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And There Shall Come A Warrior

by

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The High Lord was the only ruler the population of Dalelin had ever known. While no one knew his true origin, rumors were abundant as to how he rose to power and conquered other lands with the sole purpose of discovering their dark arts of mysticism and magic to extend his life through the centuries. Whispers of powers granted by the ancient gods, dark gods that frightened children at bedtime and haunted the arcane corners of the adult mind. His life had gone on

for so long he himself could no longer recall the details of those long ago conquests. He would be hard pressed to even remember his real name and everyone else only knew him as the High Lord. In his mind his hundreds of years of rule had only been as brutal and cruel as it needed to be to maintain order. Speaking to each other in hushed tones in the dark, his citizens would disagree.

The only thing that gave the people of Dalelin hope was the faith in a prophecy that told of a savior. A man from the north with golden hair and golden eyes. He would be of common birth but with skills in leadership and warfare that would unite the people. Clad in the armor of the ancients, he would ride forth and bring the tyranny of the High Lord to an end. And at last summer's games, that man seemed to appear.

The games were held every five years to remind people of their powerlessness against the empire. Any province could send the most talented warriors to challenge the elite of the royal guard. If any warrior could defeat all twelve in single combat, he would face the High Lord himself. The victor of that match would become the new ruler of Dalelin. But if the challenger lost, those who sponsored him would be impaled and their families would be sold into slavery. No one had ever lasted longer than two minutes with the least of the guard. Until the last games. Until the coming of Allti.

He stood half a head taller than most men and half again as broad at the shoulders. Cords of muscle and sinew rippled under his skin and the intensity of his golden eyes magnified his intimidating

presence. "Allti is a northman name," people whispered. And some reached out to touch his thick mane of blond hair. Could this be him?

Not that Allti himself believed it. He didn't feel like a chosen man, a hero destined to break the people of Dalelin's chains. Yes, he liked to fight, and was damn good at it, but that wasn't enough to make a man a leader. He also had sympathy for the cause, but what could one man do? As tales of his prowess and charisma grew, he was no longer one man, he was twenty, then one hundred. And then thousands. And with them came the telling of more atrocities, more suffering. And with that, more resolve. He would enter the tournament.

Of the thousands in the arena that day, few could put into words what they witnessed. The brutal efficiency and grace of a jungle cat combined with the precision and artistry of a master craftsman. Some even felt sympathy for the High Lord's men, the same way one would feel sorry for the fly as a child tore off its wings. The rules forbade killing your opponents but was silent on the subject of crippling.

After the last of the royal guard fell there could be no doubt, this was the man of the prophecy.

The crowd grew silent as the High Lord sat on his imperial platform and stared at the huge figure standing over the captain of the royal guard. Sweat beaded on his forehead, a slight tremble in his hands. The air became thick with tension. One man in the crowd

couldn't take it any longer and shouted, "Fight Him!" opening the flood gates of yells, catcalls and boos. Still the High Lord sat. One of his advisers stepped forward, announcing that Allti was a cheater and a fraud and would not face their exalted ruler. A piece of unrecognizable rotten fruit struck him in the face and the crowd exploded into a riot. The revolution had officially begun.

Almost one year later Allti lay face down on the bank of a dry creek bed, the unique spring smell of decay and new life filling his nostrils. He forced himself to breathe through his nose and concentrated on slowing his heart rate. Last fall's leaves clung to his body and face as he pressed himself into the ground, above him men disturbing the woodland floor. Morning dew soaked through Allti's jerkin and breaches. The revolution had not gone as planned.

In his current situation he had no time to reflect on the events of the last twelve months. The rallying of the people after the riots. The gathering of a people's army. How the most feared fighting force in the world had suffered many defeats at the hands of a rag-tag group of farmers, escaped slaves and deserters from the High Lord's ranks. Allti proved himself over and over as a leader and fighter. He was a vision of violence and destruction on the battlefield. An elite brigade formed around him, a corps that more than once snatched victory from a larger and better equipped force. The rebels had taken to calling them "The Golden Spear," the vanguard of freedom.

Battles had gone on through the winter months. A new experience

for all but the most seasoned fighting men on both sides. Victories were sometimes measured in inches and some men in the people's army started to grumble about those who had faith in Allti and the cause. Constantly tired, cold and hungry, the crusade like zeal was losing its edge. As they sat in drafty tents with small fires and smaller rations, the parts of the prophecy that were missing from Allti's life became larger topics of conversation. "Where is the armor of the ancient ones? Is he even from the north? The only saving he is doing is saving the best provisions for his personal men."

On a cold, grey day in early spring a wet heavy snow fell on Tochie Hill. The rebels held the high ground, the imperial forces the plain below. Outnumbered, as usual, the Golden Spear knew they could break the front line. With the main force of the empire's army focusing on them, the second wave of the rebels could take the left flank. Behind them the small but deadly group of mounted archers would split and do hit and runs on either side of the secondary troops. The tight formation of the imperial army wouldn't allow for quick direction changes, pinning them against each other.

The first part of the plan was going well as Allti signaled for the secondary force to make their move and at that signal the men turned around and left the battle. Allti barely had time to become angry when he saw Dalelin soldiers closing in behind him. His mounted archers had seen the desertion and quickly moved behind the main force to allow Allti's men to retreat up the hill. Allti sent word to the rebels to meet at station two, a signal to the rebels to

scatter and engage in guerilla tactics until they could reform at a set place and time. The High Lord's army could not move with enough speed to hunt down the dozens of groups fleeing the field. And imperial officer caught a glance of Allti and sent a detachment after him.

For two weeks they tracked Allti north. He thought the forest would provide him enough cover to escape, but now, flatted against the dry creek bed he prayed his stomach would not betray him with a groan of hunger. The empire's men were making enough noise to raise the dead, so the worry was small. Allti crawled farther down the creek, moving to get behind his pursuers. He would kill as many as he could before he fell.

One soldier had fallen back to empty his bladder. His ears could not distinguish between the sound of his pissing and the sound of Allti's footsteps coming up behind him. In one swift move, Allti snapped the man's neck. He pulled the soldier's ax out of his belt as the corpse fell to the ground. "Now these men of the empire will know what it feels like to be hunted," he said to himself in a whisper.

Allti barely worked up a sweat killing the rest of the search party. It was less of a hunt and more of a slaughter. They were completely unprepared for the ferocity of the attack. Never had any of them seen such a display of speed and strength. Never would they get the chance to tell anyone the skill they witnessed.

He now had enough time to wash the gore off and then search the

dead for anything useful. Dried meat and fruit tasted like a gift from the gods and the skin of sour wine chased it down like the kiss from the most beautiful of the same. Allti sat on his haunches and thought of his next move while he masticated his feast. He knew these men didn't have enough provisions on them to make it this deep into the wilderness. Tracking back to their base camp would not be a problem. A child could follow their path. He savored the last of his meal, took a baldric with sword and scabbard and one more ax slid into his belt. He set off in an easy run toward the rest of his shadows.

He found them in a small clearing not far away. Four men, two of which were soldiers, and a supply cart that had been pulled there by a massive dapple grey horse. Allti thought to himself that the use of such a beast to move tents, arms and food for a group of inept soldiers was a waste of good horseflesh. He came out of the trees and toward the men as if he were taking an afternoon stroll. The men jumped at the sight of the blonde giant and took several steps backward.

Allti asked the camp men if they had joined this hunt willingly or at sword point. Sword point was the reply. Allti snorted and moved toward the soldiers. They drew their swords too late as an ax in each of the huge warrior hands came crashing down, splitting their skulls. The camp men turned to run but Allti bellowed an order to stop that froze them almost in mid-stride. They stood together as Allti unhitched the dapple grey, grabbed a bag full of bread and

dried meat and two skins of wine. He mounted the nineteen hand behemoth and rode west. It took the camp men several minutes before they could break the paralysis brought on by the figure that was quickly disappearing into the forest.

Allti followed the guard's trail back toward familiar territory. With his new mount he felt confident he could make it back to the rendezvous with his men on time.

As the trail led him back he wondered how the High Lord's men came as close to him as they did. He knew where their trail should lead, but it veered off in an odd direction for no reason he could understand. If he followed it would take him several leagues out of his way. Curiosity got the better of him and he steered his new horse with his knees further down the soldiers' tracks. He was loving his new steed every moment.

Just before dusk he found what they had gone out of their way for. An unattended earthen mound came into view. It was as tall as two men at its highest point and a good four times that distance around the base. Allti rounded the hill until he came to an archway of stone facing east. The stallion snorted and became more nervous as they approached the structure. The big man patted his neck and spoke into his ear in quiet soothing tones, promising to give the destrier a name when they were done here, but he wanted a look around first.

Allti dismounted and walked to the arch. The stone was unlike any he had seen. It was a dark blue with tiny flecks that caught the



sunlight. The effect was much like staring into the night sky. He thought the locals must have told the empires' men of this place as a potential hiding place for a fugitive. Stepping under the arch he saw the stone only went back a few feet, not exactly a prime location for concealment. As his eyes adjusted to the shadows he saw engravings on the back wall. The script was unknown to him yet some of the characters were similar to the common tongue of Dalelin. The joints between the stone blocks were tight and straight, the craftsmanship of masters. Allti ran his fingers along the outer edge of the center stone when he saw the five small indentations on the upper right corner. Spaced like fingertips. He looked to the left corner and found five more.

Allti stood in silence. What possible reason would there be for these marks? He chuckled to himself and put his fingertips of both hands into the corresponding places. Nothing. Again he let out a small laugh for his own foolishness. As he started to turn back to his mount he heard the scraping of stone against stone. To his amazement the center stone slid back several feet and then lowered itself, its top becoming even with what top of what was the bottom stone. Beyond it was a chamber illuminated by glowing stones above and an altar made from the same stone as the archway.

The entryway to the chamber was just big enough for his massive frame to fit through. If his gaze hadn't been so fixed on the altar he would have seen that the chamber was carved out of one massive piece of the blue stone. Someone laying in the center of the floor

looking up at the domed ceiling would have felt like they were traveling across the universe.

Allti could have been screaming across the galaxy on fire and he wouldn't have noticed. His focus was on the altar.

Before him lay a set of armor, the style of which had not been seen for centuries. A mail shirt like he had never seen. As he moved it the light reflected off the rings in thousands of prisms, shining like the scales of a river fish. Vambraces, lacquered a deep, rich red. The same for a pair of greaves. A cuirass, again of the same red, with no ornamentation save for a stone in the center of the chest. The same blue stone surrounding the armor, shaped like a spearhead. And finally a helmet. It was in the basic form of the headgear worn during the Great Rift War of five hundred years ago. Also lacquered red with cheek plates and a horsehair crest, front to back, dyed to match the stone.

When his trance finally broke, sweat had started to run down his face. His hands trembled as he touched each piece one by one like religious relics. Armor of the ancients. Clad in this armor he would come back to fight from the north. For the first time, Allti started to honestly believe in the prophecy and idea he was the savior the people cried out for. In this armor he would be an obvious target on the battlefield but also a rally point for the rebellion. A hope for the future. The thought of this burden overwhelmed him. Was he strong enough? He remembered what he thought this morning. Kill as many as you can before you fall.

One more surprise awaited him in this chamber. As he removed each piece of armor a wooden panel reviled itself on the altar. The panel was easily removed and beneath was a sword unlike any he had ever seen. Similar in form to a spatha but with a single edged blade of blued steel three feet long. The handle was a hand and a half, ribbed and covered with leather to match the armor. The pommel, again the blue stone in the shape of a blunt spearhead. Beside it was a matching scabbard and baldric. Allti once again marveled as such craftsmanship. He held the sword and felt complete. The war would be on again.

He donned the armor, amazed that it fit as if made for him, turned toward the opening and threw his head back in laughter loud enough to prick up the ears of the waiting stallion. He smiled and lowered his head. He would have to remove the armor to get back out. Was this a reminder from the creators of this place to have some humility in the time to come? It really didn't matter he supposed, that was the lesson he was going to take from it.

Allti pushed the armor and sword out into the archway and crawled out, the last light of the day filtered through the trees as his feet touched the floor of the entrance. His new mount's head poked in and stared at him. Allti smiled again. He thought he should really name that horse.

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Almost one year to the day after he found the armor and claimed his destiny, the rebellion stood on the edge of victory. It had not

been easy, of course, but on this day the army of common men, slaves, mercenaries and freemen felt elation. The High Lord himself led his army to the Raven Plain to keep the rebels from reaching the capitol city of Hav. For the first time since the war began, the rebel army outnumbered the imperial one. Allti did not let this fact make him over-confident. The lesson of the armor's chamber had stuck with him for every battle. A small breeze kicked up and the massive man's equally massive, but still nameless, mount snorted and stamped the ground, feeling the tension of the fight to come. Allti patted the thick mottled neck of his destier and whispered, as before every battle, "Almost, almost," to his equine partner in carnage.

The armor had proved itself to be more than just a symbol of the prophecy. It had saved the blonde-haired leader's life several times. The mail had not once been penetrated by any weapon and the stone inlay in the cuirass seemed unbreakable. In the midst of many skirmishes an arrow, lance or spear shattered on it at impact. Each time a roar would rise from the rebels that almost won the day by itself. Allti's elite corps had become The Celestial Spear, named for the shinning depth of the stone. Around the evening campfires the men on both sides said for every star in the stones, one man of the empires' order would die.

But none of the last year mattered. Only this day, the day that would see the end of the suffering of the people and the end of the High Lord's reign. Allti let out a long breath and ignored the cold spring morning condensing it into a small cloud. The unnamed dapple

grey was armored and champing at the bit, more impatient to storm the into war than any soldier on the field. A small smile flashed for a moment on Allti's face as he mounted the most famous steed in the known world. The rider spurred the stallion into a trot to the front line of his army. Each row he passed started to make a deep sound that grew with each sighting of the enormous horse and rider. By the time they reached the front to join the Spear, fifty thousand men chanted "Uuhoooh! Uuhoooh!" in unison. Across the battle field the Imperial Army of Dalelin remaining twenty thousand battle-hardened men, grizzled veterans of countless fights were shaken to their cores.

Allti nodded for the first banner to be raised. The chanting stopped and the sound of marching feet and hooves filled the plain. There was no turning back now.

The battle was a complete rout. The rebellion crushed the High Lord's forces by mid-day. The emperor's personal guard surrounded him and retreated back to a small but well-fortified outpost five miles behind the lines.

Everyone in the rebel army knew it could only be truly over when the High Lord was dead, preferably by Allti's sword. They continued their march to the outpost. They brought no siege weapons with them, seeing no need. The High Lord's refuge could be surrounded for as long as it would take to kill the Imperial Guard, either by thirst or hunger. No need to lose any more men on a defeated army. They only needed to keep the last of the empire from escaping.

Before the rebels could settle in and organize shifts to watch the outpost, the main gate opened just enough for one man to come out. It was an officer, shed of his armor, hands held open at his sides. The move stunned those outside into silence.

The officer asked Allti to come forward. The gathered men parted as the imposing figures of horse and rider answered the request. Allti dismounted and approached the unarmed man.

In a voice projected like only an officer could, the man of the empire issued a challenge. In exchange for the free passage for the remains of the imperial army the High Lord would meet Allti in one hour in front of the gates for single combat. A cheer rose from the rebels. Allti smiled. How could he say no?

At the appointed time the gates opened again. Murmurs spread through the crowd as this was the first many had actually seen the High Lord. His appearance was striking. Wearing a sleeveless jerkin, leather breeches and boots, he stood shorter than Allti, but broader and thicker of muscle. His bare arms were crisscrossed with scars, standing out brightly on his sun darkened skin. He walked forward in smooth strides and stared at his opponent with intense and impossibly blue eyes. More scars could be seen under the stubble of his closely shorn head, the only hair on his face was a grey-white goatee, neatly trimmed. In his right hand he held his baton, an object he was never seen without. On his right side hung an ax, its handle through a brass ring on his belt, a small metallic clink emphasizing his every step. As was his way, he wore no adornments.

If one had not known who he was they would have never guessed him as an emperor.

He stopped at the center of a large semi-circle that had formed around the front of the palisade walls. Allti stood there waiting for him. They stared at each other for what felt like hours when the High Lord spoke. His voice carried unnaturally far for every warrior to hear.

"Today it ends. There will be no more rebellion. No more questioning of my rule. You will be reminded, in the strongest way, I rule here and I am eternal."

The crowd briefly stood in stunned silence. A crushed ruler and army and still the High Lord carried on as if he was their master. A roar of laughter erupted from the throng. The two combatants continued to stare at each other. Neither man smiled.

The High Lord grabbed his baton with both hands. With a twist of the handle he pulled a long blade out of the end of the baton. He turned the blade and with another twist, rejoined the two halves, creating a short spear.

Allti slid his own blade from its scabbard. Everything had led to this. He held his sword in front of him and pointed it at the man who had been too afraid to face him two years ago but he would not take anything for granted.

A step forward and then to the side was his first move. The High Lord stood still for a moment and then lunged at Allti faster than any man had ever seen. Allti's helmet flew off his head, forced

up by the High Lord's blade as it went from under the young man's chin through the top of his skull. Allti stood ridged for a moment then came crashing down on his back.

The High Lord spoke again.

"Here is your rebellion."

He threw his spear aside and pulled out his ax and raised it over his head. As it crashed down on Allti's chest, it shattered the blue stone to dust.

The victorious warrior stood straight, scanning the rebel army.

"Archers!" he yelled.

At that command the walls of the outpost fell revealing thousands of archers that had not been there before. The now familiar voice boomed again at the stunned masses.

"Before you stand ten thousand archers each with thirty arrows. Enough to kill every one of you. The rumbling you now feel is the footsteps of one hundred thousand men marching this way. Did you really think I have ruled for hundreds a years just to fall to the likes of you? Some of you will survive only so you can tell everyone you meet, the High Lord is your master and cannot be defeated. I suggest you run."

The rebel army stood frozen until the sound of ten thousand arrows filled the air.

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A nameless dapple grey stallion came out of the forest to an unnatural mound. Riding the horse was a warrior with only a few days



growth of hair on his scalp, barely covering up a multitude of scars. He stroked the grey-white hair on his chin as he approached. Blue eyes looked straight ahead at the stone archway jutting from the man-made hill. The huge mount pulled a two-wheeled cart behind him. On it the unmistakable form of a man wrapped in cloth. Beside the corpse lay ancient armor and sword.

The High Lord stopped the horse at the stone entryway and dismounted. As soon as he hit the ground he went back to the cart. He put the large body on his right shoulder with the ease of lifting a child. With his left hand he grabbed the leather strap that held the armor in one package.

Under the archway he didn't even have to break his stride as the back wall of stone moved out of his way. He gently set down the armor and Allti's lifeless shell. The sword was put on the altar and the wood panel replaced. Next, the armor was neatly arranged back on top of the altar. With surprising reverence he placed the body of the fallen hero in a crypt behind the altar. He paused for a moment with his hand on Allti's chest.

"Rest well until I need you again, my friend," was the whisper that echoed in the domed room.

The High Lord stood and waited a while in the resting place of the once believed savior. Memories of the long ago times he had let Allti back into the world came to the front of his mind. Building up the people's hope only to crash it down had been an effective way of maintaining order and control in his land. In the long term it

actually saved more lives that would have otherwise perished in small, silly uprisings. To be sure, there were easier ways to accomplish the same thing, but a man had to have his fun, didn't he?

A long sigh came from the immortal warrior as he turned and left the room, the stones sealing themselves up behind him.

Outside he detached the cart from his faithful destier. He reached into a pocket and took out an apple and a knife, sliced the apple and gave half to his mount. Once back in the saddle he leaned over the horn and patted the muscled neck of the stallion.

"As soon as we clear the forest and get to open ground, I'll let you run. Just be patient." A snort was the reply.

A grin broke out on the High Lord's face as he rode back in amongst the trees.

"Someday I should really give you a name."

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