *your* version of the truth is as true to you as *mine* is to me or *his* is to him or *anybody* else's is to that person, though these *truths* may at times vary as the day from the night. But let me say this much at least about your misgiving concerning the success of our misadventures below ground." Mîtāk then turned to Xärgön, "and with regards to your inquires concerning the primary object of our quest: The *truth* is, we found much that should aid us in confronting dark Äzmadüs and his allies amidst the Flesh Fiend's hoard. Of enchanted swords and gear, we discovered aplenty that should prove helpful and telling. But the *truth* also is that I never saw the talisman Zörwind sought after and can only hope that he was as successful in his mission as we were in questing the Temples of Asäre.

"Now if that is not enough *truth* for you, the *truth* is, what I really want to do now is give up, go home, and forget all that has happened, returning to my simple life of husbandry, make-believe adventures, and fencing practice, forgetting all about war, duty, and the bloody reality of death by the sword. That is the raw *truth*," said Mîtāk, who was frustrated in his own right. "But there is more still of your precious *truth*, there always is, some better and some worse, much worse. How much of what I have been privy to, do you really want to know? Did you want to know of 'The One?' ere ZÖTÖR revealed his fate to us? Indeed, do you wish to know now who he is? I could say and be rid of the awful burden that has beset me even since I learned the terrible secret of it that fateful morn. But do you really want to know who he is? Do you also want to know of Zörwind's keen fears of betrayal from within our own group? Do you really want to know all of his fears and doubts as well as mine?"

Härbör did not answer. He looked away from Mîtāk shamefully.

"I have seen things," began Mîtāk again, "I cannot tell and know things better known only to myself. Zörwind has already dearly betrayed us once and may yet do so again. He truly is, 'not all that he seems to be and he is more.'" The young Hero paused then for a moment and let the others consider what he had just said. When he began again, his voice

was less harsh and seemed to have perhaps even a glimmer of hope in it. "I *can* assure you, however, that there are good reasons why I do not reveal all that I know of the truth, just as our wizard did not reveal all that he knew of it. For much he knew and revealed to me concerned the Future, and I deem it oft unwise to believe that simply because one knows something of the future he knows something of the truth. An ill omen does not always prove the worse overall, and a hopeful sign does not always lead to good fortune.

"But despair not, my Friends; for I ken that we are closer to defeating Äzmadüs and rescuing Princess Kitfir than you or I could possibly imagine, with or without the aid of Zôrwind at hand."

Again Mîrâk patted Härbôr on the back. "Yea, be of good cheer, stout Friend, for your words have not gone unmarked and will please him well should he learn the wit of them, even if he is disappointed in your unwillingness to heed me at my word. You mean well and love him even better. This much we all know to be *true*."

"Confusticate it all, then! I do believe you at your word, and I trust you, Mîrâk. Now let us not dally further, my mind is resolved in this now, and I, too, would turn it wholly to the bitter tasks of battle and siege if they are the deeds that lay ahead for us now."

"Well spoke, Dwärf.

"Now as for the rest of you, if you too are still with me, swear with me once more our afore sworn vow, join in our companionship and quest those of you who are new to our numbers: 'We few who stand here today...'"

Mêrâk and Ämbrêlla joined in: "... do pledge as one..."

"...to see our quest through to its end," rang out the others, "to rescue a maiden in distress, to avenge the Dark Lord who has wronged her, and to protect the Four Realms of Îndrêl..."

(What folly was it then, that in the passion of the moment, none took note of Mêl Mârâ's unwillingness to join in with the oath-taking and her singular silence during the vow-swearing?)

"...even to the price of our very lives," finished Härbôr louder than the rest. "And I do now pledge again my loyalty to you, Mîrâk, and my trust as before it was given to ZÔTÔR."

"I, too," said Xärgôn. "For you are our true leader now, none other."

"Indeed, Gentle Cleric. And you, Brother, are our chief guide in this grave quest," Mêrâk added. "But you are much more so than even you know. I have always given you my love and respect as my elder sibling, and as my leader in this quest I do give freely my trust and loyalty. But for my part I, too, have secrets as bittersweet as your own. Mine, however, I must share the-now with you all.

"I hitherto told you that on my journey to Ärqüävëa with Dëlfën's epistle, I met up with the great Lëgërdëmân and that he has joined us in our battle against Äzmadüs."

"Indeed," remarked Miträk. "I had forgotten as much. Should not he therefore be the one to marshal us against the evil Sorcerer? I am but the son of a simple husbandman, a mere boy with a sword, really, who dreamt of glory and fortune and then had them thrust undeservingly upon him."

"It is true that he who is Hero Unto the World should head us in our quest," agreed Dëlfën.

"True, he led our troops to victory in the Goblin Wars and at that time defeated Völgär düÄrânt upon the fields of Kënrê Plateau," admitted Härböör.

Mëräk nodded his head. "Troth, Dwärf. But Lëgërdëmân's time for leadership has passed. For indeed much has he sacrificed for İndrël's sake. But now he must turn the title and role of Hero Unto the World over to his first-born son, the next foreordained leader in İndrël's struggle to remain a land of free folk."

"The son spoken of in legend and lay," said Xärgön, "who will lead all races to peace and justice."

"Indeed, Good Bard," said Mëräk to the cleric. "And verily, tell us now the tale in full of Lëgërdëmân and his heritage, so that we may all learn the *truth* about Heroes and the High Heroes' Bloodline, at last."

Xärgön pulled back the cowl of his blue robes. "Please, let us sit awhile then in the shade of that tree over there; for fay, it shall take some time in the telling as Lëgërdëmân's is a sad tale indeed and a long one at that." Thus he instructed them to be seated beneath the nearby ancient elm tree that had grown in the midst of the white stone ruins of Asärê, for Vïtalüs was growing hot in the summer sky and their camp now open to his insistent gaze.

"I shall sing for you a song concerning the life of noble Sir Lëgërdëmân, which I have written especially for this hour, to remember us all the rede of that great Hero and of his duties, sacrifices, and promises."

Mël Märä, especially, listened intently; for she, of course, knew of the promise made by the progenitor of the House of High Heroes, though she had never heard of Lëgërdëmân, since she had been condemned to Ärdëntëäl fire by the very first of the High Heroes' Bloodline in the great Apocalypse War. Indeed, had she not spent a millennium banished to the lowest Ambit, sent there by the very hand of Hërmër himself?

Again, Xärgön sang to them, the tale of Lëgërdëmân and Völgär düÄrânt, the lyrics of the lay speaking also of the other two other apprentices of Mäxindin the Great—Zörwind and Bärcögan—ere war broke out and the kindreds of İndrël were betrayed. The words spoke of

how two of the disciples had become argent wizards and two dark sorcerers, two pair off archrivals in the subsequent Goblin Wars. And finally he sang of fair Mërëmer, who Völgär killed in his wrath against Lègërdëmân long after losing the war, and of how the Hero had sought to keep his two sons by her secret and safe, by fleeing and hiding in the forests north of his former home in Ärqüävëä.

*... And one day, let it be known,
When the youths are fully grown,
They shall return, sons and father,
To face their enemy, the vile Völgär,
Whose evil deeds made them all weep,
'Tis then their vengeance they shall reap.*

For the first time since meeting Zörwind in the Oakwood Forest, Mîtäk remembered from his distant past the rede of a magic wielder named Zörwindüs and the tale of Lègërdëmân. Then he realized Zörwind was “Zörwindüs.”

Mëräk stood up and walked over to his pack as he spoke. “Lègërdëmân hath charged me with the task of finding his eldest son and bade me give him this as a token of his calling to the role of Hero Unto the World.” Mëräk started to unwrap Rüneguard from the rabbit skins that covered it. “This Heroes’ shield was Lègërdëmân’s, and he fought with it in the Goblin Wars.” At this he drew forth the great shield and held the burnished talisman aloft. *For an instant each companion saw a short vision of Zörwind sitting on a green hill peacefully smoking a pipe; and they heard strange birds in the trees above their heads, singing gaily, and smelled the clover and pipe-weed round about them as though the wizard sat amongst them below the elm tree in Asärë.*

“What you have just seen was a vision,” said Mëräk. “For *Ërig-Ändönëüs*, as the shield was named of old, will reveal to all those who wish to look into its surface glimpses of the past, present, and future.

“This shield now belongs to the House of Lègërdëmân,” explained Mëräk. He placed the round scutum on the ground next to him and then laid out a long narrow bundle for all to see. Carefully he unwrapped this other object of great renown to show them all. “Behold, with me I have also the great sword, *Ërig-Srëng*, which slew Sëthtôn the Malcontent in the Battle at Shimrëng’s side and subjugated Lëm Arräm of Old, the terrible Red & Black Drägon!” He drew forth Rüneglaive and its blade shone silver and black in the dappled light below the mighty elm tree.

All gasped, and at those words Mël Märä winced as though in pain and clutched at her side.

But none had seen her flinch as though the very mention of the ancient Sword of Heroes delivered such a pain of anguish upon her that she could not stand fully upright for some time, none save Härbör, that is, who took note of it but spoke not then of his growing concerns.

“This is the famed Sword of Heroes, wielded by Hêrômêr, the Great Sword-Wielder, when he stood against Sêhtôn of Asävö in the Battle of Kêntre Plateau and brought an end to the Great War for all! Since then the glaive has been passed from one Hero to the next, down through the ages, from father to son, generation upon generation, as a symbol of their bloodline’s duty to Îndrêl. It is my task to deliver this sword up to Lêgêrdêmân’s heir, the next great Hero Unto the World!” declared Mêrâk as he held the sword horizontally above his head by grip and tip.

Mêl Mârâ’s dark eyes filled with pain and rage at the sight of the fearsome weapon that had condemned her to a thousand years of misery and suffering, and she almost gasped as its ancient scar burned with a sudden pain. The wound had never truly healed, not even after a thousand years, and now it was laid open once more so that it oozed forth blood and pus beneath her red and black armor.

“Rüneglaive!” exclaimed Mîtak. “But that is *our* family sword! Certainly you must recognize it, Mêrâk, as the sword Father gave me on my twelfth birth-day. I told you how I lost it in the desert storm where it was taken from me by the Äêrêâl Elemental.”

“Yes,” said Mêrâk. “This is the selfsame sword given to you by our father, Lêgênd—even Rüneglaive. But *Êrig-Srêng*, *Lê Mîst-Srêng*[†] is its proper name: Rüneglaive—Sword of Heroes, given to you, Mîtak, by your father, Lêgêrdêmân of the High Heroes’ Bloodline!”

Everyone was silent as those who had not already realized that Mîtak was Lêgêrdêmân’s son let the profound news sink in. Xärgôn had known for some time, Ä mbrêëlla since Mêrâk had learned of his own true heritage, and even Härbör had guessed at the truth, from Mîtak’s amazing ability with the long sword and because of the strange rünes visible upon the blade of his family sword. But for Dêlfên and Mêl Mârâ the fact that the two young brothers from the Oakwood forest were descendants of the High Heroes’ Bloodline was a complete surprise. For Mîtak, it was at last the undeniable confirmation of something he had been trying to deny to himself for some time now. He was to be the next Hero Unto the World.

[†] *Êrig-Srêng*, *Lê Mîst-Srêng* {H.Ê.} (rüne-glaive, the magic-glaive; “Rüneglaive, the Enchanted Sword”)

Mël Märra felt dizzy and ill. *How could this be?* she wondered. She staggered as the pain in her side and her confusion and dismay brought her to her knees in anguish.

Mëräk knelt then, too, and presented the Heroes' sword reverently for Mîtāk to claim.

Xärgön also knelt and said: "Fay! Gentle Sir. I am at your humble service as I served your father before you, Mîtāk of the High Heroes' Bloodline."

Then Härbör and Dëlfën dropped to one knee beside the others. "LHÖ, TÖRNHIN![†] My humble apologies for ever having doubted you, ma'Lord Hero," said Härbör. "Ach! 'Tis certain, had I known..." he trailed off in his excuses and momentarily forgot even Mël Märra and his doubts about her character. "I am at thy service, kind Lord Mîtāk," he said at length, and he took the tip of Mîtāk's sword and kissed it.

"Stëlth! Mîtäklôus, Wëndëlmôr Fô Lê Ändin-Ërëndilê.[†] My service is given thee and to thy duty to all İndrël," said Dëlfën reverently.

"Ma'Lord," said Ämbrëëlla as she, too, knelt. "Stëlth! Mîlânêô Tô Lâ Têlü Wëntëlmürâ Mürdür.[†] I serve thee and thine."

Tears welled in Mël Märra's eyes as she held the old wound that bit at her side. *How could this be true?* she asked herself over and over. For a thousand burning years she had cursed Hërômër and his kin. She had sworn utter and hateful vengeance upon his foul bloodline and any associated with them. How could she have let herself fall in love—oh yes, it was that very accursed emotion—with the one she had sworn to slay?

Then all eyes fell upon Mël Märra, for she alone had not sworn her fealty to Mîtāk, though she had been the first to kneel before him. Still she pledged not a word, though genuine tears filled her eyes.

When the companions remained kneeling, Mëräk whispered in Mîtāk's ear: "Place your hand on each person's shoulder and formally accept or reject his vow of allegiance."

So, Mîtāk tried to look and sound dignified as he thanked each of his friends for their support and welcomed their declarations of loyalty. Lastly he came to Mël Märra, and though he did not speak to her, he offered her his hand instead.

But the dame-warrior would not look at the Hero and rose without his aid.

[†] LHÖ, TÖRNHIN! {L.D.} ("Hail, Lord-brave!")

[†] Stëlth! Mîtäklôus, Wëndëlmôr Fô Lê Ändin-Ërëndilê. {H.Ë.} ("Hail! Mîtāk, Hero For the World.")

[†] Stëlth! Mîlânêô Tô Lâ Têlü Wëntëlmürâ Mürdür. {D.Ë.} ("Hail! Son of the High Heroes' Bloodline.")

The formality of the moment was gone then, and the others broke off into groups to leave the two alone.

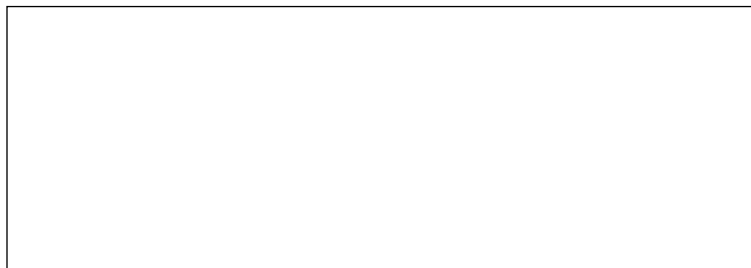
“Does hearing of my heritage truly frighten you so?” asked Mîtāk.

Mël Märra gazed silently across the river at the Temple of the Priestesses and the western slopes of Dale Öráth. Time had evaporated away so rapidly. She shook her head slowly. She could remember... Ah! She could remember when she and her sisters were queens of all Índrêl! She could recall when the Ancient *Lôrêân* Themselves had waged battles that had laid low mighty mountains and had raised valleys up into majestic peaks. She could recollect an age when Men and Dwärves and even the Second-sired were but the dim imaginings and vaporous dreams of young and foolish Gods, a day when she knew not the meaning of pain or of fear, only of how to inflict them upon others. But now she knew pain well, she even new the bitter taste of fear. A long millennium in the bowels of Ärdëntëä had taught her well. They were her closest comrades now—the pangs of remorse and the doubt of uncertainty. The world could change in the blink of her serpent-like eyes. Indeed it had done so once again: her first and only love, sprung from her deepest and most long-abiding hatred. Why did the paths of Fate so often lead to such treacherous places, she wondered.

Mîtāk put his hands around Mël Märra’s slender waist, but the frigid warrior turned from him and walked away.

Torn between new-sprung love and ancient vengeance, Mël Märra left the young Hero to ponder the significance of his newfound heritage by himself.

When Mîtāk looked down at his hands he found a crimson stain upon his right palm and cried out, “Mël Märra!” But she was gone.



CHAPTER TWØ

SÏËR-GLAIVES AND ØTHER ÊLVÂN BLADES

The remainder of that first day above ground, the companions spent resting and recuperating before the long journey ahead, reacquainting themselves with one another and building new friendships as they discussed their hopes and concerns about the impending war. Xärgôn and Dêlfên were soon debating Êstêrêân politics. Mërâk and Âmbreëlla got to listen to all of the old war stories Hârbôr had told the others while in the catacombs, the stout old fellow becoming a little more a great champion with each new telling. In those hours Mîtâk's friendship with Xärgôn, especially, was renewed. He tried not to think about the unusual dame-warrior who had recently joined them, about her unwillingness to swear fealty to his Heroship, of about the unexplained blood upon her left side. He kept himself busy listening to the cleric's stories about his father and the Goblin Wars. He would give Mël Märra time to be alone, if that was what she wished, and would deal with her later.

In the morning they planned to journey south-east again, towards Ärqüävêä, with their dearly bought enchanted weapons and armor. But that night, around the campfire, Xärgôn wielded his clerical magic and great knowledge of lore and history to determine the worth and purpose of each of the weapons Mîtâk had found in the Imperial Chambers.

The two swords he had recovered were named *Ërinsl* and *Sörinsl* and were special, even among enchanted blades, for they had been forged by

Sïerthälus Lörëen himself and were amongst his renowned Sïer-glaives. Their yellow-aura blades were effective against all forms of flesh, including the undead; even Ghöüls and Zombiës could be slain by their golden steel edges. Indeed, these particular swords had been two of Sïerthälus's greatest blades, forged while his furnaces were newly hot from the *Dî Mândôrëä*. Furthermore, each sword was enchanted such that it aided its wielder in skill, making him more likely to find his mark than otherwise his aim alone might have achieved, also causing wounds of greater severity than an equivalent blow with an ordinary blade would have inflicted. "And their edges will never dull," Xärgön explained. "Nor can any other weapon, save but for another Sïer, break them; for they will cut through ordinary steel as though it were lead or pewter."

Mëräk, it was decided, would take *Sörmsil*; and Ämbrëëlla was given *Ërnsil*. When they held the weapons in their hands, it seemed to them as if they had wielded the glaives all of their lives.

The long shield recovered by Mîtäk, also, was awarded to Ämbrëëlla, for it offered special protection from arrows and darts and all other forms of missiles. This guard was of Dwärf craft making, and Härbôr was given to teach them all a bit of Dwärvän history in his explaining of the shield's origins and functions. He told them its name in the Low Dwärvän Tongue, **ÛHURGTÖHN-KHÜRRHUM**.¹ But even more difficult to pronounce than fair Ëlvän names, was the Dwärf gruff Härbôr used. Only a true bass, or perhaps a well-ranged baritone, could have hoped to pronounce such a name properly. So, Härbôr gave them the shield's Common Tongue name as well, which was "Storm-Blocker." Now though the long shield had been crafted by Dwärves, Härbôr explained that long ago it had been fashioned to be a gift for the High Ëlvän king, Qünsônëšëüs, Second-Born of Lënälörnälön, in exchange for his aid in the Drägön wars. How it had come to Asärë, however, Härbôr knew not nor could he guess.

Dëlfën, Mîtäk, Ämbrëëlla, and Xärgön most of all, were amazed that the usually taciturn Dwärf knew so much ancient lore and was so anxious to share it. Perhaps, they decided, it was a pride in the craftsmanship of his illustrious race that drove him to be so verbose when he was usually so reserved with his words.

When Mîtäk produced from the bag of holding the longbow and its quiver of silver arrows, Dëlfën took an instant interest in them.

"What are these?" he asked.

¹ ÛHURGTÖHN-KHÜRRHUM {L.D.} ("Storm-Blocker")

Mitāk handed the elegant weapon to *Lê Êlf*, who read the Middle Skrit glyphs wrought of fine silver strands inlaid upon its handle riser and upon the backs of the limbs:

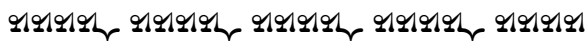


“*Lê Êng-Ôëen Lêb*,”[†] he read aloud.

“The Keen-eyed One,” echoed Xärgön, who took the weapon from Dêlfën to examine it more closely. “I have heard of this bow before. It, too, was fashioned long ago by your ancient kin, Dêlfënlonthälüs, though it is not the work of Sîerthälüs’s hands. Äsenthôrölüs forged the handle riser of a special alloy, and the limbs are a composite of mërthwood, alder, and ash. The string is woven from a tress of hair bequeathed by Sind-inloxsölüs, the only daughter of King Krisgrisälüs the Clairvoyant, for the benefit of future generation and is braided into a cord mightier than any bowstring has proven afore or since.

Dêlfën took the weapon back and removed from a small pouch tied to the grip, a fine white cord. This he strung to the bow as he bent it, and when he tested the pull and brace of *Lê Êng-Ôëen Lêb*, he found the limbs were still pliant and the bowstring yet taut. A fair sound the string did make when released, as that of Êlf maidens singing under the stars, yet with an edge of perilous foreboding.

Six silver-tipped Êlvän arrows there were in the half-empty quiver, straight and true, with red-orange fletchings from the tail feather of a Phoenix. Each had a name in inlaid silver Skrit:



The names, Xärgön read aloud, “*Äsäreng, Äyâeng, Frëng, Spindalëng, Dêlüëng, and Ômondëng*.”[†] And then he blessed the arrows and handed them to Dêlfën. “Once fitted to the notching point, they shall ever hit their mark and will never fail the one who uses them in defense,” expounded the cleric. “However, fay, each can only be used once; for upon finding its target the arrow doth burst into flames and consume its victim.”

Dêlfën was glad to be given the bow, for it replaced his own Êlvän longbow, which he had broken in his battle with the Invisible One, Jürkër.

[†] *Lê Êng-Ôëen Lêb* {H.Ê.} (“the Keen-eyed One”)

[†] *Äsäreng, Äyâeng, Frëng, Spindalëng, Dêlüëng, and Ômondëng* {H.Ê.} (beautiful-sharp, death-sharp, swift-sharp, storm-harp, true-sharp, and hard-sharp)

The next weapon produced from the bag of holding was the mace, **THÉRÄG-DËRIK**, Nemesis-Crusher, again of ancient Dwärvän craft. Xärgôn claimed that weapon for himself and learned from Härbôr of the blunt weapon's origins and use: Khänhdhôr the One-handed had smithed the mighty war-hammer after losing his own right hand in a furnace accident. Though it neither aided its wielder nor inflicted a more deadly blow, if dropped in battle Nemesis-Crusher could be called upon to return to the wielder's hand by verbal command alone.

The last weapon left was the spear Mîrak had found among the treasures in Emperor Ländrôs's crypt. He gave this to Mêrak, who was phenomenally adept with throwing-weapons anyway and would be best suited to wield the long weapon.

Mêrak handed the spear to Xärgôn, who suggested that with its weightlessness, if used as a javelin it would be just as accurate in Mêrak's hands as a normal spear but up to perhaps twice the distance. The unusual weapon had no runes or writing upon it nor markings of any type that might identify it, and neither Härbôr nor Dêlfên could say for a certainty if it had been fashioned by members of his own race. So, Mêrak took the weightless spear back and examined it closely. It was a simple, slender, metal shaft, about the length of his arms spread. At one end the metal spar was dull and rounded and at the other it came to a fine coned-tipped point, but the lethal end had neither flange nor blade nor barb to it. Indeed, the only irregularity upon the shaft at all was a pattern of finely scored lines, which crisscrossed at a point midway between tip and butt and formed a rough grip which felt good in Mêrak's hand.

"What is the possessive form of *sorcerer* in High Êlvän?" Mêrak asked Dêlfên.

"*Mîstdôndüsêš*,"[†] 'Sorcerer's'. 'Of or belonging to a sorcerer'."

"And the Low Dwärvän word for *bane*?" he asked Härbôr.

"Rrôn."

"Then I dub this spear: *Mîstdôndüsêš-RRÔN*,"[†] Sorcerer's-Bane; for surely the crafts of both races were used to forge such a wondrous spear."

And all were pleased with the name and hoped that the javelin would serve Mêrak well.

The day was wearing on. Vîtalûs was now low in the west and would set early in the Vale of Kings.

[†] *Mîstdôndüsêš* {H.Ê.} ("sorcerer's")

[†] *Mîstdôndüsêš-RRÔN* {H.Ê./L.D.} ("Sorcerer's-bane")

"With these mighty weapons," said Mîtak confidently; "nothing can stop us from rescuing Princess Kitfir and conquering Äzmadüs! But let us rest now and prepare ourselves for the journey to Ärqüävëä.

"Xärgön, take the first watch," he said. "Then myself, Mëräk, Härbö, and Dëlfën last. I do not believe the Fiënd shall venture forth into the open after us, but let us keep a close watch upon the entrance to the catacombs anyway."

"What about Mël Märä?" asked Härbö, who did not so easily overlook the latest member of their companionship, who had st ill not returned.

"I do not know," said Mîtak truthfully. "If she comes back during the night, I want to be awakened."

"Fay, ma'Lord," said Xärgön. "I shall wake you for your watch in a short while."

"All too short, I am sure," replied Mîtak; and he began to lay out his bedroll in the cool evening air.

. . . .

At first, Mël Märä cursed herself for falling in love with Mîtak. *It should never have been*, she told herself. But it had happened, and now all she could do was try to deal with her confused emotions. Alone, she sat atop the center acroterium of the crumbling facade on the Temple of the Priestesses. The wooden walls and roof of the Temple having long since decayed away leaving only the marble columns and the triangular facade above the entrance, the sculptured frontispiece and abacuses were the only elements truly reminiscent of the basilica's original grandeur. Below the wounded Drägönness lay Dale Öräth—it, too, in ruins. She remembered the Vale of Kings as it had once been: filled with white marble statues and freshly painted shrines and temples, well-kept gardens and fountains, Priests and Priestesses coming and going, worshipers and pilgrims filling the white cobblestone streets. She remembered Asärë as a mighty kingdom, formidable, powerful, and everlasting, along with her sister city, Asävö, the centers of all civilization—cities without equal in all the Four Realms. But that was now long ago, and it felt like a different life altogether. Could things have changed so drastically in a thousand short years? Could she have changed so much in her banishment to the depths of Ärdëntëä?

From where Mël Märä sat atop the Temple, she could see the companions' watch-fire burning, and though it looked warm, she spurned the desire to heat herself in its bright glow, contenting herself with the cool

touch of her marble throne. Hêrômêr's old wound had stopped bleeding at last, but now tears of sorrow fell from the temple roof like soft rain and mingled with her spilt blood upon the broken steps below.

Far away to the south Mêl Mârâ could sense Âzmadûs calling to her. The dark sorcerer would want to know of their progress in finding *The Sôrsêr*. And if they had found it, he would order her to kill the companions, including Mîtâk, and she would be forced by the *Drâgôn's Bane*^v spell cast upon her to do his bidding.

When first she had learned of Mîtâk's true heritage, she had been enraged. She had felt betrayed, deceived. Indeed, she might have killed the young Hero that instant for what Hêrômêr had done to her, were it not for Âzmadûs's commands. Then, later, she had felt only a kind of aching pain—a sorrow for things doomed and forbidden. Now she was torn between her love for the Man, her hatred for the Hero, and her imminent orders from Âzmadûs to destroy them both.

Her master called again, and she was forced to ignore her own turmoil and respond to his command to return to his dark castle. She stood up and spread her arms as she stood atop the temple's crest. Then, with a flash of red and black, Lêm Arrâm assumed her mighty Drâgôn form and leaped into the night air. Slowly, she circled upwards, then wheeled to the southeast and flew towards Nôdrêôf.

But Lêm Arrâm was not alone. A tiny pair of silent, feathered wings rode her swift slipstream across the Ândrêân Desert like a kite in tow. They went unnoticed by all, the two swiftly moving dark shadows, all except for Xârgôn that is, who, looking up into the night sky, saw for an instant the shimmering blue-white stars blocked from view by a pair of huge, shadowy wings and a terrible slender body.

He shook Mîtâk awake.

"Fay! Wake! Grave tidings. We have been discovered yet again," he whispered. "Some foul beast of wing and claw passed over our heads just now like a dark sky Spirit, headed towards Nôdrêôf."

"Some large night bird or bat?" asked Mîtâk, looking around for Tinbâstêân.

"Nay, no bird of our Ambit. It seemed rather to me as if it were a..." His words were low and hushed, and he broke off as if he dared not speak the word aloud.

"...*Lâ Rêplêônûs*." Dêlfên had joined them, and he called the beast by its ancient Êlvân name.

^v *Lâ Rêplêônûs* {H.Ê.} ("a Drâgôn")

"Ay, that is my fear," agreed Xärgôn. "A Drägôn."

"But there are no Drägöns in İndrël anymore," said Mîtāk.

"Truly," agreed Dëlfën. But then he amended Mîtāk's words. "At least here *were* no Drägöns in *Ērēindil*. But I, too, did witness the star-shadow, if but only for a trice when I heard Xärgôn gasp, and methinks it may indeed have been a Drägôn."

"Whatever the dark creature was, it was surely Äzmadüs's fell work," concluded Mîtāk soberly. If Äzmadüs had released a Drägôn into the Ärthäl Ambit once again, it would certainly make their quest all the more perilous. "I want two on each watch for the rest of the night. You two go to sleep now, and I shall wake Mërāk."

When Xärgôn had come to Mîtāk, the youth had still been awake having not yet slept himself. For the young Hero could not stop thinking about the mysterious red and black armored warrior they had rescued in the catacombs and who had subsequently disappeared.

Now as he kept his vigilance, Mîtāk sat in silent contemplation and did not speak with Mërāk. He told himself that what he and the dame-warrior had done and shared could not possibly have been wrong, as they truly loved each other. And indeed he had, and still did, love the beautiful Woman very much. But did she truly love him? And if so, why had she left and where had she gone? Could she have sent the Drägôn back to Nödreöf?

From their bag of holding, Mîtāk removed the breastplate that went to the garniture of armor he had taken from the Imperial Chambers and began to meticulously clean and polish it. The ancient armor turned out to be much nicer than he had thought it would be when he had taken it from the Flesh Fiënd's lair, and he was surprised to find it burnished nicely and was not rusted or corroded at all as he buffed it with a soft piece of deer hide.

Mërāk sat silently stroking *Mıstdöndüsës-RRÖN*, running his fingers over the scored grip and imagining how he would throw such a marvelous weapon. He aimed it up at the night sky and thought, *If that Drägôn dares show itself again, I may have to re-name this javelin: Drägôn-Biter*. He wondered at the skill that had wrought the fine weapon and wished to learn more of smithing and the craft of the armorer.

The two brothers had not spoken much since being reunited and there was a queer, uneasy tension in the air. Each of their lives had been so dramatically altered over the past two-and-twenty days that they each wondered silently if they had not somehow grown apart. Mîtāk had matured much as a leader of Men, and Mërāk would never be the innocent shy boy he had been when Stëngër's Men had dragged him into the cruel dungeons below the Dark Keep.

Mérák finally broke the quietude and said, “We should go fishing like this more often, big brother.”

They laughed and quickly found that of course they had not changed all that much, after all. Míták was still as cocksure and proud as ever and Mérák as cautious and worried about him. By the end of their shift it seemed that no time at all had passed since they had set out to angle some Shimrëng large-fin trout and find a little bit of adventure along the way, almost a moonth ago.

“What are we going to do, really?” asked Mérák, referring to the rescuing of Princess Kitfir.

“What do you think we should do?” Míták turned the question around as he wondered how he would feel when he saw the lovely princess again.

“Everyone thinks war’s a foregone conclusion,” said Mérák, “but I thing we should try and stop it while it is still only brewing. Mayhap if we confronted Ázmadüs in person with a show of arms, things could be solved without resorting to armies and battles. Even if we won such a war and rescued Kitfir, so many lives would have been spent, it would be tragic.”

“You are right, Mérák, my brother. I should be thinking more of preventing a war than winning it; at least at this point. But war or no, Ázmadüs must be destroyed.”

Mérák nodded and rubbed his wrists. “By my troth, you speak the truth, Míták. I will not rest until I have seen the Dark One destroyed. The things he did to me... And has done to others...” Mérák paused and stared at the flickering watch-fire. “You know, he has driven away or killed very nearly every *Driäd* left in the World—they who were here ere even the first of the High Ælves.” A chill wind blew in down out of the high Vändërlänts, and the flames of their campfire whipped about like the Shâdes of Men dead but not yet at rest.

“He must be stopped,” Mérák said at last. “What we have to do is strike fast, before things escalate into all-out war.”

“Agreed.” Míták nodded and stroked his short beard. “If we could get together a small, elite group of soldiers and get inside Castle Nödrëöf, perhaps we could solve the problem by dealing with its source.”

“With Dëlfën back in Ärqüävëä, we could form such a group from his Home Guard,” said Mérák enthusiastically.

“Do not get too excited yet,” warned Míták. “Remember, I said: ‘If we could somehow get inside the castle.’ That would be the hard part.”

“You will think of something; you always do.”

Míták smiled sadly. “Not always,” he said. “Not always.”

“It is time for Härbör’s and Delfën’s watch now, anyway,” said Mërak. “Think on it. I have faith in you, Mîtak. Remember, you are of the High Heroes’ Bloodline, descended from Hêrômêr himself!”

As he lay in the darkness, Mîtak tried to think about ways of getting into the black castle. But his thoughts kept wandering back to Kitfir and Mël Märra, until he finally drifted off to sleep and was carried away by dreams of home. *He was fishing for Shimrêng large-fin trout with feathered hooks. Lègênd had helped him tie.*

And then she was there, the golden-haired child of his youth, as she had been so often before.

But suddenly they were being chased by a mighty Drägôn who breathed ardent red flames and belched forth hideous black smoke. A conflagration raged all about them and stones rained down from the sky. A great and terrible spear was raised and held poised over them ready to strike...

Mîtak woke up alone, shivering in the dark. He could hear Härbör and Delfën bickering softly nearby, so he rolled over and eventually drifted back off to sleep.



CHAPTER THREE

TRAITOROUS TRADERS

As Silvā rose in the east, her green light glistened on the polished stone walls of Castle Nodrēōf. High above the citadel's embattled towers circled Lēm Arrām. Åzmadūs, in the fortress below, called to her to him. But more than just her spite and hatred for the sorcerer held the Red & Black Drāgōn back now. Her will to disobey the dark sorcerer was strong, but the *Drāgōns' Bane* spell over her was stronger; it drove her to her master, bending her will unto his, until she found herself landing on one of the high stone archways that spanned two of the castle's many black towers.

The Ögre guards had long since spotted her circling in the night sky high above the castle and had sent for their dark Lord even before she landed and took the incarnation of a Woman with long black hair. From thin air, Åzmadūs appeared on the arched stairway to meet her. The gusting wind high up amid the turrets washed his dark robes about his tall frame like black flames.

"You summoned," said Mēl Mārā tersely. She stood, more beautiful than any mortal Woman, tall and as fair as a dark-haired Ēlf maiden, gowned in red and black silk wiþs. Yet to the dark magic wielder she appeared vile, repugnant, and reptilian.

"What haſt thou discoverèd, my Alluring Drägöness," charged the Sorcerer.

"The company hath left the catacombs behind already," she ſaid.

"And Zörwind? Hath he the *Power of Evil*?" demanded Äzmadüs.

Mël Märra could ſee the incredible hunger burning in the magic wielder's dark eyes. It drove him near to madness with deſire. "I know not, for he is no longer among the others."

"Thou knoweſt not?" repeated Äzmadüs angrily, and his eyes flared with red fire, their terrible light shimmering on Mël Märra's red and black dreſs as it blew about her ſoftly in the pale moonlight. Äzmadüs pounded his fiſt upon the battlement, ſhattering the ſtone merlon.

Even Mël Märra, indeed Lém Arräm the great Red & Black, ſtepped aback at his rage and his incredible power. He had grown even ſtronger in his dark magic, much ſtronger, in the ſhort while ſhe had ſpent with the mortals of Zörwind's queſt. It was apparent that Äzmadüs had now maſtered many a ſpell from *The Skiwärð* and had wielded them to ſtrengthen himſelf physically.

"The old wizard was loſt in the underground labyrinths," ſhe explained, "'afore ever I ſaw him.

"But..." the ſpell on her forced her to reveal everything ſhe knew, even ſuſpected, "... methinks ſomething is awry; their young leader knows ſomething of the wizard he hath not yet revealed to the others."

Äzmadüs ſtudied Mël Märra's face, trying to judge how well the *Drägöns' Bane*^o ſpell was working upon her. He forced himſelf to calm his rage and think clearly. Much depended upon the fooliſh old mägüs's diſcovery of *The Sörsër*, and if it lay not there in Äſärë, then where could it be found?

"To Our ſtudy," he ſaid, and he took Mël Märra's hand forcefully. With a flaſh of violet light and a ſhort ſenſation of bitter-chill cold they were ſtanding in the ſorcerer's dark ſtudy, deep below Caſtle Nödrëöf. Äzmadüs ſtrode over to his leather chair and ſat behind his deſk, leaving Mël Märra ſtanding before him. He put his boots upon the hardwood deſk and toyed with his heavy iron ſcepter. As he queſtioned her he abſent-mindedly bent and twisted the thick iron rod, with its Görgön-headed pommel, as though it were a green willow ſwitch.

When Mël Märra had revealed all of the companions' ſecrets, including the fact that Mitär and Mëräk were of the High Heroes Bloodline, deſcended from Hëromër, Äzmadüs commanded her to return to them with haſte. He did not wiſh for the companions to grow ſuſpicious and

intended to keep her as a spy among them for a while longer. Perhaps, they would yet reveal the Argent Wizard's whereabouts or if he had indeed discovered the powerful tome.

Soon the great Drågön was speeding northward once again, her tiny unseen shadow trailing close behind.

. . . .

Just after dawn Mël Märä entered the camp the adventurers had made outside the entrance to the catacombs bearing an armful of fuel for their watch-fire.

"Where have you been, Sly One?" demanded Härbör, who was then keeping the watch with Dëlfën. Had he known how true to the mark his suspicions were, he would not have been even that kind.

"Near at hand," she replied simply.

"Doing what?" demanded the Dwärf. "Collecting firewood the whole night?"

"Press the damsel not so," Dëlfën came to Mël Märä's help. "Has she no right to some modest privacy?"

"Do not be so gentle on this deceitful wench, **WHIMLHÖ**. She may appear kindly and comely, but there is more to her than meets the eye, I should warrant."

Mël Märä knew her Drågön-allure was not working on the old Dwärf as it had so easily charmed Dëlfën and the others. So, Mël Märä wove a wonderful lie to appease the old fellow's suspicions. "Kind **KHWÄGËN**, I do beg thy pardon. This past night was a hallowed eve for me, and I didst need the time alone to perform certain holy rites and make special sacrifices and offerings to my God. For I had all but forgotten mine own beliefs and loyalties until I didst see everyone kneeling before the young Hero and remembered myself that I needst kneel and thank my Maker for returning us all safely to the surface." Mël Märä toyed with her serpentine ring nervously as she lied, twisting the black gold band round and round her slender finger. "Forgive me my grave discourtesy; I should have spoken thus much ere I departed."

"Humph! 'Tis certain," begrudged Härbör.

"What is it?" asked Mîtāk as he woke up to the sound of the Dwärf's loud grumbling.

Dëlfën said nothing more, but Härbör gave Mël Märä a hard look. "Naught," he said as he kept his eyes upon the suspicious warrior in her red and black garniture. "Mël Märä's just now returned; 'tis all."

Míták stretched and put his family sword upon his belt. "Good the morrow, then, gentle sirs, and to you, gentle lady," he said politely and with a slight bow.

Mél Märra did not return his smile or acknowledge his greeting.

"I shall fetch some more firewood," she said as she began to head out into the overgrown ruins in search of more fuel. "I have fresh venison to smoke for our journey to Nödrêôf, and it shall require a decent fire."

"Wait..." began Míták, but she was already gone from view.

"She be trouble, I warrant, 'tis certain," said Härbôr simply.

"She is *my* trouble, then," replied Míták curtly. "There are other things aplenty for you to worry about. You must devise a way for some twenty warriors to get inside Castle Nödrêôf without detection."

Härbôr shrugged his stout shoulders. "I am just trying to help," he said, and his voice betrayed a thinly veiled hint of injury.

"I am sorry," said Míták, and he patted the Dwärf on the back. "And you are right for doing so. But what I really need you to do right now is concentrate on the tactical problems of getting an elite group of fighters inside the Dark Castle in clandestine. I have a plan. So, that is the most important thing you can do for us right now."

"A plan to rescue ma'Lady?" asked Dêlfên, who had purposefully kept from getting between Míták and Mél Märra.

The young Hero scratched his beard and stared at his boots. "As a matter of fact, I do. A simple one, really, but a good one, I should wager."

When the others were up and Mél Märra had returned to the camp with firewood and a small dressed doe, Härbôr helped her set up the fire for curing and they began to smoke the venison. As the preserves cured, Míták explained the plan he and Mérák had devised during the night. He believed much of the bloodshed of the imminent war could be prevented, if they could but usurp Äzmadüs swiftly and completely.

Neither Míták nor Xärgôn nor Dêlfên spoke of the dark shadow they had seen pass overhead during the night, and thus Mél Märra was unaware that they knew that one of her kind had entered the Ärthäl Ambit. Rather, they discussed instead their journey to Nödrêôf, deciding between the two possible routes they could take. The companionship could either travel northeast along the Vändërlänt Mountains, to where they met their eastern brothers, the Förgëng Mountains and then follow the southern border of that range down to the Shimrëng River, where they could buy canoes or construct rafts to take them south on the river all the way to Nödrêôf, thus avoiding the open desert and the watchful eyes of Äzmadüs's spies *or* they could take the direct route and venture through the Ändrëän Desert once more, returning to Ärqüävêä the way

they had come, then follow the Shimrêng south to Äzmadüs's castle fortress from there.

During the discussion, it came out that Xärgôn had come across some traders journeying in the direction of Pântän Oasis on his way to Asärê. He had met the vagrant peddlers at the southern feet of the Vändêrlânt Mountains, below *Lê Vêrdä Cädêräs*,[†] the Southern Pass, on their way from Vändêrlânt to Pântän. They were scheduled to have come up the Glimmer River two days earlier and would have just come through the pass that morn. Xärgôn had convinced the wayfaring traders to return and meet up with him in a fortnight's time with ten Humped Beasts, or what the traders called, "camels." By then Xärgôn hoped to have met up with his friends, whom he had said would be returning from Mount Rên with a load of diamonds to trade in Nödrêôf and Hêndêrm. (He could not tell the wayfarers that the companions were really coming from Asärê, for no man would have put stock in their return from the depths of that foul place.) So, he had told the traders that they would be taking the Glimmer River south from Mount Rên to the Ancient Pass and would meet the Men he had bartered with at the western base of *Lê Îthgôr Cädêräs*, near the ruins, some two or three days before the new moon.

"By my hood, that is the day or the morrow," said Härbôr.

"So, they are expecting us to be returning with diamonds from the north." Mîtäk wanted to appraise the situation.

"Fay. I have come to realize that in the Outside World," explained Xärgôn, "indiscretion's sometimes simply inevitable."

"Well, at least we should make good time to Ärqüâvêä," said Dêlfên optimistically, "and with camels, we can take the open route across the desert swiftly and safely."

"If they do not just simply try and slit our throats for our 'diamonds'."

"Merry, Mîtäk; 'tis true *if* the traders come with the camels at all, of course," reminded Härbôr.

"Let us make a smoke signal for them to find us by," suggested Dêlfên. "Truly, *Mâfêrêlân* was a vast city." He gestured around the expansive ruins.

"Indeed," said Mîtäk.

"Think what you will," persisted Härbôr, "but I am not counting on them. Such wayfarers are known for wandering hither and thither without regard for appointments or promises. That way I shall be

[†] *Lê Vêrdä Cädêräs* {H.Ê.} ("the Southern Pass")

prepared to walk all the way to Ärqüävëä, and will not be disappointed when we have to do just that.”

• • • •

A long trail of smoke rose high into the air and trailed away to the east above their heads in the soft morning wind.

“That must be them,” said one of the Men from Pântän Oasis.

There were six of them, each sitting upon a camel at the top of a hill overlooking the ancient ruins of Asärë. They were not the traders Xärgôn had spoken with, but ruffians—bandits from the oasis who had met the wayfaring traders in a local tavern. They had learned from the bargemen of the cleric’s need for camels and had agreed to deliver the camels themselves. The wandering traders had gladly taken gold in recompense for their share of the deal, for they were wont to wander eastward anyway and did not like the idea of having to go somewhere in particular, to begin with, especially at an appointed time.

Each of the six large Men atop the hill carried a halberd, for the long-helved poleaxes were the mascot weapons of their group. Indeed, they called themselves “the Gisarmés” for that very reason and fancied themselves something of a band of philosopher-bandits.

“Looks like four scrawny Men and a couple o’ Women with the religious one,” said their leader, Shërük. He was the largest among them and held in his hands a mighty halberd with a sharply curved fluke opposite the axblade. It was named **GROSH-GHÖRR**,¹ or “Pain-Giver,” for it had been fashioned with the blade of a Dwärvän battle-axe of that very title. In a dispute, he had killed the Low Dwärf who had smithed the fine weapon and had taken the axe from him when the old **KHWÄGËN** had refused to sell **GROSH-GHÖRR** to Shërük.

“Sounds like no problem to me,” said another of the ruffians; “we are six.”

“I will take those odds any day. Especially since one of them is an Elf and another is a half-pint Dwärf,” japed a third ruffian. “Remember that old stump-of-a-man who would not part with your halberd, Shërük?”

“Shut up, Half-Wit.” Shërük did not take the odds so lightly. He was seasoned in the art of ambush and attack and knew never to judge an opponent prematurely by size or by number. Th at last Foremidwinter, Shërük had fled into the desert from the Southern Oakwood with his

¹ **GROSH-GHÖRR** {L.D.} (“Pain-Giver”)

band of highwaymen after having waylaid one of King Jörän's vassals. When the King had put a price on their heads thrice the sum of what they had stolen, they had taken their spoils and departed straightway hence to distant Pântän Oasis. Shërük was not one to take unnecessary risks. He had retrained the group, having traded their horses for camels, and thus far the Gisarmés had been more successful than ever they had in the glens of the mighty Oakwood.

. . . .

From a vantage point high up in the hills of *Lê İthgôr Căderäs*, behind the ruffians, a *Tracker* surveyed the valley below. He sniffed the air with his furry snout and smelled the afar off smoke that had lured them to the Vale of Kings. From where he crouched he could see the Men from Pântän Oasis riding down into Dale Öräth to meet the Men and Women of the company he had been trailing all the way from Smithsands. He pointed his long doggish arm in their direction and howled with delight at the sight of his quarry.

"I have them," said a Man who held the Tracker at the end of a sturdy leash. "Looks like they have company, too."

"I sees them," acknowledged a gruff voice. "There, amidst the wrack, Brother."

"Aye, Me sees them, too," Snôron's second half assured the first. He tossed a large bone he had been chewing on to the crouching Tracker, who yelped in delight and snatched it up. (The bone might have come from a Man's thigh, though it was too badly mauled now for positive identification.)

The Tracker's trainer noticed the resemblance and stepped a few nervous paces away from the huge two-headed Ettin. He and his Tracker would work for hire for anyone, even an Ettin, but suddenly he feared the beast might just as easily decided to eat him as pay him, now that their prey had been found.

Me Snôron picked his teeth with his dagger as I Snôron proclaimed: "Now I proves to Äzmadüs once and for all I can take care of Dămănit-Slayer and his weird friends."

"Me shall not be fooled again with their nasty trickery," proclaimed the other head.

"This time I sees to it they do not escape."

"And Me's going to eat them well and good."

"Aye, Brother. I will."

The Man with the Tracker gulped nervously at those words and was relieved when I & Me Snöron tossed him a purse of gold coins. He took the pay gladly and departed straightway with his Tracker and reward, ere the Êttin could change his mind about their deal.

"Good hunting," he said in parting and pried the bone out of his Tracker's paws. "You are not eating that rotten thing, boy."

. . . .

"Look!" cried Dêlfên. "Truly, must be the traders Xärgôn spoke of."

Mîtäk and the others looked to where the Êlf's lean arm pointed to a pack of tiny dots slowly windings its way down out of the Ancient Pass.

"Are they on camels?" asked Mîtäk excitedly.

The golden-haired Êlf nodded the affirmative.

"Ach! 'Tis certain," agreed Härbôr assuredly, although he could not see the approaching Men himself. When he was much younger, the Dwärf could see perfectly; now, however, he had aged one-hundred-eight-and-ten years under the Mountain, and his vision had degenerated rather significantly. It was still, nonetheless, not quite bad enough to force him to admit to himself his eyesight was failing rather badly. The old Dwärf sniffed the air to make sure the others were not just kidding him, and sure enough could scent something that smelled just like what he guessed humped desert animals would smell like.

"Why do you not get out some gold regals now," suggested Mîtäk to Dêlfên. "I do not want them knowing about the bag of holding."

"I shall get them," volunteered Härbôr.

"I do not think that would be a wise idea," responded Mîtäk. "I doubt you would be willing to part with the gold once you had it in your gnarled little hands."

Härbôr shrugged. "I suppose you are right." Then he decided suddenly, "Mayhap it would not be such a bad idea to walk to Ärqüâvêä, after all. How much gold do you think it will cost, anyway?" He asked the question with such genuine concern in his voice that the other companions had to laugh at his stinginess.

As Dêlfên counted out several gold regals and gave a few each to Mîtäk and Xärgôn for bargaining purposes, Härbôr watched the edge of his perception for the approaching riders. His curiosity as to what these strange Humped Beasts looked like was so strong it even distracted him from the gold.

The tiny blurs drew closer and closer, until they were about a furlong distant and the Dwärf could just begin to make out their characteristics.

Slowly Härbör realized the approaching Men were not bringing along any extra camels, only the ones they rode upon.

"What? What? Something's awry here. Ach! 'Tis certain," he said with an anxious voice.

Dëlfën looked up from the bag of holding to see a glint of sun upon one of the rider's halberds. "Truly, we are being ambushed," he cried and dropped the gold out of his lap as he went for his new bow.

Mîtāk drew his great family sword as the ruffians began their charge. He saw Mërāk and Åmbrëëlla drawing their enchanted glaives as well out of the corner of his eye and wished they had all been a bit more wary.

Xärgön fumbled with the bag of holding in an attempt to retrieve his mace from the loose sack.

Of all the companions, Härbör was the most experienced at battle, yet in the face of the onslaught, the first thing he did was scramble to retrieve the fallen gold regals Dëlfën had lost in his haste, and only when they had been recovered did he ready his bipennis for the assault.

But what use would any of their weapons be against the mounted attack of half-a-dozen well-armed assailants in three-quarter field armor?



CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIRST BATTLE

“**K**ill them all and every one!” was Shérük’s battle cry as he charged the unprepared companions. **GROSH-GHÖRR** felt anxious in his hand and seemed hungry for the taste of flesh and bone once more.

And thus the mounted ruffians fell upon the unprepared party of diamond-traders. The Gisarmés believed it would be their easiest ambush since taking to the desert that last autumn.

Too late, Shérük realized they had made a fatal mistake.

Dëlfën had one of the silver-tipped arrows nocked and sighted before he realized it was one of his six silver arrows. He still had a few regular arrows left in his quiver, and though he could have split a crooked cat’s crooked whisker with a crooked bolt at that distance, he was forced to use one of the immensely valuable shafts or miss altogether the chance to kill one of the ruffians before they engaged in hand-to-hand combat. He let go one of Äsenthörölüs’s Arrows, and with a sharp hiss, *Äsäreng* found its mark.

Piercing the heavy mail hauberk of the ruffian second from the foremost, the missile burrowed itself to the red-orange fletchings in the Man’s chest and then erupted into flames, killing him instantly.

Mëräk and Ämbrëëlla lured one of the attackers off to the side and tried to force him from his camel by assaulting him from both sides.

Unfortunately, their ploy did not work; rather, the ruffian wheeled his mount about and concentrated his attack upon the *Drûid* exclusively, only defending himself at need against Mèràk's novice sword swings. He thought to kill the damsel quickly and then take Mèràk on one-to-one.

Now the plan almost worked, for Àmbrèëlla was in no way used to fighting with a sword and was well challenged just in trying to defend herself from the vastly more experienced ruffian. It was at that moment, when she was engaged in hand-to-hand combat for the first time in her immortal, yet infinitely fragile life, that she thought of the vow she had made when she pledged with the other companions to see their quest through to its end, "... even to the price of our very lives."

For a moment she wondered if she should not have remained with the other Wood Èlves, leaving the troubles of the Four Realms behind for Men, Dwärves, and High Èlves to deal with. Of course, she owed nothing to the other races; the only interest she had in any of the mortals was her love for one Man, Mèràk. But for him, she had joined her destiny to theirs, her fate to their plight.

Mèràk swung at the mounted attacker's left leg. But the ruffian easily blocked the glaive with his shield and continued to assault Àmbrèëlla. As they fought, the Gisarmé coaxed his mount sideways, until he had Mèràk trapped between what was left of a large wall and the huge fallen blocks of a marble frontispiece.

Mèràk was helpless, unable to get past the ruffian's large shield, or even help protect Àmbrèëlla on the other side of the camel. He stabbed upward at the Man's chest, but the blow was deflected again. He just was not a great swordsman; missiles were his forte. But he had neither bow nor spear at hand, nor would either have done him any good, in such close proximity.

Then the ruffian caught Àmbrèëlla's sword in the curved fluke of his halberd and yanked the whinyard from her hands. Almost in the same move, he leaped from his camel to finish her off before Mèràk could come to her aid.

Mìtāk fought the ruffian leader one-on-one. Mèl Märra did not draw her weapon, though she crouched near to him, and he wondered at her hesitance to fight. Yet the thought never entered his mind that perhaps Hårbör's worries were all too well grounded.

Shèrük seemed to sense that the red and black armored dame-warrior was not a threat and concentrated exclusively on Mìtāk. He used the length of his halberd to keep Mìtāk's deadly glaive at a safe distance.

This frustrated Mìtāk, who preferred a quick and to-the-point mêlée to a drawn out bout of changing tactics. So, he tried to cleave the haft of

the ruffian's long partizan with his heavy sword, but the Man was obviously much used to swordplay and deftly blocked all his blows with the heavy, metal axeblade of Pain-Giver.

As he fought the skillful halberd-wielder, Mîtāk tried to glance around and check on the others. The memory of how Hårbör had nearly been killed by the Gärgöyles because they had not been fighting as a group was still fresh in his mind. He glanced over at his younger brother, who was having trouble, and saw that Åmbrëëlla was faring even worse.

"Help them," he said to Mël Märra, pointing his head in their direction as he fought Shërük. He was more interested in what her reaction would be, than he was worried about Mërāk, who could usually take care of himself quite well.

Mîtāk blocked a wide swing of the ruffian's halberd, and the sharp ring of metal sang out as **GROSH-GHÖRR** met Rüne glaive squarely. He spun quickly around to block the next strike, and blue sparks flew as their mighty weapons clashed and skirled against one another. He saw Mël Märra draw her red-bladed sword and head for Mërāk and Åmbrëëlla just as he saw the ruffian knock the Sïer-glaive from the Wood Ælf's small hands. And he was glad then that Mël Märra had gone to help them.

As the ruffians attacked, Xärgön had quite a bit of trouble retrieving his mace from the bag of holding. In his frenzy to get the blunt weapon out of the black satchel, the cleric kept getting the helve caught in the drawstring and loose flaps, until at last he remembered the battle-hammer was enchanted. Then he simply called out: "Nemesis-Crusher to my aid!" and the Dwärvän armament loosed *itself* from the bag of holding and shot forthwith into his open palm. Indeed, the mace freed itself just in time, for Xärgön brought the enchanted weapon up only an instant before one of the ruffians' gisarmés would have split his skull asunder.

The ruffian who attacked him was apparently used to fighting primarily on horseback, for he used a charging tactic with his halberd similar to jousting. The rider's long weapon, as with all poleaxes, had a sharp spear-like spike at the tip as well as a broad axeblade and pointed fluke, and thus could be thrust as well as swung at an opponent.

Xärgön did not let the formidable mounted attack intimidate him, however, and he turned the rider's preference to his own advantage. Since the desert camel was nowhere near as agile or fast as a horse, Xärgön was able to climb onto a column block and knock the rider off from behind as he passed by on his second charge.

Now, **THÉRÁG-DÉRIK**[†] was not enchanted such that it could aid in Xärgõn's performance, as would the Sïër-glaives, but the blue-robed cleric was already quite used to wielding a mace, and was skillful enough to challenge the ruffian by himself once he had doffed the raider from his mount.

When the ruffian got his wits about him again, he stood face to face with Xärgõn for several moments without attacking. He stared at the cleric's orange cat-eyes as Xärgõn sized up his adversary. The highwayman was left-handed, and Xärgõn wielded his mace with his right, but the Gisarmé had fought many such opponents before and had lived to learn from his previous battles.

They both charged, cleric and ruffian. Several assaults and parries were made, but they were all misses except for a glancing *passé* or two, and the combatants backed off a second time to judge one another more closely.

The highwayman he faced was but a youth, Xärgõn realized then, who tried to hide his age behind a mask of fuzzy facial hair. "This is foolish, Brother," he said. "Let us not fight thus."

"Cast not a spell upon me, Crafty Cleric," warned the ruffian. "I take not well to be'n enchanted."

"Fay, Brother. I do not wish to charm you nor to do you bodily harm."

"Hand over the diamonds, and I shall let you live," offered the youth.

"I am afraid I cannot do that, my son. For there are no diamonds."

"We shall see about that," said the young ruffian and he brought his halberd up and then swung it down at the cleric's hooded head.

Xärgõn blocked the assault, then stepped forward and swung his own weapon down heavily upon the ruffian. The youth sidestepped and blocked the cleric's next blow with hands spread wide apart on the helve of his *gisarmé*. He kicked Xärgõn away and brought his weapon to bear again as the cleric stumbled backwards in his loose-fitting *birrus*, intent on finishing off the holy Man ere he could cast a charm on him or dissuade him with his cunning words.

Härbôr, the "half-pint Dwärf" as they had called him, was of course the most experienced, and proved nearly the most lethal of all the companions. He killed the first rider who came at him almost with his eyes closed. The only hard thing was being careful not to injure the ruffian's valuable mount. But Härbôr skillfully hurled *Fell Venom*-slasher squarely into the rider's chest and let its strange poison do the rest.

[†] **THÉRÁG-DÉRIK** {L.D.} ("Nemesis-Crusher")

When a second ruffian attacked, he was a little more cautious than the first foe and hesitated for a moment. The break gave Härbör a chance to check on the others and retrieve his bipennis; which he did quickly. He found each of the remaining ruffians was well matched with one or more of the other companions. So, he took his time slowly and carefully whittling his opponent down. He did not wish to throw his axe a second time, for it was a dangerous ploy, leaving him unarmed if he missed.

That second ruffian was much older than the first who had charged Härbör, with a straggly beard, mostly black where it protruded out of his close helmet, but spattered with gray here and there. He was also much more heavily armored than the first Man, wearing a full suit of heavy masclad armor despite the great heat of the desert. From the pointed toes of his sollerets to the plumb of his helm, he was girt in shiny gray steel. The diamond-shaped plates of linked metal that covered his chest and upper thighs shimmered in the sunlight and gave him an air of majesty despite his obvious nature. Where the hauberk of linked diamond-shaped scales did not cover, he wore leg armor and arm defenses, with genouillere and gardebras to protect the knees and elbows.

For a weapon, this second ruffian held a marteldefer in his right gauntlet, a halberd with a long straight spike opposite the axblade in place of a fluke, which could pierce the heaviest plate armor fashioned. This he had named Helm-Piercer, for he had punctured many a sturdy battle-helmet with the fearsome poleaxe, and he thought to do likewise with Härbör's newest cap.

He looked Härbör hard in the eyes for a moment, then threw the beaver of his helm down and prepared to charge. With the helmet closed, he resembled an enraged Goblin with pointed lips and snout and protruding tusks.

Härbör did not dare swing at the Man's legs for fear that even a small nick from his poison axe on the camel's flank would kill the animal; nor could he reach the Man's upper body.

As much of a disadvantage as Härbör had fighting the highwayman on camelback, however, the tall rider suffered an equal handicap attacking the unusually short Dwärf from atop his mount. He found that he had to lean so far out of his saddle to get at his opponent, even with his long horseman's hammer, he was left altogether vulnerable to a coup from Härbör's bipennis and quite off balance in his heavy mail.

And that was exactly what Härbör played on. He lured his assailant far enough out of the saddle that he was able to lop off the Man's weapon-bearing arm at the gardebras. The intimidating marteldefer fell useless to the ground, still clutched stringently in the gauntlet of dissevered appendage.

This, however, did not stop the highwayman, who simply withdrew, stripped the arm defense off his upper arm, and wrapped his bloody elbow stump quickly with a sash. He then reached over and drew his sword with his left hand.

“By the *Lôrëän*, Half-Pint! You are a dead man!” he swore.

Härbôr could not believe the ruffian was so little daunted by the grave injury, but he had heard before of such instances battle-rage allowing a man to fight on long after he should have collapsed or fainted. A mercenary he had fought with some years before had told him of a man who had lost an entire arm in battle and had fought on for some long season before realizing the appendage was even missing. So, Härbôr took a few steps back and drew the highwayman and his camel further out of the open and in among the ruins. He avoided most of the rider’s thrusts and swings simply by stepping back a pace, or ducking, and successfully parried the rest with the blade of his battle-axe.

Then Härbôr attacked and drove the ruffian aback. But he was unable to inflict any more wounds. The rider was simply too tall atop the camel to get at his chest or head. Yet Härbôr was tiring quickly and had to do something. Therefore, the next time the ruffian attacked, Härbôr parried and then swung low with *Fell Venom-slasher*, risking hurt to the camel. He severed the ruffian’s leg at the knee where the linked lozenge-shaped plates of his masked armor ended, for it was the only place he could reach with his short weapon.

But this did not stop the ruffian, either! He seemed a man possessed, for the grievous wounds he shrugged off as though trivial, and Härbôr wondered if he were not fighting the undead when even the poison of his enchanted blade seemed ineffective.

The ruffian wheeled his mount about then and charged the Dwärf with his sword held high.

Härbôr, however, sidestepped and swinging *HËSH ÜRRÄG-BHÜRR* at the ruffian’s other leg, dismembering it at the knee as his attacker rushed by atop the camel, held in the saddle by its high skirt and his will alone.

Yet the highwayman *still* came on, charging past Härbôr once more.

This time Härbôr knocked the ruffian’s sword from his weakening grip, and it fell amid the stones.

And still the Man would neither yield nor give up his endeavor to kill the Dwärf. Using the bulk of his large mount, the ruffian drove Härbôr into a narrow dead-end lane between two fallen pillars. Then, with his one remaining arm, the ruffian backed his massive beast up and readied the mount to charge at Härbôr one last time. He drove the animal

straight at the small Dwärf, intent upon trampling his foe to death if he could not kill him in hand-to-hand combat.

In a panic, Härbör looked about for some way out of his predicament. He was trapped between the two pillars, of about an ell in diameter each, which lay parallel upon the ground on each side of him, with just enough space between them for the camel to pass. The end of the channel was blocked by one of the column blocks, which had rolled up against the opposite column.

All within the matter of an instant, he thought to scramble over one of the columns, but knew without trying they were too tall and smooth for him to surmount, so he did not waste his time in the attempt; he thought to yield, but feared the ruffian would only overrun him out of vengeance anyway; he thought of his odds if he charged the camel headlong and tried to bring it down with a blow to the shins; and he thought to pray to Ärxë. All these he discarded in favor of standing fast and holding his ground on his own—his will against the will of a ruffian and his mount. He had not enough room between the columns to swing his bipennis, but he would face his adversary with dignity, if nothing else.

The least well equipped companion to face the Gisarmés was Dëlfën. Although he had already slain one of the mounted attackers with his long bow, he was no match for the second ruffian to reach him. Too close to use his bow and arrows effectively, the Ëlf was forced to cast *Lê Êng-Öëen* *Lê* aside; (for he dared not try to block a blow from the rider's halberd with the invaluable heirloom and risk damaging it). But the only weapon he had else was his rapier, which was no match in either length or strength for his adversary's poleaxe. The best he could do was to avoid the charging ruffian as best he could and duck or leap out of the way of the Man's swings and thrusts. But for how long could he outmaneuver such an opponent before he was hit or simply worn out.

Knowing his current strategy was doomed to eventual disaster, Dëlfën struggled to think of another plan. Had he an *Ïnhörn* and a lance, he could best the ruffian in one pass. But he had neither. If he could just get the Man off his camel, however, he would then have the advantage. His light sword was quick and accurate, while the marauder's heavy halberd was sluggish and crude. If he could get inside the weapon's long reach, he could kill the attacker.

Somehow, he would have to knock the Man off his mount. That was the only way.

Leaping from stone to stone and block to block, Dëlfën led his adversary in a winding, dodging path through the walls and causeways of Måferëlan in the hopes that he might get the Man to fall off his awkward

mount over the sharp, twisting, turning course. But the ruffian was too skilled a rider to simply slip from the saddle.

Dëlfën ran along one narrow stone wall that put him at about eyelevel with the galloping camel rider and had to duck twice and jump over a third swing of the Man's long partizan but failed to keep his balance when the wall ended and he had to leap to a broken column of about the same height almost a rod away. He landed on one foot, but a jar from the camel as it slammed its hind quarters into the pillar sent him sprawling to the ground.

Luckily, he just missed landing right on a cāmōsnake making its way through the tall grass. The snake, which had been as green as the grass, slithered into a tight coil and its head turned bright red as it hissed in warning. As quick as an eagle, Dëlfën snatched the deadly serpent up by the tail before it could strike and flung it into the path of the camel that was about to trample him.

The camel bucked and scuttled back on the ancient cobble stone street, dislodging its rider in its frantic efforts to get away from the lethal cāmōsnake. The ruffian landed with a clamor on the roadway, his heavy three-quarter armor bringing him crashing down like a toppled stone column.

With Mërāk blocked by his mount, the ruffian who had À mbrëëlla disarmed and pinned raised his halberd over his head to strike the beautiful unarmed *Driād* down. But his blade was mysteriously thrust backward!

He turned to see that a thin, red, sword-blade had thwarted his deathblow. Mël Märra, resplendent in her red and black armor, swung that blade to finish him off; but the attacker was far too wily and practiced to be taken so far off guard that it would cost him his life. He ducked and then kicked his new opponent in the chest, knocking her back as he turned to leap into the saddle of his camel again.

But now Mërāk was there, and he caught the Man with one solleret in the stirrup and one in the air. He pulled the ruffian back down and the Man's neck was broken between helm and gorget, the weight of his three-quarter plate armor simply too heavy for the Man to break his own fall.

Again Shërük attacked. But again Mîtāk blocked his blow as the ruffian charged past. Though there is a definite advantage to any mounted attack, camels are not war horses and are in comparison simply awkward and clumsy. So, the young Hero bore that out well. He took advantage of his greater mobility, agility, and ability to jump over fallen columns or climb over low walls to keep his distance. He could easily have brought

the knobby-legged dromedary down, as well, with a swift swipe of his razor-sharp sword; but wished not to harm the camel, hoping to defeat the ruffian without doing so and be able to ride the camel to Nòdrëöf himself. Instead he used a thick branch to trip up Shërük's ride and force the bandit from his mount.

As the attacker and his camel each scrambled to his feet, Mîták looked to his left and found Xärgön wielding his new mace against one of the mounted attackers. To his right Dëlfën was dancing along a thin wall with his foe galloping along trying to keep up with him. Behind Mîták, Härböör was bobbing and weaving, trying to keep out of reach of his Gisarmé's attacks.

This time, it was Xärgön who would block the blow, with his hands at each end of the haft of his weapon, as he lay upon his back. The young ruffian swung with all his might as he brought his long poleaxe to bear on the fallen cleric. But THËRÄG-DËRIK was of Dwärf-craft and the ruffian's halberd of ordinary smith-craft, so the oaken spear of the longer weapon splintered when they met and the head of the halberd broke off near the tip. The heavy axeblade lodged in the ground next to Xärgön's head and he thrust the ruffian back with his legs so that he might scramble to his feet, which he quickly did.

"Yield, Brother," Xärgön said smoothly. "You are weaponless."

"Not quite," replied the young ruffian thrusting the sharp end of his broken helve at the cleric's belly. The gisarmé's oaken haft had split at an acute angle producing a tip as sharp as any spear's.

Xärgön knocked the thrust down with the butt end of his own weapon, pinning the sharp point into the soft turf. Before the Man could withdraw his weapon, Xärgön brought the heavy end of his new weapon down upon the oak shaft, breaking off another three links of its length.

Again, he implored the youth to give up. "Fay. The day is mine. Yield," he said. He brought his mace up and held it poised above his shoulder.

But the young ruffian drew a dagger from his belt with his right hand and stabbed it upward.

Xärgön blocked the thrust with the butt end of THËRÄG-DËRIK again, but when the youth immediately attacked without respite with the broken end of his halberd helve, Xärgön was forced to bring his mighty mace to bear.

Although the battle-hammer was deceptively weightless at rest, it carried a great amount of force once swung; and while Xärgön tried with all his might to soften the blow, once he had started to swing the hammer around it carried heavily past the oaken spear and struck the hapless ruffian on the temple with a dull thud. The wayward youth crumpled

dead at the Fënüsëân cleric's feet then, and Xärgôn wept in silence, for he had been forced to kill a youth he knew to be not more than six and ten years in the World.

Pinned between the two fallen columns, the massive camel charged at Härbôr like a sudden storm, shaking the very ground upon which it trod with the thunder of its galloping flèche. At that moment Härbôr knew he was the "Doomed One" spoken of by the prophecy. He would be the one to die before the quest's end. But he did not flinch. In fact, he yelled his defiance: "To Ärdëntëa with you and all accursed four-legged beasts!"

Still the camel charged on until he was almost upon Härbôr, and at the last moment the Dwärf drew his arms over his face and head. But the charging beast suddenly stopped short, so abruptly so that it flung his dead rider from the saddle.

The dismembered ruffian was thrown on top of Härbôr, and so heavy was his weight, even without most of his limbs, the Dwärf was trapped beneath him and not found until long after the battle was over.

With his opponent on the ground, Dëlfën was quickly able to subdue him. Before the Man could get to his feet even, the lithe Ælf had his rapier-tip at the ruffian's throat. "Yield, Sir," he advised. "You have fought well, but the fray is mine."

"I yield," begrudged the ruffian. But then when Dëlfën went to help him to his feet, the treacherous foe drew a dagger and hurled it at the Ælf.

Dëlfën flinched and caught the light dirk by the grip, sending it straight back so that it stuck, blade-down, in the moss between the cobblestones at the Man's cheek. "Do you truly yield, now, Sir?"

"I do," the ruthless ruffian admitted. But then of a sudden he sprang up at Dëlfën.

Not to be fooled a second time, Dëlfën dispatched the deceitful thief with the point of his slender sword before he could realize that the Man was scrambling from cāmōsnake, which had slithered over to them and was at their feet.

Even though Shërük had been dismounted earlier than any of the other ruffians, he was the last of the Gisarmés still alive as he faced Mîtāk on foot. Shërük was their leader, and it was not because he was their wisest nor their most charismatic; it was simply because he was the strongest. He had commanded his group of unruly bandits with staunch authoritarianism and the might of **GROSH-GHÖRR**; thus the fact that he was the last of his Men still alive was *not* because Mîtāk was not the best fighter

among the companions, but because Shérük was far superior to any of the other dromedary brigands.

The two leaders of Men fought long and hard then, a terrible duel.

Now Shérük had an unusual gisarmé, the haft of which could be broken down by unscrewing the bottom half of the long pole. This made for a weapon that was not unlike a rather large battle-axe with a blade, a fluke, and a point.

Shérük was amazingly skilled with this half-halberd, unique among Men and weapons; nevertheless, Mîtāk realized that his dexterous opponent was but a vague shadow of the forces and foes he would face if he and his small party ventured into Castle Nôdrêôf. There he would confront Ögres and Êtins, and ultimately, Åzmadüs, who was said to be the mightiest swordsman ever to have lived in İndrêl.

So, Mîtāk “practiced” with this ruffian leader for as long as he dared, eventually wearing the Man down, making a mockery of the battle. The desperate struggle eventually turned into nothing more than a sparring bout, where Mîtāk played cat and mouse with the bandit. He simply practiced his thrusts and parries until the Man looked a complete fool. Then he used a technique called, “chopping” to break the butt end of Shérük’s halberd helve off one piece at a time. This infuriated Shérük, however, for the ruffian leader venerated **GROSH-GHÖRR** and could not stand to see the weapon defiled. But Mîtāk hacked a second piece of the haft off, and then a third, and a fourth, until the weapon was useless and Shérük threw the heavy Dwärvän blade at the Hero in a rage.

“I shall have your young head on a peg for that,” he promised Mîtāk as he went for the hilt of his sword.

But before the ruffian could draw, Mîtāk butted the large Man in the chest with the pommel of Rüneglaive.

This knocked the wind out of Shérük, and it was several moments before he could catch his breath enough to face Mîtāk again.

“What say you to a dandy barter for your Humped Beasts?” said Mîtāk. “Your life for the mounts; seems fair to me.”

“By your life, Sir, I shall have none! But I will have your life for the mocking of me!” By then the outlaw was well beyond rage, and on top of that, humiliated, and Mîtāk’s words seemed to him an unabashed mockery. Shérük charged so furiously and fearlessly and ferociously then with his heavy sword that Mîtāk was suddenly hard pressed just to block the Man’s powerful blows and keep from letting him fulfill his threatening promises.

They fought like this until Mîtāk was afraid the ruffian’s experience would best his own skill. He just could not keep the Man at bay. Again it was a struggle to the death and not just a practice bout.

Twice the tide turned as first the ruffian and then the young Hero took an offensive stance. But in the end, the young Hero's greater skill won out over Shërük's rancor. Mîták dispatched the malicious highwayman with a merciful sweep of his claymore, sundering head from shoulders in a single painless swipe of Rüneglaive's finely honed blade, and the mêlée was over.

He looked down at the dissevered head, whose unseeing eyes stared back up at him. "Is that then a costly enough price for six camels?" he chided the dead Man. "I think it would have been a rather expensive tax for our diamonds."

The other companions had been watching the final moments of battle, but no one smiled at the sardonic comments, save Mël Märra; for each of the others was, in his own way, trying to deal with the idea of having to kill Men. The age-old argument that, "it was either us or them," never really seemed to justify raceicide and alleviate the feelings of guilt and remorse whenever one has to slay an individual of his own kind. Somehow it was just different from killing Örcs and Ögres. Perhaps it was because many of the companions believed a Man, friend or foe, had a Spirit created by Äösêrô and in the care of the *Lôrëän*—a Spirit that would live on after the body was dead, and that one day slayer would have to face slain and be held accountable for it.

"Mëräk," said Mîták. "Mëräk!" His brother looked up from the beheaded ruffian. The young companion's face was as sheet-white as a High Elf's, and he listened blankly as Mîták spoke.

"We must get moving. This venture has already cost us a great deal of time, and that is one thing we have not enough of as it is."

Mëräk looked back at the dead Man but said nothing.

Mîták went over to his younger brother and put his arm around the lad's broad shoulders.

"Why must Men always kill other Men?" asked Mëräk. "It seems ever to have been so."

"I do not have an answer to that question," replied Mîták soberly. "Why the *Lôrëän* created a world filled with death and disease and war, I do not understand, either. All I know, is that the easiest thing for me to do is just to accept it; that is all I can do."

Though it was not said explicitly, all of the companions realized then that Mîták had just acknowledged the first battle between Men in the War With Äzmadüs, indeed what would later come to be called the *Nöd-rëöfëän War* or the *War of the Tomes*.

"At least we have transport across the desert now," Mîták pointed out, changing the subject.

"At least *six* of us have transport," corrected Xärgön. "For there are seven of us, and only six camels."

"That is quite all right," said Dëlfën sarcastically. "Härbör is quite prepared to walk to Asäre; are you not, Gentle Dwarf?"

Suddenly, everyone realized that Härbör was nowhere to be found. They quickly searched among the dead, fearful that the battle-worn old Dwarf had at last begun his final journey, gone to see Ärxë in the Realms of the Dead.

Finally, Ämbrëëlla looked about and discovered the Dwarf still pinned beneath the ruffian he had slain.

"A mighty foe to have slain, if he were indeed so mighty a foe even after his fall," teased Dëlfën. But he helped Mërak pull the large enemy off Härbör and then gave the Dwarf a hand up and a slap on the back.

Mitāk took a moment then to lead Mël Märra away from the others. "Thank you," he said softly to her as they readied the camels to cross the vast desert once again; and she smiled.

"I couldst not deny thee," she said; "for I do love thee still."

"What ails you, ma'Dame?" asked Mitāk anxiously, confronting the warrior for the first time since she had mysteriously left. "Why do you distance yourself from our company? And what has happened between us?"

Mël Märra shook her head, her straight, black hair flowing in long soft waves, reminding Mitāk of how incredibly beautiful she was. When he looked in her dark eyes he lost all sense of reality and priority, but it felt safe and pleasant. From the instant he had first seen her sweet smile, all reason and logic had disappeared, whether he realized it or not, like shadows with the approach of light. Yea, indeed he was enthralled by her sensuality, mesmerized by her beauty, and enamored by her smile. In a word, it was *love*.

Again Mël Märra smiled that sweet endearing smile as she shook her head slowly. "'Tis just..."

"Is it another?" asked Mitāk, sensing her reluctance to be frank and remembering his own reasons for hesitating at first. "The ring."

"What of my ring." She was suddenly grown very defensive. "It is but a trinket; nothing more."

"You belong to another, do you not?"

Mël Märra exhaled a slight sigh of relief, looked away, and was silent. He did not suspect.

"Do you love him," Mitāk wanted to know, his own pride suddenly hurt.

"Nay. I do not belong to him," said Mël Märra plainly. Love was the furthest emotion in her mind for Äzmadüs; but his wicked enchantment refrained her from expounding upon her feelings. "Indeed, I love him not. And yet he doth hold me to him."

Mîtäk thought about his own dual love for two Women and wondered if he would be willing to share Mël Märra with another, as she must share him with Kitfir. "If you do not love him, then what holds you to him?" he pressed, afraid he might lose her at that crucial point in their young relationship. "Why hast thou grown so suddenly distant?"

Mël Märra turned back and smiled, sad and sweet; and though Mîtäk saw the pain that he could not understand, visible in her dark eyes, he saw the love there as well—the love that had been so real—if but so fleeting.

As Mël Märra looked into Mîtäk's concerned eyes, she realized that she did not hate the young Hero for what his distant ancestor had done to her. In fact, she knew suddenly, deep down in her heart, that she could not find fault even in Hêrômêr's actions. He had vanquished her in fair combat, and thus it had been his just and noble right to pronounce her fate. She would have done far worse to him, had she been the one to stand victorious on Kênrê Plateau.

It was so easy for Mël Märra to tell herself she must end the love between them before it utterly destroyed her, or him, or them both; but when she was with Mîtäk, what she knew she must do became the impossible. She could steal a man's heart with a glance—a thousand times she had done so, or she could tear it out with clawed talons—as she had done with relish countless times before; but she could not tell her own heart how to feel, any more than she might rip it out of her rib cage and cast it aside. From whence her emotion came, she knew not, but her burning love for Mîtäk ran too deeply and too fundamentally to keep it in check with mere willpower, or wise logic, or even from sense of self-preservation.

"Kind Mîtäk of the Oakwood," she said, "thou art the only man I love, or have ever loved; and I care for thee more deeply than thee for mine own self. Were it in my power to do so, surely I would give myself to thee, now and forever, and be with thee and thine, always. But I am not meant for thee, Mîtäk. I am not worthy of thy love. I..."

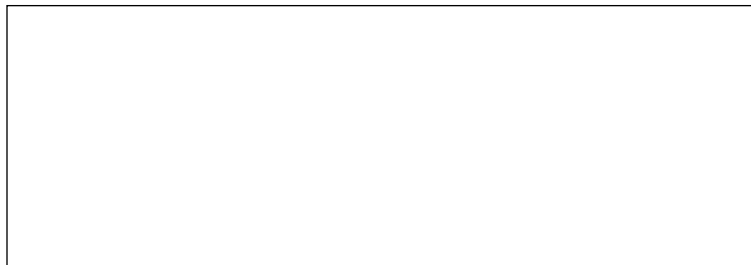
Mîtäk put his finger over her lips, halting her words. "By saying that, you only make me love you all the more. Do not let the fear of what might yet be, frighten you from doing what your heart tells you is the right thing to do."

"My heart tells me to take thee in mine arms and hold thee tight, never letting thee go. Yet..."

“Then take me in your arms, Mèl Märra of Shên Valley, and never let me go.” Míták opened his arms in welcome to her.

Once again, the dame-warrior in red and black armor felt herself falling helplessly into something she knew was doomed from the beginning, even as she fell helplessly into his arms; and yet she could not stop herself from tumbling headlong into the folly. She loved the young Hero, and he her, and she could only hope one day, together, they could change the laws of destiny and challenge Fate. She gave into her heart’s yearning then and fell into Míták’s arms, crying openly. “I love thee, Míták. Oh how I love thee.”

Míták embraced Mèl Märra tightly then, and she returned his affections warmly, wishing they could hold onto that precious moment forever and never let each other go. And for a time, at least, they remained together.



CHAPTER FIVE

TIMÖRUS

Zörwind awoke and blinked his eyes. Still, no difference whether they were open or closed, shaded from the three suns of Klêzëon or not. His head lay upon the slowly heaving side of Timörus. Realizing that he had accidentally fallen asleep while watching over the strange hound-cat, he reminded himself of the dangers of that strange land in which the suns never set.

“Wake up, Brave Timörus,” he said, gently shaking the large animal. “Your wounds are mended, and we must be on our way (that is, if you are still coming along with me).”

The catlike creature woke and stretched its long back.

“The city should not be far, now,” announced Zörwind.

As if Timörus understood the wizard’s words exactly, he led the old man directly back across the stream that they had been following and then continued along the path that followed it down towards the city.

They had not been walking long when they heard a sudden cry of terror in front of them. It sounded rather Man-like and Zörwind called out. “What ho? Is someone there?” But he got no response, so they continued on.



CHAPTER SIX

THE WAR COUNCIL

The large dining hall in Ärqüävêä's Keep had been transformed into a war room and council chamber. Sitting within the inner walls, at the roots of Ärqüävêä's Keep, the hall was large enough for three score and more Men to hold council in. All of the furnishings, save only the long trestle-table and its chairs, had been removed. Even with the many torches burning upon its walls, the room seemed somber; for it was filled with dark and gloomy smoke, and equally dark and gloomy faces.

Légërdëmân watched carefully as Adventurer General Nêxtër of the Ärqüävêän Adventurer Army addressed the war council. King Jörân had kept Nêxtër in charge of the City's army for the attack against Nòdrêôf, despite Légërdëmân's concerns about the General's overabundant wealth of ambition. After all, Nêxtër had just sat back and watched as Constable Boggs manipulated the reigning powers of Ärqüävêä with the hopes of personally benefiting from a governmental upheaval.

The commander and chief of the Ärqüävêän Army stood in his red and white tabard at the head of the long, narrow table, with the King watching from a distance. At the other end of the table sat Légërdëmân. There were many of the King's liegemen sitting or standing about them as well, divided into four basic groups: Standing on the King's right were City Garrison Knights arrayed for war in chain mail armor. Those who stood on the King's left wore the gray and red uniforms of officers in the

Ärqüävëän Adventurer Army. The tabards they wore over their three-quarter masclad armor bore a blue insignia with two white swords crossed between the Opaline Tower and a white Royal Ärqüävëän Steed rampant over a red chevron with a rose proper in base—the Insignia of the Imperial Army.^o They were foreigners, hired knights in errantry under the direct command of General Nêxtër (also not Ärqüävëän by birth). Those sitting on each side of the long table were natural born citizens, however. On the King of Ärqüävëä's left, below a white standard with an acorn above an inverted red chevron,^{ooo} sat members of the Old Council—rich merchants and landowners not directly beholden to the monarchs of Ärqüävëä; and on Jörän's right, below a standard of their own,^{oooo} sat the commanders of his Royal Ärqüävëän Homeguardsmen—his vassals and fiefs.

Among these Homeguardsmen was Ängëüs, acting Captain of the Royal Home Guard. With him sat Sir Tölin and his other headmen who had been granted Guard Fiefs—manors and estates by the king, in the lands and vineyards 'round about Ärqüävëä. They held command over the lower ranking Homeguardsmen not present, made up of companies comprising exclusively their own close kinsmen. Now, girt in full plate armor for battle, Captain Ängëüs and his headmen proudly wore their company's coat-armor over their field garniture—the red, chevroned blue, Ärqüävëän Homeguardsman's Insignia,^{oooo} with its white Royal Ärqüävëän Steed and knights helmet—embroidered upon light-blue surcoats.

Opposite Ängëüs, on the other side of the table, sat Lord Hånsöm, the strongest and most influential member of the Old Council. With



^o Emblazon:

Blazon of the Insignia of the Imperial Army: Azure a chevron gules fimbriated sable, two swords in saltire argent between a tower argent and a horse rampant argent, crined, tailed, unguled, langued, and orbéd gules

See also: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrël⇒Insignia of the Imperial Army



^{ooo} Emblazon:

Blazon of the Insignia of the Old Council: Argent a chevron inverted gules and in chief an acorn slipped and leaved proper

see also: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrël⇒Insignia of the Old Council

^{oooo} see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrël⇒Royal Ärqüävëän Insignia

^{ooooo} see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrël⇒Ärqüävëän Homeguardsman's Insignia

him sat a dozen other Councilors or Feudal Lords, with their own principal vassals standing behind them, each with a sanguine satin festoon slung over his left shoulder marking him as a City Garrison Knight. Lord MëGrëgër, Knight Commander of the City Garrison, stood behind his lord, Councilor Hånsöm. He wore his old, light gray battle tabard from the Goblin Wars, which bore the Arms of the City Garrison Knights⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰ upon his chest—a per bend black and red tinctured escutcheon with the white Opaline Tower of Ärqüävëa between a gauntlet and a portcullis countercharged. He, and all of his Garrison Knights (though not all present at the meeting) were now girt for battle in chain mail armor at all points beneath their gray tabards and wore swords at their sides in place of their usual cudgels.

A large map was laid out upon the dining hall table between them all, and Adventurer General Nèxtër pointed out the enemies' positions by the light of two candles resting upon the extensive chart—one at each end.

The faces of those who looked on were grave, indeed, in the flickering light.

A large moth whirled about one candle perilously, and MëGrëgër snatched it up in his fist with a swift swipe. "Methinks a swift death be better than a slow one, me-Lords."

Many of the Council of Feudal Lords laughed and a few of MëGrëgër's Garrison Knights as well as some Adventurer Soldiers. But none of the Ärqüävëan Homeguardsmen found the humor in it, for they understood plainly that it would be *they* who would first face any Nöd-rëôfëän Soldiers.

"Here," said General Nèxtër of the Ärqüävëän Adventurer Army, "is our enemy's northern boundary—the Oakenford Fields." He drew a line with his dagger directly eastward from where the Shmrëng River turned sharply to the southeast just above Thä nälgrim. "But my scouts return with reports of Westerland Ögres from Lörkaräth as far north of there as thine own dukedom of Open Springs, Your Highness."

Jörän, who stood behind his general in the shadows as if watching to see what would ensue between the three pre-eminent powers of Ärqüävëa, remained expressionless. Some of the Knights and Guards looked surprised or nodded, but most of the Old Council and their Soldiers just shook their heads as if to say: "Is not life always so unpleasant?"

"The King hath appointed the commencement for our attack four days hence." Nèxtër pointed at Jörän. "We march south the day after the

⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰ see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrël⇒Arms of the City Garrison Knights