

the HEROES' ARMAMENTS BOOK ONE

RÜNEGLAIVE SWORD OF HEROES

Michael R.R. McLaughlin

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RÜNEGLAIVE

SWORD OF HEROES

Tome I
Being Volume I

of

THE HEROES' ARMAMENTS

a hexalogy from

THE HERO SINGS

Vilmārēan Edition

written & illustrated
by

Michael R.R. McLaughlin

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Índrél/The Four Realms



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Prologue One

THE LOST TOME OF ANCIENT MAGIC



TELLS THE TALE OF Māxindīn[†] the Great, who satteth alone in the highest stone tower of his ancient keep. 'Twas there, in his mystical laboratory, that the wizened wizard now spent the majority of his time. Quietly, peacefully, he read an ancient tome as he sat in an embroidered chair smoking a long meerschaum pipe, the bowl of which was carved in the fearsome likeness of a great Red & Black Drā-

gōn's head. Blue-gray smoke swirled lazily about the wizard's hoary head as one long finger steadily traced the fading words across yellowed parchment.

HOWEVER, peace and tranquility had never been close acquaintances of Māxindīn; and their fleeting and tenuous visit was about to come to an end. For in the darkness beyond the embattled walls of Wizards Keep, three enigmatic figures lurked in the shadowy night—a fierce steed champed nervously at his bit, eyes smoldering like glowing coals as he pawed one massive hoof restlessly at the hard turf; beside the sable mount, gray and black in the cold light of a green moon, crouched a large cat, a sinewy feline who snarled and fought at the leather harness that held him in check; and at the other end of the sturdy leash stood a tall lean Man, in heavy black robes.

THE young Man's hard eyes surveyed Māxindīn's impressive citadel, yet he smiled confidently to himself; for 'twas his belief that the old wizard had grown lax with age and ease, and the youth believed that his own time had come at last.

[†] See following pages for notes on pronouncing the Indrēlēan vowels, which have retained their *Vimārēan* variants (one-, two-, and three-dot diacriticals).



DIG UP WITHIN THE STURDY tower, the flickering light of Máxindín's oil lamp gleamed brightly in his eyes, a modest hint at the vibrant life still radiant within an aging but agile frame. Yellow flame-light shimmered softly upon the smooth fabric of the old Man's garb, as do stars upon a calm night's sea. The strange and shifting opalescent colors of the sendaline raiment made the silver-haired sire appear as though he were a Sháde who twinkled in and out of the Ærthál Ambit. For Máxindín wore the signifying robes of one who had spent his lifetime in the study of Benevolent Magic; and the wondrous and varied colors of the nacreous fabric bore testament to the fact that he had, indeed, mastered every aspect of what the Élves called, "High Truth." Yea! Máxindín was indeed of the order—Mágús Magnificent.



IS silver beard hung soft and thick and so long it lay in curls upon his lap as he sat and perused the ancient book before him. His eyes were deep-set and furrowed with age and care; but the blue-gray orbs, beneath thick white eyebrows, shone brightly and twinkled with keen awareness. Although well-hidden by his loose-fitting garments, his build was yet lean and strong. Once, he had stood the most lofty and proud among mortal Men, descended in a direct patrilineal line from the House of Lébénmálán the Quick-Eyed, first of all magic wielders.



ET even for illustrious wizards... Lo! Even for Máxindín the Great, time will eventually claim its inexorable toll; and the now, the old mágús sat bent with years—many, many long years—his broad shoulders drooped with the very burden of simply being.



NDEED, local legend in Fërmén—over whose township Wizards Keep held stoic watch—maintained that Máxindín was none other than the Great Silvermān of yore, a renowned wizard of local tradition who was already old when the World was yet young and, as some believed, was, indeed, older than writing, itself.



OWEVER, such was purely speculation; and little was known for a certainty amongst the townsfolk of Fërmén concerning Máxindín's age, except that he was certainly older than merely "very old" and as mysterious as time, itself... remembered by the eldest of their elders as an ancient wizard, even in the earliest memories of their own distant youths.



ERILY, and if one wished to discern the true age and heritage of Máxindín the Great, one would do best to journey north to distant Èstèrèa, where the long-lived High Élves remember the past as if yesterday were yesterday. There, in the Emerald Forest, Máxindín was well-known, indeed, and remembered honorably by his many true and rightful titles:

Ferloxölús Lē Lan^T —the Great Silvermán; *Lē Fer Mistförim*^T —the Argent Wizard; *Lē Fer ÁĒstereén*^T —the Silver Wanderer; and by their most endearing term: *Drúek*^T —Elf-Friend, as they had long ago dubbed him.

NOR, certes, the Star Children, at the least, yet remembered Máxindín accurately and justly for the many brave and admirable deeds he had accomplished during his venerable life. The Ēlves had not forgotten that 'twas he who had driven the rancorous Hill Trólls from the Chánlénk Mountains ere the Spring of Great Content, banishing forever the horrid flesh-eating creatures to the lands east of the Násēr. That was the now more than ten-score-and-fifteen years hitherto. 🍁 Yea, and for that magnanimous act and for the many other great feats he had accomplished—and not only in his much younger years—Máxindín was forever destined to be deeply revered and well-belovéd amongst the First-born and their descendants.

BUT alas, though greatly postponed by his craft, Máxindín was now beginning to feel the true toll of those many, many taxing years. He was, after all, the now rightly ancient, even by the reckoning of the enduring Ēlves of Ēstereá. For though he was but a Man, by race, he was as old as their eldest High Ēlván fathers and still new to the World only in the eyes of the *Dríad*^T and the Elder Ēlves, who, alone of Nēvinēūs's Children, yet remember the first twinklings of the first stars, long ere even Ázón—Father of Mortal Men—erst walked the Four Realms.^T

^T *Ferloxölús Lē Lan* {H.Ē.} (silver + mane the bearded; "Silver-mane")

[†] Dis iz a sēntēns dēzind tū hēlp ū wíp prónúnsēāshān in āl ðē bōks.

Vilmāreān (vīl'māɹ-ē-ən); Īndrēl (īn'dɹēl); Ārqūāvēā (āɹ'kwā-vēə); Shimrēng ('ʃīm-ɹēŋ).

a (ā) = about; ā (ā) = at; áú (ʊ) = ouch; ā (ā) = father; ā (ā) = ape; e (ē) = set; é (ē) = end; ē (ə) = nefarious; é (ē) = eel; i (ī) = fit; i (ī) = in; í (i) = pier; í (i) = I; o (ō) = on; ó (ō) = hot; óó (ōō) = took; ö (œ) = *monsieur*; öö (œ) = *schön*; ô (ō) = oh; ôĕ (ɔɪ) = boy; u (ú) = burn; ú (ú) = up; ú (ōō) = frugal; ú (ū) = union; ý (y) = yes; ý (ý) = wine

Note: For those who wish to learn the accurate pronunciation of Īndrēlēān words as they have been done into English from the Common Tongue in *Lē Wēndēlmōvēāēs Mōrlōr*—*The Heroes' Bloodline*, the following may be helpful. Consonants are straightforward and close enough to English to forgo explanation. With respect to vowels, the allophonic variant of each vowel is determined by its *Vilmāreān* Variant—the number of its diacritical dots. Simply put: The more dots, the "longer" the vowel sound; to wit, vowels with no dots are always soft and vowels with three dots are always hard, with increasing degrees of diphthong and rear-tongue movement, second stage or "echo" on the vowel, and slight downward pitch glide with the increase from zero, to one, two, and, finally, three dots.

^T *Lē Fer Mistförim* {H.Ē.} (the argent magic + light; "the Argent Wizard")

^T *Lē Fer ÁĒstereén* {H.Ē.} (the argent not-at-home-er; "the Argent Wayfarer")

^T *Drúek* {H.Ē.} ("Ēlf-Friend")

^T *Dríad* {H.Ē.} (Ēlf + juvenile; "Ēlf-Child")

^T the Four Lands; *Lē Irēmtlē Lonāli* {E.Ē.} (the this + walk mother; "the Motherlands"; Īndrēl)



HE DUSKY CHAMBER IN-~~THE~~-WHICH MÁXINDÍN THE GRE^{HC} then sat, he called his *study* or his *laboratory*; though it might better have been described as a library, owing to the countless books that lined its walls, shelves, cupboards, lintels, and were stacked upon tables, chairs, and even in random piles upon the floor, in the corners, and amongst the chamber's many alcoves.




BUT books were *not* the room's most striking feature. Set apart from the other works of art that filled the crowded study, by reason of its central and prominent location upon an otherwise empty wall, hung a single, striking Élván tapestry of most wondrous delight to behold. ❀ Looking up from his tome for a moment, Máxindín glanced at that ancient woven work—the effort of many nimble Élván fingers and countless patient years; and when he did so, the old wizard yearned for times and circumstances that would never be or come to pass again. ❀ It had been more than two decades since last he had visited the Emerald Wood, and more than two centuries since first he had beheld the enchanted homeland of the High Elves of the Forest, when he was still but a child. ❀ *Hath it truly been so long an age since I was young?* he wondered. For to him—and all the more so as the many gathering years had ever more-quickly faded into the past—his life now seemed but the briefest encounter with existence. ❀ *Aye!* he nodded to himself in rye acceptance; *I suppose it hath, indeed.*





AS MÁXINDÍN SAT READING THAT evening, enjoying an Asäreán tragedy, he blew large rings of smoke from his bearded lips, savoring his rare and fine smoking herbs; and, as he did so, he smiled to himself contentedly. ❀ A token of his vast travels, the Ázmír herbs he smoked had suddenly brought to his mind that strange and remote land, where good pipe herbs brought more upon the marketplace scales than did the abundant nuggets of gold or the innumerable gemstones and jewels so common as to be almost worthless in that marvelous region.





FROM TIME TO TIME, AS he read, Máxindín also glanced over at a large bookcase that stood against the wood-paneled wall, to the right of the Élván tapestry, directly across from where he sat. The dark oak cabinet held the wizard's most powerful magic scrolls and glamoury codices; and, upon its ornately carven top shelf rested his most treasured possession—a large silver tome, its argent vellum spine embossed with gold-leaved runes. Máxindín was the only mortal alive who knew that the sacred glamoury codex still survived, and he kept that

secret well; for the silver glamourdex was invisible to all mortal eyes, save for his own. Even his apprentice, Zörwind—the one Man he trusted above all others and the only one with whom he was truly close—did not know about the existence of the ancient talisman of protection.  This strict secrecy the venerable wizard deemed absolutely necessary, despite the taxing toll upon his being that such ongoing spells exacted; for he knew that if *The Skiwärd*—as the large tome was named of old in the Common Tongue—were ever to be lost to malicious forces, the innocent folk of Indrél would be in the gravest of dangers. Indeed, discovery of its mere existence would surely portend the greatest doom for all free Men, Ælves, and Dvärves. Not even the Crystal Crown of Lénalörnälön would be a more dangerous talisman in the hands of an ambitious tyrant who could unlock the book's powerful magic. For although the benevolent glamoury codex's complement—its evil counterbalance, *The Sörsër*—was still lost to the World, if ever 'twere learned that Máxindín had rediscovered the silver tome of protection, its malevolent, black-tome-counterpart would surely be sought out by every sorcerer alive and, inevitably, discovered. For yea, does not Destiny invariably ever so seem to work?

 **AG**ES ago, the two terrible talismans had been lost to the World forever... Or so the Wise had believed, until Máxindín had accidentally discovered *The Skiwärd*, in his search for ancient written collections of wisdom, knowledge, and magic. He had immediately realized, then, that if *The Skiwärd* could be found, why so, too, could *The Sörsër*.

 **T**HUS, one-hundred-and-one years ago, Máxindín had taken upon himself a secret quest: for to find *The Sörsër* and then to destroy the two powerful tomes, together, to rid the World, once and forever, of the doomed “godssends.”

 **U**NTIL then, he knew that his only chance at fulfilling this quest lay in the keeping of his discovery of *The Skiwärd* an absolute secret. As he had... until that very night.

 **O**W, UPON THAT PARTICULARLY FINEFUL evening, Máxindín was not studying one of his many strange glamoury codices. Neither was he meditating upon an ancient work of Elder Wisdom. Nor even investigating an exceptionally intriguing history but was, instead, enjoying a work of plain ordinary fiction—a simple but profound tragedy written by Fláitës—a great author and poet of Asäreän antiquity, famed for his use of comedy amid sorrow. 'Twas a rather random book to be reading, amongst Máxindín's vast library of significant scholarly writings, a work of fiction recently acquired along with a few precious volumes of the previously lost *Imperial Records of Asäre*, which were

the only extant account of a civilization that had, long ago, blossomed and flourished, during the First Age of Man—the Age of Art—only to suddenly decline and be destroyed during Man's second age—the Age of Ignorance.

ALL throughout his long life, Máxindín had been too busy to enjoy, for their own sake, the lay-books he had collected. He had devoted all of his time to studying his magic tomes and contemplating works of ancient wisdom and researching olden histories, ever in his ardent search for *The Sörsër*. ❀ But the now, at last, Máxindín made the time for reading collections of poetry, grappling with philosophical treatises upon the nature of being, and for relishing simple works of fine prose. He was old and tired; and he had acquiesced, at the last, to the inescapable fact that 'twas not his Destiny for to find *The Sörsër*. That quest, he would 'or' long pass on to his apprentice in magic—Zörwind the Young.

GAIN, Máxindín smiled to himself as he thought of his apprentice's appellation. For, who would the now call Zörwind "Young?" The Man's flowing beard had long since grown silver with long years spent in the learning of magic's many secrets. ❀ And yet, neither was Máxindín's novice "old"—not *very* old, at any rate... not as was his mentor. There were yet a few dark streaks in Zörwind's hair—at the corners of his mouth, at his temples—and his thick eyebrows were still almost jet black. ❀ And unlike Máxindín, Zörwind's frame was still straight and true, his gait, strong and quick. ❀ Nevertheless, the outward resemblance betwixt the two sages was so similar that they might easily have been mistaken for brothers, though *that*, they certainly were not!

OVER the years, Máxindín had taught Zörwind much, passing on to him the secrets handed down from one generation of wizard to another—the charms and incantations that set events in motion, turn thoughts into reality, and transform objects and beings. And 'or' long, he would confide in his apprentice his secret knowledge of the rediscovered *Skiwärd* and turn the search for *The Sörsër* over to his one, last, faithful disciple. ❀ 'Twas, at long-last, time for Máxindín the Great to simply relax and enjoy his much-beloved, much-treasured musty, old library and his precious pipe weed and his collection of curious trinkets and artifacts, to adore his art, to savor his well-earned leisure, and to reminisce upon a lifetime of colorful—if not always pleasant—memories.

HE chuckled and nodded to himself as he read his Asäreän tragedy and smoked his meerschaum pipe, again glancing up to check upon the secret talisman over which he kept watch. ❀ White rings of smoke floated lazily about his head and slowly drifted out a pair of open terrace doors,

at the far end of his study.

IN the distance, the town bell of Fërmën rang out the second half of the late evening watch: ten, deep, resounding knells that echoed hollowly through the high towers of Wizards Keep.

ONCE more, his gaze went from the book he read, up to *The Skíwård*, and then back, again, to the tragedy's brittle yellow pages.

WHEN, AS MÁXINDÍN QUIETLY ENJOYED his overdue respite, he unexpectedly came upon the most important discovery he had made since recovering *The Skíwård*, a verse referring to the other talisman for which he had sought so diligently and for so many, many long years:

When the last fair monarchs of Asävö, yea even Their Majesties Imperial Lándrös the Benevolent, Emperor of Asävö, and Lady Lándrë, Imperess of Asävö, were laid to rest amongst the tombs of their allies, yea, verily, in the Temple crypts prepared for the noble fathers of Asäre, even in the very Imperial Chambers of Emperor Längsförth the Long-Lived, Pötentate of Asäre, lo and behold! The Sörsër was sealed therein with them, that it might be kept safe for all time and eternity, free from the foolish ambitions of Men...

PAUSING, Máxindín wondered whether or no' this could possibly be true. No one had ever thought to look in Asävö's sister city of Asäre for the ancient black tome. The two empires *had* fought together as allies against Sefhtön and his malign armies; and the sovereigns of both nations *had* been decimated to the man, at the end of the War, in the Battle of Këntre Plateau, which was, indeed, near Asäre. 🌸 Was it not, then, possible... even *probable* that both Potentate Längsförth of Asäre *and* Emperor Lándrös of Asävö had been interred, therein, together, below the Temples of Dī Ōmond, in the Vale of Kings? 🌸 *Might not the lost tome of ancient magic have been buried in Asäre, all along, with the two historic monarchs?*

BUT ere he could fully ponder the probability of such a supposition, Máxindín felt a sudden strong flux in the Network of Magic—a sharp tug upon the mystic fabric of energy through which his life had been, for so very long, so inextricably interwoven.

SLOWLY, he closed the novel and put his darkly colored pipe in its stand upon the oak trestle table beside his high-back chair. 🌸 The air felt full of pregnant energy, seemed to forebode—to those in tune

with its signs and portents—some great event not yet revealed to time and to mortal Men.

SOMEWHERE, very close at hand, Māxindīn could sense a powerful magic wielder casting a formidable spell. ✠ *Perhaps Zōrwind practices his art,* Māxindīn tried to convince himself.

BUT even as he considered this possibility, he came to sense that 'twas not just *strong* magic that was being worked that night but, rather, that 'twas the *Dark Arts* in practice; and then, he knew that it could in no wise be Zōrwind's enchanting that he perceived.

ANXIOUSLY, MĀXINDĪN DROPPED THE FLÄITCE-
SÖHN tragedy upon the floor and, with amazing speed for a Man of his great age, raced toward the open doors of his high balcony. As he ran, he put to his lips a small silver whistle, which hung upon a fine silver chain about his neck, blew upon it, and filled the still night air with a solitary, high-pitched note that rang out like a crystal-clear Elf-clarion.

BY then Māxindīn reached the open terrace, there awaiting him stood Radiance, the shimmering white winged horse he had hailed. The large steed pawed at the tiled balcony floor in readiness, noble and proud, his snowy mane like braided ermine interwoven with fine silver threads spun in the enchanted furnaces of FHĒLHDSFHĀR^T by illustrious Low Dvärves. In the stallion's eyes burned a white-hot fire, which crackled like lightning; for he, too, could sense something foul in the air.

MĀXINDĪN did not use a saddle; for, indeed, Radiance needed none not. The silver-haired wizard simply leapt atop the sleek white back of the Windcourser, and together they sprang from the high balcony into the cool night air and were aloft.

^T FHĒLHDSFHĀR {L.D.} (mine + deep) 𐌺𐌹𐌸𐌹𐌸𐌺𐌹𐌸

NOTE: In the original Common Tongue texts of *Lē Wendelēen Gōmānēi*, words from the Low Dvärvish Tongue and the proper names of Dvärves and their lands and possessions are recorded in Dvärvic Rūnes. Since there is no case distinction between upper- and lowercase in Dvärvic Cirth, in this text small caps are used for the sake of clarity. Dvärvish proper names and uniquely Dvärvish words are bolded to provide the flavor of their original forms (just as the Elvish tongues are translated with a light italic font to reflect the fine script used in Elvān writing forms).

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Prologue Two

THE TURNING OF THE TIDE



N THE DARKNESS, FAR BELOW the great winged stallion, Radiance, & his wizard-rider, Máxindín, lay the small township of fěrmén. Lights still flickered in a few of its windows—some folk kept awake by labors that continued through the dark watches, others casting the intimate shadows of lovers embracing to ward away the night's chill. ❀ As the Windcourser circled downward through the crisp air, Máxindín could sense that somewhere, hidden within the black shadows of his beloved hamlet, toiled the practitioner of malicious magic. ❀ Radiance hovered, for a moment, wheeling, silent and anxious. Then, Máxindín gave the signal; and the Windcourser tucked in his furry wings, held them tightly against his flanks, and the twain plummeted towards the source of malice, as might a streaking thunderbolt from a dark and cloudless firmament.



IN THE CENTER OF THE village was a greensward, in-the-which the townsfolk of Fěrmén had joined with Máxindín and Zörwind in creating and caring for a small sacred grove and garden. The little orchard of fruit trees and garden of flowering shrubs and rare herbs, collected from throughout Índrél, was a sanctuary of peace and a hallowed place. Indeed, 'twas there that the villagers gathered for song and dance at the solstices; upon Midsummer's Morn, for a community breaking of the night's fast; and upon Midwinter's Eve, when they exchanged boxes of sweet, dried fruits kept hidden from the children since the onset of autumn.

THAT night, the park was dark, silent, and cheerless; and 'twas there that Māxindīn directed Radiance to land.



UT LO! The village green was no longer recognizable to them. Where once lovely trees and lush bushes had grown, a common whose beauty was rivaled only by the magic and wonder of The Queen's Garden in the Ēlvān kingdom of *Ēstēra*, stood the now but burnt and grotesquely contorted stumps, scattered amidst uprooted plants and scorched sod. ❀ An eerie mist swirled about the twisted and misshapen foliage. Silvā had risen, the waning forest-moon casting a weird green hue upon a mire of low-drifting fog, which gave to the scene of misshapen flora the illusion of strange vespertine monsters lurking in the night's pale light.

AT the center of the perverted shrubbery stood two dark figures: one, the silhouette of a tall intimidating Man; the other, a steed, stark and rigid. Before them lay a swarthy panther. ❀ The enigmatic Man's long hair and short pointed beard were the color of shiny coal; and more, he was clad from head to boot solely in black, with a heavy cape of inky suede hung about his tall frame. Only the icy whites of his hard eyes and his sharp teeth—which gleamed menacingly in the starlight—betrayed his mortal state. His eyebrows were thick and wiry, with sharp arches, fierce and yet seductively handsome, overshadowing dark, wide-set eyes. In his left hand, he held an iron staff with the grotesque head of a Gōrgōn cast in tarnished silver upon one end.

THE steed was as black as the rider's suede cloak—or perhaps blacker—and as tall at the shoulder as the Man's full height, which was exceeding. ❀ When the sable beast's wild eyes turned upon Māxindīn and Radiance, they flared with a red light that hinted of a malevolence not born of the *Ārthāl* Ambit but of the *Ārdentēal*. The charger's coarse coat was rough and matted, and about him hung the stench of rotting flesh. He was Grāfhlēer the Nightcharger.



S MĀXINDĪN & RADIANCE APPROACHED the center of the park, the black stallion trotted a few steps forward in challenge. Radiance neighed anxiously and pawed at the strange fog that slithered about his hooves as though 'twere constricting serpents. ❀ But Māxindīn stroked the Windcourser's neck in reassurance; and when the magic wielder alighted from his mount, the green mist dissipated about them as might the last wisps of fog at the triumph of

day.

COLDLY, the black-clad figure before them raised his iron staff to the starry sky and, bringing it down cruelly, ripped open the chest of the creature at his feet. ❧ The feline let out an unearthly scream as swirls of steam rose in the cool night air from the entrails of the disemboweled beast.

THE scent of sudden death filled both stallions' nostrils, heightening Radiance's disquietude and, at the same time, exciting Grāthlēer into a near frenzy.

MAXINDĪN strode slowly closer as the enigmatic sorcerer in black reached his right hand into the cat's riven chest and tore out its heart, still throbbing its final pulses, spewing forth hot, steaming gore.

WHEN THE SILVER WANDERER WAS within a few paces of the incanting sorcerer, a ring of fire sprang up betwixt them, suddenly surrounding the dark figure and his ghastly sacrifice, encircling them in a protective wall of green flames many hands high.

GRĀTHLĒER reared restlessly without but did not advance further.

THROUGH the dance of the arcane flames, Māxindīn could see the black-clad Man working his powerful Atrous Magic. He recognized the incantation as the reversal of a *Banish Across the Astronomical Barriers*[‡] spell, which, being intoned backwards, Māxindīn knew would loose the Shāde of a condemned Dāmānwraīth into the Ærthāl Ambit. ❧ Once in İndrēl, the Dāmānwraīth would be free to enter a physical body and become a Dāmānmonster in the form of a fierce Amalgamation Beast. ❧ And Māxindīn was well aware that once the Dāmānwraīth had crossed over, it would possess, and then mutate, the carcass of the jaguar, perverting the cat into a hideous creature that would grow in size and shapes as it consumed its victims. Each Man, animal, or monster that it killed would be absorbed, to become an extension of the transforming Beast, each victim joining and fusing with the previous bodies, incorporating claw or pincer, hand or hoof, limb or wing, whatever furthered the Dāmānmonster's desires. ❧ Moreover, once released, virtually nothing would be able to stop the cancerous creature. Ordinary weapons of iron and steel would be as useless against such a monster as they were

[‡] *Banish Across the Astronomical Barriers* spell [L.T.] ERÜZRAT RÖMRAZT NÜ MÜRETÜ = (across Barrier go forever)

against the Unseen or the Undead, its body impervious to all but the most powerful spells and enchanted weaponry. Not even Máxindín the Great could destroy such a creature, alone and unprepared. The Dámánmonster would be free to wreak its havoc until he could gather the clerics and talismans needed to separate the Dámánwraíth from the Ærthál bodies it had taken, and thus send it back to the Árdentéál hell from whence it had come. ☞ Until then, nothing in Índrél would be safe, neither naked babe nor valiant warrior, fair creature nor foul; nothing could withstand the Amalgamation Beast's malignance. Its vile presence, alone, would wither the sweetest flowers of Fërmén upon the vine, turn clean flesh unholy, and bringing despair even to the bravest heart.

AND when it had destroyed Máxindín's small hamlet and had assimilated its every inhabitant, the Dámánmonster would seek out the next village or farm or Örc den for to devour, growing ever stronger with its spreading corruption until 'twas destroyed or else all wide Índrél laid to waste and the Amalgamation Beast, master of the wreck and ruin thereof.

DREAD FILLED MÁXINDÍN'S HEART, BUT he did not waver. Quickly, he searched his pouches for what he needed. ✱ Yet perhaps 'twas already too late. A flash of green light revealed the face of the dark magic wielder, who looked up from his malevolent labors, a crooked smile twisting his sharp lips.

The sorcerer's black mustache was thin; and his beard was trimmed to a stiletto point at the chin. When he smiled, a look of cruel cunning sparkled in his dark eyes. ☞ "Ázmadüs!" cried Máxindín when he realized, all too late, the sorcerer's identity. For indeed, only then did he recognize the enchanter as the young prince of Nódreöf.

FOR some time, Máxindín had been aware that the Nódreöféan prince was studying the Dark Arts; and thus, Máxindín had been watching young Ázmadüs carefully from a distance. He knew that the Dark Prince was a student under Bärçögan, Máxindín's own sometime-apprentice. But what Máxindín had not foreseen, nor could he have ever guessed, was that this young Southerland prince would grow so powerful so quickly, strong enough, even, to challenge a Master wizard, such as himself, even a Mágús Magnificent! Not even Bärçögan—Máxindín had wrongly believed—was powerful enough for to consider such fell ambitions.

INDEED, upon first becoming aware of the intrusion, Máxindín had presumed that 'twould be one of the Order of the Red whom he would face that night... not the young apprentice of one of its Dark Masters.

“**U** CERÜM ÜN CZARMÖR...”[‡] As Ázmadüs neared the completion of his horrible *Release from Banishment* spell, lightning crashed down from the sky, sending thunder rumbling through the peaceful township of Fërmén as though the ground-quaking march of an invading army of Stone Giants.

Indeed, the very air was torn asunder by the spell’s power as white bolts rent the starry night into broken shards of black.

MAXINDÏN was too late. The Dámánwraíth was coming! Neither valor nor wizardry could prevent its crossing the now. Such formidable *Mist* / *Argent Magic* or *Atrous* once set into motion, could in no wise be easily turned aside. The spell’s powerful inertia was too great to be halted or reversed by the benevolent wizard’s own hasty incantations. Ázmadüs had already won. MáxindÏn had only been lured to the town gardens out of spite, not in challenge. He had been brought there for to be destroyed—first of all his beloved town to be assimilated by the new Dámánmonster’s ravenous bloodlust.

BUT THEN, THE OLD MÄGE had a wonderfully terrible idea. If the glamoury could not be halted or reversed, perhaps it could be diverted. *“ÖSVĚZŮ LIX MŮĚZÁL,”*[‡] intoned MáxindÏn.

WITH those few words of his own—a simple spell of *Seeing* spoken backwards—and a wave of the Silver Wizard’s hand, Ázmadüs lost his sight.

HE DARK PRINCE BUT CHUCKLED at the trick. “’Tis too late, Argent Fool!” he cried from within his protective magic circle. “We hath vanquishèd thee, at the start! Thou provèst all-too-paltry an adversary for mine awesome Arts.”[‡] Then, Ázmadüs resumed his chant. This time, the black sorcerer uttered his incantation in full, his long, outstretched fingers pointing blindly towards the body at his feet: *“ÜTERÜM ÜN TZARMÖR TARZÜRE!”*[‡]

[‡] *Release from Banishment* spell = ÜTERÜM ÜNTZARMÖR TARZÜRE ≠ (forever go Barrier across)

[‡] spell of *Blinding* {D.T.} ÖSVĚZŮ LIX MŮĚZÁL ≠ (eyes the awaken)

[‡] *Release from Banishment* spell = ÜTERÜM ÜNTZARMÖR TARZÜRE ≠ (forever go Barrier across)



AT THAT VERY MOMENT, MÁXINDÍN'S apprentice arrived. Zörwind wore the robes of the learner—the plaid birrus, with its crisscrossed threads of blue, white, silver, yellow, and gold interwoven into the gray cloth of the novice. ❀ “No!” he cried above the din of the conflict when he saw what was toward.

For even as Ázmadūs had uttered the last syllables of his wicked spell, Máxindín had leapt through the ring of green flames, shoving the dead jaguar's body from the magic circle. In place of the sacrificed cat's carcass, the Dămánwraith was released into the aged wizard's prostrate body.



IT WAS A BRILLIANT GREEN BURST of light, the dreaded crossing commenced. All Indrél shook as the fabric of two Ambits at once meshed and tore apart. A veritable whirlwind formed as hot air hissed into the little garden and cool night air rushed out into Lower Ärdentéa.



FOR a trice, both worlds overlapped, then and there, and existed in the same space and time, two realities as one, two Ambits within one existence, both the decimated garden and some unspeakable Ärdentéal hell. Trees were become giant hideous crystals, sharp and angular; rocks were growing things, shifting and changing; verdant grass turned into writhing, black, blind worms; the darkness that crept into Indrél—overwhelmingly heavy, enveloping and swallowing everything; the pale light of stars and moon—was at the same while dazzlingly bright, glaring, and biting, in the distant world of eternal darkness, as brilliant as staring into a full noontide sun for the myriad red eyes that had not seen such illumination in eons.

INDRÉL was Lower Ärdentéa—Lower Ärdentéa, Indrél. ❀ Sounds, too, passed from one Ambit to the other. Weird cries, of beasts hitherto unknown, unnamed, undreamed-of in the deepest, most fearful nightmares of mortal Men, flooded into Indrél—the thick batting of enormous wings, the rough scrape of nail and claw upon brittle stone, the skirl and keen of agony and pain, and the cries of lustful conquest, all spilled into the peaceful hamlet of Fërmén, in a grim foreshadowing of what was to come.



SOMEWHILES, into the Ärdentéal Ambit stole an alien sound, an un-sound, as unfamiliar as light to the eternally dark world. A dampening hush of calm night fell upon Lower Ärdentéa, as though all sound might be absorbed and muted out of existence. The soft chirp of crickets and the delicate flutter of a moth's wings were deafeningly subtle and soft to ears that had only ever known harshness and clamor.



BUT THEN, ABOVE ALL—THE lamentations and the silence—roared up the din of sudden combat as the most powerful Dāmānwraíths of Lower Ärdentéa struggled to cross the transient threshold first. ♣ Quickly, one was victorious—more vile, treacherous, and powerful than the rest.



LIKE a dark eclipse, the great Dāmānwraíth—nameless, faceless, and shapeless—entered the Ärthál Ambit and claimed the body provided for it within the magic circle. ♣ In that moment, the crossing was complete. The doorway clapped closed; and Índrél was, again, Índrél—Lower Ärdentéa, Lower Ärdentéa.



SILENCE FILLED THE NOW-BALMY NIGHT; and the air grew calm and still, in the little ruined greensward. ♣ With a wild cry, Radiance reared up on his hind legs and beat his powerful wings in fury, swirling the eerie mists about him into a green tornado of dust and ash. His eyes burned with white fire; and his teeth gleamed in the dim night. ♣ He charged at Gräthléér; and they clashed into one another, like day into night, colliding in a fiery sunset of crimson, black, and white. ♣ Sparks flew from both horses' shod hooves as they met. Red flames leapt from the Nightcharger's flared nostrils as smoke belowed from his snarled mouth.



RADIANCE was a giant amongst mortal steeds, largest of his kind; but Gräthléér was not of the Ärthál Ambit, and he was larger still.



AT FIRST, IT LOOKED AS though his gnashing teeth would quickly bring an end to their conflict as he tore at the Windcourser's white neck with ferocity unmatched by equid—mortal or fantastical. ♣ But Radiance spread his great wings and, beating them wildly, pulled himself free of the black stallion's deadly clench.



WHEN, Radiance reared, once more; and this time, his hooves found their mark and tore at Gräthléér's mangy throat. ♣ Black-red gore flowed from the gash, yet 'twas not enough to stop the foul beast. The smell of his own blood only sent the Nightcharger into an even more fevered rage; and he reared up on his hind legs, as well, pawing at the air betwixt them.



AT THE SIGHT OF HIS master's possession, Zörwind's clear blue eyes filled with tears of anger, frustration, & sorrow as he rose fully erect, his great height suddenly apparent. True, he was only an apprentice wizard; but he was menacing and powerful, nonetheless—as is one with much strength who is not yet accustomed to it and, therefore, unpredictable and doubly dangerous. “What have you done!” he cried.

AZMADŪS turned blindly toward the horrified voice he took to be Māxindīn's, believing that he had succeeded and that the Dāmānwraīth was now free to destroy Fērmēn. “Bārcōgan foolishly warnēd Us that We were not yet ready to challenge thee, Māxindīn the Crafty. But verily, he was wrong 'bout a great many things. ❀ “Our time, 'tis as at hand! We prophesied truly the Dāmānwraīth's arrival; and verily, We haſt foreseen thy death this very night. Naught that thou mayeſt accomplish the-now shall change thy terminal destiny, Māxindīn the Foolish!”



ZÖRWIND, WHEN HE REALIZED THAT Azmadūs was blind, acted quickly. Rolling his hands together, he produced a sizzling blue ball of electricity and hurled the sphere of flames and sparks at Azmadūs. ❀ The cluster of fervid energy struck the Dark Prince squarely in the chest, in a burst of dazzling azure light.

THE blast of ardent flames was potent but not powerful enough for to kill the sorcerer, though it momentarily stunned him, knocking Azmadūs aback, unconscious.



AS the ring of green flames dwindled with its creator's faint, Zörwind rushed to his prostrate master and knelt at his side, gently rolling the old māge over onto his back. ❀ Māxindīn yet lived; but his visage was a sickly shade of gray-green, contorted with pain and inner turmoil as if a long-decaying body had been untimely and unwisely resurrected. Māxindīn's pallid lips stretched in agony to reveal teeth that gnashed and chipped and fractured as he gritted them unmercifully, seeming to fight a most intense the pain.



SEING HIS MASTER'S DIRE SCACE, Radiance took to wing and drove Grāthlēer farther and farther aback until the Nightcharger fled from the garden, galloping wildly through the empty cobblestone streets of Fērmēn in terror.

Yet the white Windcourser did not pursue the dark beast then and kill him, as he might have. Nay, he swept back to the side of his fallen

rider, where Zörwind strove to comfort his tortured teacher. ✠ For within Máxindín's rigid body two essences strove painfully, one with another, in a staggering struggle for control of the single corporeal shell. The Spécteral, intellectual tussle contorted his face so that the skin was stretched and bruised, and blood trickled from the corners of his eyes and mouth.

AT times, a look of hatred filled red-embered eyes as the Dámánwraíth prevailed and strove to drive the agèd wizard from his own body. ✠ At other whiles, Máxindín gained the greater part of control; and in his blue-gray eyes might be seen a look of sharp pain, even fear, but also of great strength and defiance.

BACK and forth, the tide surged thusly.

WHEN, FOR A FEW MOMENTS, Máxindín prevailed; and he gained enough control for to focus his eyes and look upon Zörwind. "Bear me to my keep," he managed through clenched and cracked teeth. 🍃 "But Master..." argued Zörwind. 🍃 "Quickly!" urged Máxindín. "Not long shall I be able to hold the Dámánwraíth at bay."

EVEN at those words, the pupils of his eyes glowed red once more, and the orbs rolled up in their sockets until but bloodshot whites might be seen; and once again, his visage appeared inhuman as the tide of the battle slowly turned against Máxindín.

OBEYING his mentor's command, Zörwind lifted Máxindín's rigid body as if it weighed no more than a parchment cutout, gently placing the old mágús upon the back of his anxious Windcourser. 🍃 Then Zörwind, too, clomb onto the wingèd horse; and Radiance leapt into the air, thrust upwards by his powerful hind legs, until his great, white-furred pinions might carry them aloft.

SLOWLY, they rose into the air; and Radiance made for the high stone towers of Máxindín's keep.

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Prologue Three

THE DRAGON'S LAST BREATH



ADIANCE LANDED WITH A BLUSTER of wind upon the high, open tower terrace of Wizards Keep. Quickly, Zörwind carried Mäxindin within. Heedlessly, he brushed aside loose books and parchment scrolls as he cleared a large oaken table in order for to lay the old Man's body upon it. 🐉 For a trice, he was uncertain what to do with his possessed master. 🐉 Then, gently, he brushed Mäxindin's long hair from his agonized face and reassuringly held wrinkled hands that trembled rigidly. Speaking softly to him, Zörwind sought to comfort with words that seemed to ease the look of anguish knotted upon Mäxindin's ghastly countenance.



OW, LET IT BE KNOWN that upon the balcony behind them, a tiny unnoticed intruder listened and watched—a small green Qüäzlöt called by his master, Qü. The diminutive reptilian creature was Äzmadüs's animal familiar, a dark-green, leathery-winged thing the shade of rotting leaves, who stood barely shin-high, had yellowed fangs, and sported long sharp claws. From Qü's crafty little head sprouted two devilish, yellowed-brown horns; and bony barbs of the same twisted shape and color grew upon his shoulders, elbows, knees, and heels. 🐉 He crouched in the shadows of Mäxindin's verandah, fidgeted with his slender, twitching tail, and eavesdropped for his master, his rubious, beady eyes darting this way and that, pointed ears twitching to and fro as he watched intently, and surreptitiously listened to all that was said and done.



GAİN, MÁXINDÍN GAINED ENOUGH OF an edge in the battle for to speak: "Harken unto my words carefully, my son," he whispered. "What can I do, Master? Speak and I will act." Yet ere Máxindín could reply, his eyes, again, turned red. In a voice most strange to Zörwind's ears, harsh and full of hatred, a declaration that was *not* Máxindín's came from Máxindín's lips: "There be *naught* that thou canst do, Bearded Fool!"



HE grating voice laughed mockingly as the Dámánwraíth gained ever more control.



ZÖRWIND fell back from the quaking body, letting his master's limp hands drop from his own. "Thy wizard be strong," the Dámánit mocked, "but I be the stronger and do destroy him utterly, even the-now!"



NONE THELESS, MÁXINDÍN AGAIN WON OUT over the intruder within him one last time. "Not yet, foul plague!" he cursed harshly. "Strength! Good Master! Thou shalt yet prevail!" encouraged Zörwind. "Alas, not so; the End upon me," Máxindín replied hoarsely.



ZÖRWIND shook his head. "Nay! Nay!" But Máxindín went on. "Hush and heed my words: Ere I pass on, I must needs entrust thee with a great secret, Zörwind. What you must do with what I impart hath more import, even, than my very life."



BUT Master...! "Hearken well, my son. Heed me well." His master's words fell to all but a whisper. "I shall not live to see the breaking of the-day; but ere I die, I impart this great secret unto thee—a secret upon which shall rest the fate of all Free Folk. Lo! Many a'year ago I rediscovered *The Skiward*, lost to the World in ages past. And the-now I charge thee with the tasks of finding its corrupt counterpart, *The Sörsër*, and of thereafter destroying both glamoury-tomes, together, ere the same calamity may befall Indrél that came at their creation."



THE SKIWARD...? and *The Sörsër*...? But surely, Master—"When I am gone," Máxindín interrupted, "you must erst take *The White Tome*, already in our possession, to the High Élves in *Éstérëa*. There you must—" "But you cannot not die! You mustn't!"



MÁXINDÍN continued his instructions straightforwardly. "Híánthelús shall keep *The Skiward* in good safety until its malevolent twin be found. Meanwhilst, must you venture forth and locate *The Sörsër*,

that both tomes might be destroyed together and the World be rid of the doomed godssends forever!"

YOU cannot die, I say," insisted Zörwind. "I am not yet ready for such a quest. There are innumerable skills you have yet to teach me and too many secrets yet to be revealed, Great One."

BE strong, Zörwind. Be still. There be neither time nor choice left to us the-now." Mäxindin's voice was stern as it became a harsh whisper. His body shook with spasms and sudden convulsions.

ZÖRWIND bent closer and listened, with sorrow in his heart, to his master's last words. ❧ "My Gentle Apprentice, hearken well my final rede and eschew any selfish concerns for my life. Repeat to none the words that have fallen—and shall fall—from my dying lips. You must vouchsafe my secrets, for in their safekeeping rests the key to survival for all the Free Folk of Indrél."

CHOKING back his tears, Zörwind nodded. "I swear, with my life, to keep your secrets safe and to accomplish all that you require," he assured his master. ❧ "Then, heed me well the-now: This very eve, as I read Fläitës, I chanced upon a fortuitous verse which revealed that, verily, buried within the catacombs at Dale Óráfh,..."

MÄXINDIN coughed violently and tried to swallow the thick blood that choked his throat and slowly filled his lungs. His cold hands clenched Zörwind's so tightly they cut off the circulation and made his fingers for to tingle with numbness.

IN THE SHADOWS, QÄ'S pointed ears perked as he listened intently for the momentous "secret" about to be revealed.

“**W**ITHIN THE SEALED TOMBS below the Temples of Asäre,” continued Mäxindin, “within the Imperial Chambers, lies *The Sörsër*, lost for more than a millenium. There, I deem, the dark glamourdex of fell sorcery may yet be found.” His words were but a soft whisper as his grip slowly slackened. “You must locate *The Black Tome* and then destroy both codices, together, *Black and White*. ❧ “Take all that is mine. Use it to aid thyself in thy search for *The Sörsër*,” he said softly as a large drop of crimson fell from the corner of his mouth, widening the red lines that ran down his cheeks to his ears.

ZÖRWIND," he whispered, barely audible, "destroy my body then, now, while the Dāmānwraith's attention is yet diverted." 🍁 "Fie! Lord!" cried Zörwind, who, again, stepped away from his dying master.

MAXINDIN'S possessed body began to shake with fiercening convulsions as he coughed and gasped for one last breath. His eyes, ever strong and proud, suddenly revealed fear and uncertainty.

THEN, they smoldered with hatred and rolled back in their sockets. The whites/red-streaked/bulged as Māxindin's thick eyebrows knit with pain.

AND THEN, THE ANCIENT WIZARD grew still. 🍁 Zörwind crept forward, took his still hands within his own and felt the warmth return to them. He clutched them, tightly. "Master...? Master...?"

WITHOUT warning, the Transference began. In one long explosive blast, all the thoughts and memories of more than a lifetime, indeed, all the hopes and fears, loves and losses, lessons and follies of generation upon generation of wizards passed, flowed from Māxindin's mind into Zörwind's.


AS the full Transference flooded into his consciousness, Zörwind reeled as though physically blown aback by the sudden outpouring of emotion and information. 🍁 Into the hidden recesses of his mind swept every thought Māxindin had ever had, every feeling he had ever experienced, every desire, every belief, every affection, every insight, every passion, and every dream, yea, and more than that—the memory of the thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, affections, insights, passions, and dreams of all his mentor's predecessors, as well, back to Lēbēnmistlē the Foresighted—all these rushed into Zörwind's mind, overwhelming, overpowering, very nearly completely overshadowing his own consciousness.



AS SUDDENLY AS IC HAD begun, the Transference was over—the investiture of Zörwind into the role of full-fledged wizard, anointing him as a Master of All Colors, was complete, with the bequeathing of the sumtotal of the Mentor's knowledge and experience to his Apprentice.

HOWEVER, with the rush of edification and understanding came other experiences—past disappointments, pains, fears, regrets, and sufferings... And something else, as well, something strange that did

not seem good or wise at all—feelings utterly unfamiliar to Zörwind, ideas completely alien to him or his perception of his master.


BUT Zörwind did not judge the Gift, could not judge it; he could but accept it wholeheartedly and absorb everything he had been offered or reject it altogether.

THE TIME HAD COME FOR Zörwind to destroy Máxindin's weakened body, while the Dámánwraíth was yet within it. 'Twas his only chance, his only opportunity to save Fërmén, though 'twould mean killing a friend he loved more than all the World... yea, killing himself, almost.  A knot tied itself in Zörwind's stomach so tightly it seemed it could never be undone, and his head pounded with pressure. He had never faced such a terrible dilemma before; and as he fought to do what he knew he must, his haggard breath came in short shallow gasps.

TWICE, he went to place his large hands upon his beloved master's temples, to destroy his body with a lethal charm.  And twice, his hands shook uncontrollably; and he withdrew them.  *I need time... time to ponder possibilities, time to consider what I have been commanded to do... and if that is, indeed, what I must do; time to evaluate the situation and to find another option; time to consider the costs and consequences of each choice ere I do what I must.*

PERHAPS, Máxindin was being too rash. Mayhap, there was a way he could save his beloved mentor's life *and yet* destroy the Dámánwraíth.

HOWEVER, time was one luxury that Zörwind did not possess. The Dámánwraíth would not wait for him to weigh his options or to devise some other stratagem; Zörwind could see as in his friend stiffening visage.

DEEP IN HIS HEART, ZÖRWIND knew what must needs be done. Yet he shook his head ruefully. Tears came to his eyes. "I cannot, Master," he said at last, his heart torn betwixt what he knew he must do and that which he knew he could not.  For, had not Máxindin raised him almost from the cradle? Had he not cared for him, protected him, had he not even loved him? *How can I return a lifetime of kindness and charity with bitter anguish and cruel death?*

A DEEP sense of helplessness filled Zörwind with despair, and he felt unworthy even to be in his master's presence. He knew that 'twas his duty to destroy the Dámánwraíth, but he could in no wise perpetrate the terrible murder necessary for to do so. His heart ached with guilt, as though

it might rupture within his chest. Yet he could not kill the Man he loved and respected so deeply.

SAMEWHILES, however, he felt a strong urge, an alien one—the desire to fulfill the command, to destroy both the Dămănwraîth and Măxindîn and become the new Master of the Wizards Keep, warden of its many treasures and secrets, and the sole lord of all its dominion. ❧ He was powerful, the-now, more powerful than he had ever dared to imagine he might become. Indeed, with the Dămănmonster and Măxindîn gone, he would be the most powerful being in İndrël, more powerful, even, than Azmadûs. ❧ With *The Skiward* at his disposal, he could rule the World benevolently, if he so chose; and none could stop him—not his nemesis, not the Men of İndrël, not the Low Dwarves of FHĒLHDSFHĀR, not even the High Elves of Ēstēvā; not should they all unite as one and be joined by all the foul races of İndrël, could they stand against him if he claimed lordship of the Ārthāl Ambit with *The Skiward* in his hands. Only the Thörēn, Themselves, would be his equals. ❧ And if I were to recover *The Sörsēr*, as well? Why then, not even They could stand against me!

ZÖRWIND forced himself to eschew such wicked thoughts and was horrified to find that they had entered into his mind at all. Never before had he lusted after power or domination over others. *From whence came such vile and evil thoughts?* He had never even allowed himself to imagine the time when he would inherit his mentor's mantle and rise to the level of Măgûs Magnificent, though such was his inevitable; and the-now this sudden power-lust affrighted him.

IS this some inherent ambition only the-now awakening in me at the sudden possibility of truly attaining such greatness? ❧ Or is this newfound aspiration to rule over others a result of... the Transference?

AS ZÖRWIND WAVERED IN INDECISION, precious moments slipped away; and Măxindîn the Great grew ever weaker. 'Or' long he would surely lose the inner battle he waged against the beast of darkness, fought valiantly though it was. The Dămănwraîth was strong, stronger than Măxindîn, alone; Zörwind could sense it. 'Twould claim his master's body unrivaled, in the end; and nothing that he or Măxindîn could do would change that outcome.

ZÖRWIND knew all this; and yet... *still*, he did not... could not act.



WHEN MÁXINDÍN'S GRIP WENT SLACK, and Zörwind laid the ashen hands gently upon a sunken chest. His eyes watered, but they would not cry. He was filled with rage, frustration, and sorrow. He wanted to weep, needed to weep, but would not... could not.



FOR A SUDDEN, MÁXINDÍN'S EYES flashed wide; and he reached forth his hands and grabbed Zörwind about the throat, throttling him with a grip of steel. Zörwind struggled to free himself, choking and coughing; but the hands of his master held fast as they strangled him with inhuman strength, buried their nails deep into the sinews of his neck, and stopped the flow of air to his lungs and blood to his brain.



HIS head burned with a white fire, and he could in no wise see clearly through pain- and grief-moistened eyes as he struggled futilely to loose the constricting grip. He began to feel faint... to feel the strength ebb from his every thigh. Bright lights danced in his vision like crazed fireflies.



A SPELL CAME INTO ZÖRWIND'S mind, and he acted. From a hidden pouch in his gray-plaid robes, he produced the powdered component he needed—a dark orange admixture of sulfur and carbon, with which he quickly coated his own strong hands.



WHEN, Zörwind placed his palms upon Máxindín's possessed head, intending to wield an *Invoke the Dead*[†] spell and thus to revivify his mentor's Shāde.





YET without breath, he could nowise chant the strange mystical words needed to bring to bear the power he sought to summon. The incantation needed to be uttered aloud: *REDĒNEX ŌRVĀDEŪM LĒNX-VĀ*. But he could not. He was being strangled... even unto to death.




ZÖRWIND and Máxindín wrestled, his master rising from the table, writhing and seething in an inhuman fashion as the Dāmān-wrāiſh took full control of his body. They twisted and turned, tumbled upon the table and, then, onto the chamber floor, knocking over bookshelves of dusty volumes and toppling ancient sculptures.

[†] *Invoke the Dead* spell {L.T.} *REDĒNEX ŌRVĀDEŪM LĒNX-VĀ* = (restore Shāde body)


ZORWIND struggled with all his might to pry Máxindín's... *The Dämānmonster's* fingers from his throat and was just able to gasp a small breath of air. This, he let out as he intoned: "*ÄV·XNĒL MÜĒDÁVRÖ XENĒDER!*"[‡]


WHE WORDS HAD COME OUT BACKWARDS! He had just cast a *Slay the Living* spell upon Máxindín!  His vision cleared, and he went suddenly numb. He felt naught, physical nor emotional: no anxiety, no regret, and neither pain of body nor of mind.  No longer did he see his master struggling before him but only the Dämānwráith—nameless, evil, and corrupt; his mortal enemy.

AGAIN, he placed his trembling hands upon the sides of his adversary's head and squeezed. His palms grew red with heat, then yellow, and then white as the Malevolent Magic burned within, around, and through him.

THEN, Máxindín's grip loosened upon his throat; and he could smell burning flesh and hair as he breathed the life's source in, once more. The odor made him nauseous. He choked and coughed upon the very air he so desperately needed.  Nevertheless, he breathed deeply and lived.



WHILE THE GREAT MAGIC WIELDER & his apprentice wizard struggled with the Dämānwráith released by Äzmadüs, high up within the lofty tower of Wizards Keep, the Dark Sorcerer, himself, regained consciousness down in the greensward & recuperated somewhat from his over-bold deed of having called forth the damned Shāde.  The blindness Máxindín had inflicted upon him had only been temporary and was already wearing off.

CAZING about, Äzmadüs found that his nemesis was nowhere to be found and that the Dämānwráith had not possessed the jaguar's lifeless body.  Instantly, he surmised what had happened and called Gráthléer back to his side.

[‡] *Slay the Living* spell {L.T.} ÄV·XNĒL MÜĒDÁVRÖ XENĒDER ≠ (corporeal·body Shāde restore)

QUICKLY, they rode to the nearby ancient keep of his enemy. ✠ Then, using a *Levitate*^Y spell upon himself, Ázmadūs sprouted leathery wings and flew up to the citadel's high open balcony.

“**Q**SNÖZÖ LIX MÜEZÁL,”^Y he whispered; and with a wave of his hand, the verandah was entombed in silence as he threw a cruel black rope about Radiance's neck, hitching the Windcourser to the terrace railing. ✠ The winged horse reared and whinnied in fear; but no sound of warning could be heard within, neither by Zörwind nor by Máxindín, as Ázmadūs joined his spying Qüäzlot and watched and waited from behind shadowy curtains.

AT THAT TIME, REVIVALIZED SOMEWHAT by the intense physical pain Zörwind was inflicting upon his body, Máxindín the Great regained some small fraction of control over his physical shell. It had been he who had caused Zörwind to reverse his *Invoke the Dead*^Y spell, turning the charm into a curse. For he had not yet been completely vanquished but rather had feigned an early defeat, purposing for to lull the Dāmānwraith into overconfidence.

THE NOW, with his last reserves of physical and mental strength, Máxindín added to the power and intensity of the *Slay the Living*^Y spell that Zörwind had conjured, turning the already lethal curse into something ever more powerful.

AT A TREMENDOUS SILENT BURST of light, Máxindín's physical form disappeared at the culmination of the spell. His body vanished—whether to be translated straight into the Æthéréal Ambit, where his Shade could walk forever beside those of his forefathers—or whether he had come to an end of all being, lost to utter nothingness, only The Ancient *Thörëän* can say.

BUT 'tis of a certitude that the Dāmānwraith, left without a physical shell for to possess, was cast back across the Astronomical Barriers and into the Ambits of Ärdéntéa from whence it had come.

^Y *Levitate* spell {L.T.} ADAMANTIÖT ÊRÖM ≠ (stone of weight)

^Y spell of *Silence* {L.T.} ÖSNÖZÖ LIX MÜEZÁL ≠ (ears the awaken)

^Y *Invoke the Dead* spell {L.T.} REDËNEX ÖRVÁDEÜM LËNX-VÁ = (restore Shade body)

^Y *Slay the Living* spell {L.T.} ÁVXNËL MÜEDÁVRÖ XENËDER ≠ (corporeal-body Shade restore)

WHEN UPON THE BALCONY, ĀZMĀDŪS stroked his pointed goatee with two, long, thin fingers and nodded as he listened to his tiny green spy's quick accounting of all else that had transpired. Thus, he smiled; for it seemed to him that he would come away with a great victory that eve, yea! far more, indeed, than he had hoped for.

WHEN THE BLINDING LIGHT HAD faded away & the cloud of concomitant white smoke had dissipated completely, Zörwind's eyes readjusted to the dim candlelight in the study, & he found that all that remained in his burned hands were the empty sendaline robes that had once belonged to his beloved master.

HE fell to his knees, out of breath with fatigue and despair. His teacher and closest friend of so many long years of study and erudition, was suddenly gone; and he was wholly alone in the World. His only close confederate the-now was Lëgendil, a self-exiled recluse who, in denial of his calling as ally against such wickedness, had long ago fled into the wilds, abandoning his duties and his birthright. None could the-now say where he might be found nor whether he meant ever to return to his blood-bound role as High Hero unto the World.

YEARS earlier, Zörwind had studied magic with Lëgendil, under the tutelage of Māxindīn, along with Bārcōgan and Vōlgār dūĀrant; and once-upon-a-while, all had been true and close friends. Yet bitter rivalries and divided allegiances had sundered them—Zörwind and Lëgendil upon the one side, Bārcōgan and Vōlgār upon the other.

IN the early years after their Master had turned out Bārcōgan and Vōlgār, Zörwind and Lëgendil had campaigned together in the Goblin Wars, oft fighting side-by-side upon the battlefield, each Man having saved the other's life many times over. Yet when the Wars were over and freedom and peace hard-won at the-last, he and Lëgendil had drifted apart. At first, and at whiles, there had been holidays in the Ārquāvēān or Ēstéréān courts that had reunited them... a the-least for a brief span; or they had seen oneanother in Fërmén, when their Master summoned them to Wizards Keep for instruction or for to send them upon some enigmatic quest. But then, Zörwind's former fellow apprentice had vanished altogether, disappearing after a bloody assault upon his family by their now great enemy, Vōlgār dūĀrant.

FOLLOWING the cruel attack, Lëgendil had turned his back utterly upon their friendship and upon their mutually sworn duty for to aid and to protect the Free Folk of Indrél, an act made all the more seeming egregious given that Lëgendil was also the sole descendant of an ancient and noble lineage of great knights whose heritage 'twas for to serve righteous kings and to harry unjust ones; for indeed, he was sole heir to the High Heroes' Bloodline.

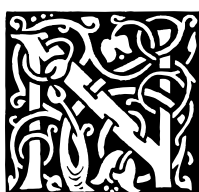
BUT where Lëgendil could the now be found, who might say? The former apprentice wizard and abdicant High Hero had simply withdrawn from the world and his honorable obligations. Yet with such a grave quest suddenly set before him, Zörwind knew that he would have to at the least seek out the reluctant High Hero and beseech his aid, whether Lëgendil were willing to render it or no.

SOLEMNLÝ, ZÖRWIND'S TEAR-FILLED EYES TURNED to the bookcase where his Master had kept *The Skiwärd*; and as Mäxindin's powers in the Ærthäl Ambit slowly faded with his death, *The Black Tome* reappeared.

THUS, THE PRECIOUS GLAMOURY CODEX became visible to other eyes, as well, eyes that lurked in the shadows and waited deviously. Äzmadüs had failed in his plans for to unleash a Dämänwraíth upon his arch adversary's sheltered little village of Fërmén—which sorely upset him—for he prided himself in his masterfully cunning devices. However, he consoled his damaged ego with the accomplishment of Mäxindin the Great's utter destruction and nursed his wounded pride with the unanticipated and unprecedented opportunity for to seize *The Skiwärd* and claim it for himself, to wrest from the hands of the Benevolent Wizards the powerful glamourdex of protection spells.

AS soon as he saw the large silver tome appear, Äzmadüs acted, while Zörwind was still dazed with grief. He outstretched his sinewy hands for to draw *The Skiwärd* to him, through the air; and lo! silently, the ancient volume rose off the oaken bookshelf and drifted towards him.^y

^y *Levitare* spell {L.T.} ADAMANTÍÓT ÊRÔM ≠ (stone of weight)



OW, WHEN ZÖRWIND SAW THE spell book levitate and move towards the balcony, he realized what was happening; and the leather-bound glamoury codex stopped in midair.[¥]

For a moment, the glamourdex looked as though 'twould be drawn back across the room to him; but it remained suspended, quavering half-way across the chamber.



AD the ancient tome been but an ordinary volume of cloth or even vellum, 'twould have been torn asunder by the incredible invisible forces contending for it, its boards blasted into a thousand tiny splinters, its pages riven to shreds. But though it shuddered and, at whiles, lurched back and forth in the invisible tussle, it remained undamaged.



OR an eternity, it seemed to Zörwind, the two magic wielders' minds strove for control over the floating tome. Each Man understood that the balance of power betwixt the benevolent wizards and the malevolent sorcerers of İndrël hung within his grasp; and though exhausted, intellectually as well as physically, neither mäge nor necromancer would succumb to the other, though each drew ever closer to the lethal limit of his mental endurance.



WEAT poured down Zörwind's forehead, drenching his long, gray-streaked hair and beard as he struggled to his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Radiance upon the balcony fighting for to break the strange rope about his neck; but the black line held the white stallion fast as the tome remained locked in midair.



ELPLESSLY, Zörwind watched as Qû stooped upon Radiance, swooping back and forth, clawing at the winged horse's back and haunches with his razor-sharp processes, driving the great steed to choking himself upon the lasso as he struggled for to escape the Qüäzlöt's harassments. In desperation, Zörwind sent thoughts of comfort and reassurance into the dumb beast's mind, afraid the Windcourser would injure or strangle himself if not quickly calmed.



UT the strain of the struggle with Äzmadüs, combined with his attempts to pacify the overwrought mount, were too much for him. They drained him dangerously close to death's embrace, as he grew ever weaker and weaker.

[¥] Weightlessness spell = İZMÄ MÖRËBÖ = (become weightless)

YET himseemed that Ázmadüs, too, was beginning to falter. His foe had already worked great conjurations that night, and the sorcerer's hands quaked as he tugged mentally at the object of their grapple.

MOREOVER, the balls of electricity that Zörwind had hurled at him in the greensward had wounded Ázmadüs grievously. He was scorched from head to bootheel and grievously wounded. ❧ Howbeit, the sorcerer seemed sore bent upon acquiring *The Skiwärd*; all his thought and desire appeared resolved to the task as he, also, pushed himself hazardously close to his utter limits.

THE floating tome vibrated and shook with their contention, first drifting slightly closer to Zörwind and then slipping away.

WHEN RADIANCE SLIPPED UPON THE spew of his own blood, choking himself in his inability to regain his footing, the distraction caused Zörwind to falter; his will snapped like a dry twig over-bent. ❧ He collapsed to the floor, his last effort spent in trying to right the floundering stallion and save him from the noose about his neck.

IN that instant, *The Skiwärd* flew into Ázmadüs's hands—a flaming silver arrow loosed to the victor.

WITH A RUSTLE OF BLACK velvet, the sorcerer and his accomplice were gone as Ázmadüs leapt from the keep's high tower, down to the grounds far below, and then onto Gräthléér's back, the silver glamoury codex burning white-hot in his blackened hands.

ZÖRWIND dragged himself to the edge of the balcony and watched helplessly, too weak even for to cast a simple spell of *Following*^y with which to trace the Nightcharger's course as the dark duo galloped off into the black night, a winged streak of green at their side. ❧ Yet he had but little doubt as to whither the thieving culprit would go. Ázmadüs would hie across the Andréan Wastes, returning to his dark castle in Nódreöf, whither none could touch him under the protection of his father, The King.

^y spell of *Following* = ÖZÉVSÖ NŮ LŮB = (eyes go with)

IN A BITTER FIT OF anger and frustration, with a last tremendous effort, Zörwind conjured up one more scorching blue fireball, which he hurled down at the escaping sorcerer.^Y Then, he buckled with fatigue and collapsed upon the balcony, supine beside Radiance.

UNSEEN, the globe of blue flame faded and fizzled out ere ever it reached the fleeing thieves.



UNCONSCIOUS, ZÖRWIND LAY NEAR DEATH upon the open terrace for many long days & nights, his body an immovable stone, his mind vexed with sorrow & twisted apparitions. Vitalus rose and fell in the sky, many times over, as Silva waxed and waned; and ever he lay there, motionless, beside the bound Windcourser.

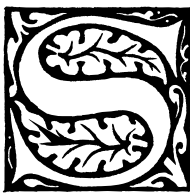
BUT he lived. And slowly, slowly Zörwind recouped from the overreach of his powers.

WHEN UPON A DAY—a fortnight, a moonth, a year, a lifetime later, Zörwind stirred and oped his eyes. He blinked. The season was the same; and though it felt many long years later, he somehow deemed that it had only been a matter of weeks... or a moonth, at the-most, that he had slumbered.

HE propped himself up upon his elbows and, looking about, found Vitalus at his noontide zenith, the day bright and hope-restoring.

RADIANCE whinnied with joy when he saw that the new Master of Wizards Keep yet lived. Again, he struggled against Azmadus's bitter rope, trying to reach Zörwind; but the rope yet held him fast, biting into a neck chafed and bloodied, choking him sorely and keeping him in check.

^Y Fireball spell = *ĖZRATRĖR HTAŖT* ≠ (snowball hurl) [used by Zörwind?]



SLOWLY, ZÖRWIND STOOD, HIS HAND upon his lower back, for it suddenly pained him greatly to straighten his ever-before limber frame. ♀ He made his way over to Radiance and leaned heavily upon the wingèd horse for support. ♂ For a long moment, he but stood there petting the mount's neck, caressing it lovingly. He felt haggard but was determined to emerge from his defeat stronger and wiser than ever he could have become without such a trial.

“**G**ENTLE RADIANCE, thou art brave, indeed, and a companion true,” he comforted the Windcourser, stroking the stallion's blood-clotted mane, abating the beast's pain and disquietude with a soft touch, letting the animal's pain flow into himself.



AT LENGTH, ZÖRWIND STRAIGHTENED HIMSELF full upright and stood tall and proud. No longer did he lean upon Radiance for support as he cast his plaid apprentice birrus aside. He stretched for his hand, and from the adjoining room flew forth the opalescent robes of a Master. These he donned ere he turned the black rope about Radiance's neck to gray ash with but the slightest gesture of one hand. ♂ He was the-now hight Zörwind the Argent, able to heal the Windcourser's bloodied throat with a whispered incantation and three loving strokes.





LOOKING OUT TO THE NORTHEAST, it seemed to Zörwind that he saw afar, beyond the surrounding township of Fërmén and the Chásméén Desert that encroached upon its eastern walls, beyond even the distant band of verdant green upon the horizon that marked the passage of the Glimmer River southward—dividing the Chásméén Desert from the Andréán Wastes—far over the northern spurs of the RRÖT Mountains, past both vast deserts, and beyond the reaches of their farther environs, to the green ribbon where the Shimrëng River flowed south toward the Marënéän Ocean, verily, even unto distant Nödřeöf, upon the southern footholds of the Förgëng Mountains, to the very towers of Ázmadüs's dark castle, where himseemed he were able to espy the formidable banners of House Nödřeöf—blue, yellow, and black—flying from their highest spires, many, many days' journey hence.



TWAS, doubtless the Gift, a mägüs vision, his first—a glimpse of distant lands and times.

IN THE DIVINATION, ZÖRWIND SAW the minutest of details upon the highmost pennant—the very threads of embroidery in the Royal Nödrëöfëan Insignia blazoned thereupon.^a So clearly could he make out its sable lions rampant against a shield of gold, upon a field of azure; its three golden crowns, in chief; and its blazing sun, rising from base, that he thought he could even descry the glint of blood-red eyes and red claws arming its two black lions, rampant queue-forchy. Indeed, he even thought to make out its estoile of four rays nowy sable—the “Black Star of Nödrëöf”—inescutcheon, at the very center of the infamous coat of arms.

THEN, ALL THIS NIGHT BEFORE HIM; & Zörwind was filled with horror & dismay as he watched a gigantic winged beast slowly rise up out of Castle Nödrëöf's open ward.  At first, slowly, in great sweeping arcs, the terrible reptilian creature wheeled round the tall towers in a widening spiral above the main keep.  Then, with growing speed, sent abroad upon some mission of malice by Prince Azmadüs, the fell creature wheeled and turned northward, racing toward the distant horizon.

AT first, Zörwind could nowise be certain of the exact nature of the winged monster. But the great, leathery, bat-like wings of red with black trim came into focus; and a saurian body of scarlet scales and swarthy claws was revealed unto his mind; and Zörwind knew her, recognized her, and named her—for she was none other than Lëm Arräm, called of old—the great Red & Black Drägon.

HIS stomach turned to stone, and his throat felt filled with desert sand. The vision, he knew, was not only of what transpired far away but was of events in the not-too-distant future—a brief glimpse of things to come; and Zörwind shivered beneath his new master's robes. He took the revelation as a warning of how powerful Azmadüs would 'or' long become and

^a Royal Nödrëöfëan Insignia

Emblazon:



Blazon: Azure an orle Sable, on an inescutcheon Or with an orle Sable an estoile of four rays nowy Sable charged with a plate Sable, all between two lions rampant queue-forchy Sable armed and orbed Gules, in chief three coronets Or with an orle Sable, issuant from base a demi-sun Or straight rays countercharged Or and Sable with wavy rays Gules

see also: *Appendix F* → Roll of Arms of Indrël → Royal Nödrëöfëan Insignia

knew that he must heed the omen and prepare for to face an even more imposing sorcerer than the one how had achieved the ruination of his most-powerful master.



HE SPECTRUM FADED; and at the very edge of his mortal vision, Zörwind could but barely descry the dark gray-green band of trees that lined the Glimmer River Valley, less than ten leagues distant. ❀ Still, Zörwind looked to an unseen Nodrëof and spake aloud to an enemy he had not chosen but whose nemesis Fate had required him to become.

“**TERRIBLE LOSS!** O grave misfortune! Seldom hath the death of one Man been so paramount a bereavement to all Mankind as the passing of Máxindín the Great. The hurt thou hast done this land and its inhabitants, Young Prince of Nodrëof, was most grievous, indeed; and I do swear it shall not be cheaply recompensed.”



HEN, Zörwind mastered his rancor and shook his head ruefully as he remembered his former mentor and mourned all that had been lost with his master's passing. His voice came then low but fell. “Beware the storm you cause to brew, Fell Ázmadüs; or thou shalt be caught up its growing fury and swept away by its passage, as is a dry leaf in a Foremidwinter's gale.”



ZÖRWIND fell silent, then, as he looked down at his silvery attire. ❀ Returning to his master's... *Nay! Alas! My laboratory...* he stepped before *Lë Öëüm Dî Lë Ándin-Ërëindilë^T*—the room's one looking glass. ❀ Before him stood Máxindín... or so the reflection would have him believe: an ancient wizard in the silvern robes of a Master of All Colors; a white-haired figure, for the former gray streaks in his hair and beard were now gone; even his thick, tangled eyebrows had grown as pure silver-white as crystalline snow. Never before had he realized just how much he had the look of his former mentor.



STANDING thus before so stark a reminder of is loss, he grieved for a teacher from whom he would never again glean new wisdom; a friend, in whom he would nevermore confide a deep secret or hidden hope; and a compatriot, with whom he would, at no time more, share the lonely existence wizardhood. For since Légendil's flight and Máxindín's death, he was utterly alone in the practice of his Arts, an anomaly in the world, a pariah to some, an outcast to all but the wisest, even amongst his own kindred.

^T *Lë Öëüm Dî Lë Ándin-Ërëindilë* {H.Ë.} (the Window of the World; “the World's Window”)

ZÖRWIND wished to curse Äzmadüs further and to swear and prophesy The Prince's utter doom and destruction; but he turned aside from wrath and harsh words, then, and did not let his heart dwell upon such thoughts of vengeance and anger, anymore. Rather, he be-thought himself only of the great Man who had sacrificed himself for the peace-ful folk of İndrël; and he sorrowed at how all in the Four Realms would sorely miss the old Master, in the ominous days to come.

AWAF of sweet-scented Äzmîr herb wafted through the keep li-brary, then; and suddenly a wave of tears washed over Zörwind, so that he shook with sobs that rattled his being to his inmost core. For he thought, *The meerschaum Drägön hath breathed its last fiery breath.*



ZÖRWIND FELL BACK INTO HIS dead master's ancient armchair & let his eyes survey the study that was now his. Another wave of painful nostalgia washed over him, watering his eyes with grief. How little the chamber had changed in his long years of apprentice-ship there. Upon its tables and tucked away in its nooks and alcoves, there had always been boiling beakers and alembics with simmering decoctions, bubbling admixtures, and steaming infu-sions. Crystal-stoppered cruets and wax-sealed ampoules were still nestled eve-rywhere, amongst books and hidden away in secret drawers and cupboards. There were bunches, bundles, jugs, and jars of aromatic herbs and rare com-pounds; well-worn mortars and pestles; and, in one corner, a brass astrolabe and an armillary sphere.

ZÖRWIND had always loved his master's study... *My study, the-now,* he thought. But he also mused that the chamber might better have been described as an *apóthecary* or *athenaeum* or *library* or even a *mu-seum*. For there were also there collected many ancient scripts and numerous works of fine art. Bronze sculptures and marble busts of once-famous warriors and long-dead poets could be found amongst the myriad relics Mäxindîn had amassed and carefully preserved, though they then stood beshrouded in dust, neglected or lost in the room's many dimly lit corners and obscure alcoves. Their artisans, patrons, and honorees were, the-now, long-forgotten by all, save for by the Èlves and a few rare historians. They were the works by, for, and in memo-riam of Men and Èlves and Dwärves whose great and noble deeds were lost,

for the most part, to common-knowledge history, more oft than not the now relegated to dubious lore or even deemed fanciful legend, else lapsed into oblivion altogether.

NUMEROUS canvases and fine frescos also decorated the walls and ceiling of the wizard's chamber, their temperas and plasters age-cracked and their paint and pigment faded—images that remained as whispered testaments to long-forgotten days and lost ancestors.

A SOFT SCIR OF AIR RUSTLED the mysterious *Ēlván* tapestry that was the room's most prominent feature, quickening the vibrant images of forest-clad *Ēlves* and their spiral-horned steeds. 🌿 As *Zörwind* stared, the arras glimmered and became a wide window that opened unto that immutable realm of the First-born *Ēstērea*. 🌸 For a span, the tower of Wizards Keep looked out upon the distant homeland of the High *Ēlves* of the Forest—upon little yellow-haired *Ēlf-sprouts* at play; upon dark-green *Evertrees*, tall-as-mountains; upon tumultuous tourneys of jousting upon snow-white *Īnbörnēā*; and upon fencing bouts, wherein lightning-swift rapiers and blunt-tipped foils crossed and recrossed with the soft skirl of foible upon foible or the faint clang of forte upon guard. 🌸 Thereupon, the banners of the High King of the High *Ēlves* of *Ēstērea*, Regal Lord of the Emerald Wood, blew in a gentle breeze, his green and white *Ēstēreān Insignia*^b divided quarterly with two vert *Evertrees* and two white *Īnbörnēā*, all below an emerald-jeweled crown, in chief. 🌿 The far-off happy melody of children's laughter, the soft rustle of wind in needled boughs, the faint ringing of fine steel, the distant thunder of deft hooves, and the soft strum and pipe of lute and fife, all wafted into the silent chamber through the mystical portal—an echo of the remote past or a reflection of an eternal future or perhaps just a glimpse across vast distances.

THE breeze subsided; and all grew oncemore still and quiet, within the somber keep. The seeming enchanted window drew closed and was, once again, but a colorful tapestry, mere fabric fashioned of

^b Regal *Ēstēreān Insignia*

Emblazon:



Blazon: Quarterly Argent ermined Vert and Vert ermined Argent, in bend two pine trees proper, in sinister bend two Unicorns couchant Argent, on a chief potency Azure an ancient crown Argent jeweled Vert

see also: *Appendix F* → Roll of Arms of *Indrēl* → Regal *Ēstēreān Insignia*

woolen twine and spun silver and gold, its arcane Òlván magic dormant, once more.



ES, IN ZÓRWIND'S "STUDY" could be found many such magical and marvelous treasures—a wealth of beauty and lore and history, in yellowed ivory carvings, woodblock prints, ornately etched arms, stained-glass windows, intricately tiled mosaics, pastels and oil paintings, exquisitely detailed embroideries, burnished antique musical instruments, ancient stone sculptures, finely glazed pottery, glassware and enameled jewelry, and much, much more that was either a delight for the eye to behold, a key to insight and learning, or else had held some profound personal connection to the past for the aged wizard who had collected it.



ET truth be told, *books* were the stone keep's predominant and most treasured feature. Indeed, the stale odor of aging parchment and leather bindings was, even then, beginning to muddle and dull the lingering sweet aroma of Máxindín's pipe herbs.



AINST very nearly every wall and buttress stood a tall, oaken bookshelf filled with ancient records—some volumes covered in dust from years of disuse; others, freshly burnished, their leather bindings regularly treated with ermine oil to keep them supple and limber.



TACKS of vellum sheets and tightly rolled parchment scrolls stood stacked beside, piled upon, or jammed into very nearly every nook, hole, and cranny of the chamber's many bookshelves, tables, desks, and cupboards.



NDEED, THE ROWS UPON ROWS of books, illustrated manuscripts, plays, scripts, novellas, novels, tomes, folios, scriptures, codices, gatherings, pamphlets, rolls, scrolls, sheets, and even stone, clay, and golden tablets, stacked here and there, made Máxindín's collection the largest library assembled since the fall of the Asäreán Empire.



HE archive that Zórwind had inherited was extensive and diverse, a collection that his mentor had compiled over a lifetime, a lifetime that had spanned more than three centuries. The vast holdings comprised literary works of prose and verse, learned books of knowledge and erudition, extensive compendiums of myth and tradition, various magic scripts and glamoury tomes, long works from *The Histories of Indrél*—such as *The Imperial Records of Asäre*, ancient plays, poetry, and prose, including, indeed, the tome that had revealed *The Sörsér's* long-forgotten whereabouts—Fláitës' *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of King Förs*t and the Daughter of Dawn.


ZÖRWIND picked up the ancient tragedy, which had fallen spread-open upon the floor beside his Master's chair. His eyes scanned the arcane verse for the words Mäxindin had stumbled upon just before his death.

... lo and behold! The Sörsër was sealed, therein, ... that it might be kept safe, for all time and eternity, from the ambitions of Men...

WO most terrible glamoury codices, Zörwind thought—*The Skiward and The Sörsër*—proving to be both the greatest boons and the greatest curses ever bestowed upon Mankind by The Ancient Thörcän.

HE slammed Fläitës' volume shut and gazed about the silent chamber wherein his beloved teacher had been wont to spend his days and nights of late in contemplative study. *Only when I have fully avenged the one who defiled this library, he swore to himself, will I ope again a book, save in the pursuit of my revenge!*



LET THE READER BID FAREWELL, for a while, to grieving Zörwind the Young & thus travel back in time some six years ere Ĥzmadiūs the Ĥugur murdered Măxindin the Great & stole from him *The Skiward*.  In the gallant kingdom of Ārquăvėā—not twenty leagues north of Prince Āzmadūs's Black Keep in Nōdrėōf—another youth was coming of age... a seemingly common swain who lived with his father and brother in a humble isolated cottage, in the Southern Oakwood Forest, just a day's walk north of Ārquăvėā.

ਭਗਵੰਤ ਕੀਰਤਨ ਸਾਹਿਬ

Chapter One

WIELDING THE FAMILY SWORD



SAC ALONG IN A small unadorned room lit only by oil lamps & the lam-bent light of dying embers in an ancient fireplace—a young father & his eldest son. 🍷 The boy, of twelve winters in the World, was hight Mitak, a bright-eyed lad, inquisitive, comely, and clever. He was of average height, for his age, of average build, and of average countenance. But nothing else about him could be described in such menial terms. He was quicker of wit than most swains twice his age and quicker afoot than a hare with a fox at its heels.


HIS father was a humble husbandman, by all appearances—rustic in dress and weathered countenance—except for a small, silver brooch, which he wore daily upon his breast. He was common enough of face but for four parallel puniceous scars that marred his left cheek as if the mark of some wild animal's vengeance. Yet to Mitak's eyes his father was handsome, nonetheless, a bit rugged, yet pleasant enough to look upon, especially when he smiled. And Father smiled oft, as he did then, for himseemed to Mitak that his father was ever most proud of him.




AS Mitak listened intently to his father's instruction, he stared with fascination at the great family sword they discussed. His father's words spoke of how the glaive had been forged long ages ago and how it held powerful enchantments upon haft and blade. And though his father called it not by its true name, a wise scholar or, indeed, any learned swordsmith worth his mettle would have recognized the great claymore to be Rūne-glaive—Sword of Heroes. For upon its bronze hilt and along the bright blade's fuller were scribed many ancient rünes and mystical symbols; yea, for it was

Little Mouse; though perhaps, if you are lucky, you may still catch a glimpse of one of those beautiful... and *terrible* creatures in your dreams.”

“**I** THINK I understand the symbols and the coat of arms, the now, Father; so, can I not now learn to use the sword?”



MITAK had, at dawn that very day, gone through the rites of becoming a “man,” having reached his twelfth year in the World; and it *was*, after all, the now his ascribed privilege to use the family sword as he chose, ...though to even touch the great claymore before his twelfth nameday had been strictly taboo.

BESIDES,” he pointed out to Father, “the blade is the important part of a sword not the hilt or the symbols written upon it.” He made a quick cutting motion with the sword as he sliced the air.  However, his awkward stroke was misjudged; and the heavy blade carried downwards, in his nascent grip, until the tip struck the stone floor of their cottage with a spark.

HE looked up fearfully at his father, uncertain how he would react.  But Father merely shook his head ruefully as he took back the venerable glaive. “Mitak, medeems thou hast already forgotten the first icon we talked about—*The Acorn and the Oak*.  “Remember, my son: ‘Patience is the key to many treasures.’  “You must first come to fully understand the truths engraved upon the sword’s hilt; for they shall protect you in life as surely as its steel blade and bronze guard will protect you in battle.

WHEN his father laughed. “Moreover, Little Mouse, one does not *use* a sword—one *wields* it! Or it shall certainly be of little use to him, whether it be a common blade or one blessed with the most-holy powers of the Ancient *Thövrän!*”

WITH those words, Father seemed to transform into a mighty High Hero of old, as he brandished the shiny blade deftly then thrice swung it round above his head ere slipping it into its copper-bound sheath in one fluid movement.

WHEN, Father reverently placed the glaive upon the mantelpiece above the hearth, where the family heirloom had always been kept.  “Now, off to bed with you,” he announced. “For you may have become a ‘man,’ the day; but we men need our sleep as well.  “In fact, *we need to rest just as much as your younger brother, Gërák does!*” He said the latter a bit louder and over his shoulder, producing a rustle in the loft above them and then the sound of young Gërák jumping back into bed and under the covers.

"I WASN'T listening," insisted Gërak from above. 🍀 Mītāk started to snicker but then remembered that he was, after all, the now a man; and he curbed his childish laughter.

YET he stood before the fireplace mantel a long moment more and stared at the large claymore that had rested there for as long as he could remember, just gathering dust. 🍀 *One day, 'or' long, however, it shall hang at my side, he thought; and never again shall it languish in such gross disuse.* 🍀 For having held the sword of his ancestors in his hands, at longlast, he suddenly decided to become a bold adventurer, to go forth into the Four Realms for to seek out his fame and fortune, to live by the sword, like the errant knights and swashbucklers of whom he had so oft heard tales told.

AND when I have won me great wealth and much renown? 🍀 *Why then, I shall woo me a lovely young lady of genteel breeding and delicate demeanor—perhaps a noblewoman... or a princess, even.* 🍀 For what, in all wide Indrël, could not he accomplish with such a great sword in hand and enough courage for to wield it ambitiously?

QUITE suddenly, he was resolutely determined not to remain but a simple farmer, all his life, as his father had. *I am going to win the wide World for my own!* And nothing short of attaining a mountain of gold regals—indeed a great trove of treasure—and deep renown in the eyes of great lords and mighty kings, was going to satisfy him!

FOR SUCH WERE THE GRANDIOSE fantasies, at-the-least, of a youth on the threshold of true manhood. 🍀 Nevertheless, Mītāk quickly enough went obediently up to bed for to dream of fire-breathing Drāgōns and of fair damsels in distress; and he would 'or' long forget, altogether, his silent vow and remain but the humble son of a humble husbandman for, at-the-least, a few more years.

AND yet... though Mītāk knew it not then, he was, indeed, destined to be the next in a long and proud line of bold adventurers... indeed, of High Heroes; for, as Fate would have it, he would neither be the first nor the last of the High Heroes' Bloodline for to wield Rūneglaive in quest, in battle, and in courtship.

Thus Endèth a Sample of
The Heroes' Armaments