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Knightspeak

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By

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For Rotnodwip Orvik,

A great admirer of fantasy novels

Four factions shall dwell forth,
Two in the south, two in the north,
Power shall be what they seek,
Knights shall rise up to the evil
That make orcs shudder and dragons meek,
The power of the undead under a devil.
A glory to enjoy, a lord to raise, a dawn to break,
A piece to find, shall a warrior join of knowledge's sake;
Come forth the warrior! Come forth the bane
Of kingdoms doomed and lands conquered,
Of fields on fire, and dragons unbound,
Come forth the warrior! Savior of souls,
Come forth the king! Finder of stones;
For days gone by and past the curtain of light,
Knights and fights and demons and all the might,
Come join us against the treacherous blight
That will bury our sorrows and take back the night.
The winds of fate shall soon be blown,
The sands of time are falling down;
Four factions versus the unholy bloom
That shall bring to Emenecoria, the gift of doom.

From **Tales Of A Thousand Years**

The *Tales of a Thousand Years* is one of the rarest relics known to humankind, resting in the hands of Frijon Urleksed, one of the trusted advisors to King Utheros the Second. Particularly due to the request of Nikneferon, one of the Seven Council's wizards, the book had been retrieved from its restful position deep in the cryptic library of Gondelin.

Hama

Human

The night's cold winds drifted away in the western direction, cutting off the draughts and refilling them with a new, cold sense of humor.

Hama and his consulted friend, Prejin, were two of the hundreds of passers-by who witnessed the first hints of a long, harsh winter stirring up ahead.

Nikneferon had warned him not to dress like the sweet, old, warm summers. But people seldom obeyed the retired wizard's advice or commands. During King Utheros' reign, he had been a welcome visitor to Gondelin's Castle. But one of his healing potions had failed. This particular potion was handed over to the king as a bottle of blue-red waters. At night, when the king had returned from his royal throne to his elaborate quarters, he took a swig from the transparent glass bottle – to satisfy his thirst. But the drops of liquid had burnt his tongue instead.

The wizard had to spend five years in jail trying to figure out his mistake in the previous concoction. Then it struck him! He had forgotten to add the main key ingredient – Honeybrew's finest mead. After he was set free again, 'Feron sought two of his apprentices and gave them a small, but important,

quest: to bring a bottle of mead from Honeybrew, a trading town just ten miles away from Gondelin.

And so there they were – Hama and Prejin – the two apprentice squires who were walking along the Road of Eagle’s Peak. The century-old road had been used for transport of all sorts of goods. The pattern of stone-cold, hard-as-steel stones randomly repeated amidst the softer patches of wet mud.

Hama’s father had once boldly told him that in his days, every paved slab of stone that was set in the road had been made of a very hard rock. But erosion had weathered all the glory away, leaving behind remnants of the past. At some muddy slabs, tufts of grass sprang out to breathe in the cool nightly air.

Beneath the cloudless sky, revealed by the light of all the 398 stars and the full moon, the Road of Eagle’s Peak ran stiff as a goblin-forged sword.

There were no goblins now. Not here, not in the peaceful sanctuary of the kings. Perhaps they lived in caves, far away in the distant Blue Hills in the west.

Hama wondered how long it had been since the last legion of goblin blacksmiths had set foot in the kingdom of Gondelin.

A horse cart nearly rammed right into Hama’s knee and wobbled off behind them.

‘These roads aren’t straight,’ he thought. If King Utheros had heard the comment, two knights armed with steel longswords would’ve been on his trail by now. He turned towards his friend.

“Hey Prejin, how long has it been since we left for Honeybrew?”

Prejin scratched his head.

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t we have arrived by now?” he stopped a nearby mule cart carrying hay and asked the driver, “How far is Honeybrew from here?”

“Honeybrew, huh?” the bald, bearded farmer squinted off towards the north. He was dressed in brown roughspun and ragged robes. “Well, if the old roads be true, there’s the ‘Brew in all the glory!” he pointed a bony finger to the direction the two squires were heading.

“Thanks a lot, sir.”

Hama and Prejin broke into a brisk jog.

The sought-after center of trade was just half a mile away. Seeking the distant town gave them hope to continue the mission.

Smoke wafted from houses’ chimneys. Every house almost looked the same: brick-tiled roofs that sloped downwards, cobbled walls with a mixture of stone bricks, wooden doors cut and shaped by rough hands, iron bars in the windows.

From the nearest inn, the squires could hear a merry tone of music playing. The crowds of people on the road became a lot denser as the squires inched closer to the trading town.

As they got closer, they could hear an argument between two highly-respected people. Crowds

gathered round the tavern, eager to listen. Stalls and shops were bursting with items for sale. Food, weapons, armor, shields, swords, hammers, axes, anvils, bows, arrows, crops, vegetables, fruits, cakes, and clothes were just some of the wonders of Honeybrew.

But the principal attraction was the best quality mead produced by the meaderies. Each inn was flooded with people trying out different flavors.

From a two-storeyed inn, named 'The Shallow Sea', a man brought out his mouth outside an open window and vomited a sticky mass of yellowish ale.

"Death to Utheros!" the man was clearly a drunkard. Being drunk was his passion, it seemed. He brought out more throwup and resumed drinking from a tankard of ale.

"If this is the condition of a town," Prejin asked Hama on the way to the 'Purple Whiskers', the inn mentioned by Nikneferon. "I wonder what a city would look like."

It was quite unusual for those two to see so much chaos, hear and experience noise pollution, and to even sniff the dirt from the hazy smoke that covered the town like an invisible blanket.

Back at their village, it was much peaceful and quiet. But here in this town, it was madness. Folly. Chaos.

The steel stone road turned into a muddy cobblestone cart track, which diverged into multiple paths, lanes and alleyways crammed between the

aging brick-tiled and cobble-walled buildings. A gigantic maze of streets.

To supplement the faint moonlight, oil lanterns hung at every shop, stall, inn, house, tavern and corner, illuminating the place with an ochre hue that bathed the blocks in the hopes of the people being able to see as clear as daylight. But even the burning flames of the sun couldn't defeat the matching opponent – darkness.

Prejin heard some glass shattering and a man cursing in the harshest of Orchish tongues. He peered inside the 'Polyoak's Patch' and saw a mob gathering round a round table, upon which two wrestlers tried to smother each other. The innkeeper handed out a tray of mugs of beer to the most excited fans.

"Havin' quite a night, righ'?" the innkeeper grinned at Prejin for a bit before continuing his duty.

The duo turned to a lane and stopped in front of a single-floor inn. Hama glanced at the wooden sign, painted in purple with silvery text shining off the oil lantern hung from a lamp post – now covered by a thin sheet of dust.

"Is this the place?" Hama didn't recall the place much. He rarely went out of his village for visiting neighboring towns and holdfasts.

"Yes, I think this is it," Prejin unsheathed his hidden blade. For five years he had been working with the Sand Eagles, an agency of vigilantes that sought out possible assassins to hire. Enizo Mefici and Korles Anos had taught him well enough on how to use

weapons. The half-meter of bitter steel had gone cold with frost. The chilling enchantment was still active.

It was deemed a punishable offense for any squire to wield or own weapons before reaching the stage of knighthood. Nonetheless, Prejin was a young man who'd rather chase after danger.

Hama knocked on the doubled doors, but it was unlocked, strangely. Darkness crept up inside like a blanket of death, allowing no light to enter. He was confused. The old wizard had mentioned this exact place for collecting the ingredients.

"Wait a minute!" Prejin reached out into the darkness with his hand. The darkness seemed to melt away in a puff of black smoke, instantly. And inside, the room lit up with a pure white glow.

"Sorry to disturb you, my fellows, but may I enter first?" a voice suddenly interrupted them.

Both squires turned to face the newcomer. He was a bearded human with bluish-grey robes and a crooked brown wizard's hat. His arms were crossed beneath the loose long sleeves. A friendly smile was on his face, with his eyes glistening with knowledge. He seemed to wear knowledge as a badge of high rank.

"Wh-who are you, sir?" Hama lowered Prejin's hand, still clutching the hidden blade. The old man didn't reply.

He took out a long thin piece of wood (it looked more like a branch of a dark oak) and aimed it at the

glowing door. He gestured at the two squires to move aside.

The old man looked like a wizard by trade, but his actions were similar to a warrior. But his appearance was more of a king. Who could he be? Another wizard?

He paced slowly towards the room with the wand held at arm's length. He muttered some words and yelled out a spell.

"Thuponikas Shomongous!" the change in his voice was astonishing. The friendly, happy tone had turned into a commanding one. From the tip of the wand, a spark of red energy bolted into the room and burst like a firecracker.

The bright white light died down to a yellowish hue spread out from the ceiling inside. Smoke hissed and a smell of burnt leather entered everyone's nostrils.

"You may come in now," the wizard allowed them in.

Hama and Prejin found the source of the burning smell – an overgrown rat-like creature had been roasted like minced beef.

"Let me take that," the wizard carefully lifted the corpse and dropped it into an empty bucket in the corner. After he was finished, he dusted his hands together and sat on the chair behind his desk.

"So, how can I help you?" the old man studied each squire and leaned closer. "Is it any potion you want? Any special brew? Or something vintage? How about a beer?"

“We’ve been sent by Nikneferon to collect some of the finest Honeybrew mead,” Hama answered and took out small, red bag of coins and laid it on the wood-carved table. “I hope this would suffice.”

“Hmm... Honeybrew mead?” the wizard turned behind him and examined the rows and columns of vials and stacks of barrels and casks full of drinks. “I think I’ve got a barrel or two around here somewhere.”

While the wizard busily searched around for the mead, Hama took his time looking at his current environment.

From the ceiling, a bronze chandelier hung about ten feet above their heads, casting light from its blazing candles. To the left-hand-side of the two squires, a bookshelf was crammed with books of all sizes. From tiny, thin paperbacks to huge, bulky hardcovers and leather-bound volumes; every book was written by the end of the last decade and had been neatly arranged in arrays. To the right-hand-side, some cauldrons bubbled and frothed with liquids of strange colors. One contained a blue liquid with white swirls. One had violent bubbling and frothing from a red tinge. One even contained a colorless liquid with lime green droplets floating and sinking and floating in a convection cycle. And the smell from those ‘potions’ were a mixture of some exotic spices mixed with garlic and sugar.

When Hama looked at his leather boots, he found an ornate carpet spread out beneath him.

“Oh, I’ve got it here... somewhere...” the wizard wasn’t making much progress. Partly it was because of his short-sighted vision; partly it was due to too much strain while working late into the night, spending hours alone, thinking about rare magic and taking his own notes among his personal collection of books.

“Oh, yes, there we are! There. A gallon of Honeybrew mead. How much do you actually need?”

“Um.. we’ll just take a pint.”

“Oh, no, no! Nikneferon was one of my old friends. He deserves more than just a single pint of this brew. I’d have given it to you for free. Here, take this entire cask for your master,” the wizard smiled with all his heart as he handed the wooden cask to Prejin. “By the way, why does he need mead at this time of the year?”

“He’s making potions,” Hama replied back.

“Potions, is he?” the wise old man stroked his beard.

“Could you bring me news about your master from time to time? My name is Rondellof. I was once a sworn protector of the realm. Until the old king was assassinated. So sad...”

Hama suspiciously glared at Prejin for a quick moment.

They both didn’t think the timing was right for hearing such words of sorrow. They walked backwards and made for the open doors.

“Okay, Mr Rondellof, maybe we should leave now. Our master’s waiting.”

“Sure... sure... Just drop by my place anytime for a free drink,” the wizard stood up from the chair. Every bone in his body cracked and each tendon contracted as he got to the double doors to bid them away. “Goodbye! And take care now; I hear the roads aren’t as safe as they once were.”

The doors slammed shut as soon as they both stepped out of the so-called ‘inn’ which seemed more like a storage cellar or a study for a scholar. Even the fire on the oil lantern’s wick was extinguished.

Now the darkness was around them again.

Highly-educated scholars had once walked beneath the stars. But most had fled to Eldron during an age of chaos – a time period that haunted every living creature – against the Orchish invasions. The Orc kingdoms couldn’t succeed in bringing the kingdom of Utheros to ruin. A league of powerful mages and paladins had helped remove the stain of devilry away from the sacred foundations of Gondelin.

If only the paladins knew about the current condition of these lands! Let alone sacredness, had the kingdom any good left? Knights no longer fought thieves; they themselves became thieves at the dead of the night and stole villagers’ gold, sheep and household items. In short, Gondelin had become a terrible place to live in.

Hama thought about these subjects as he and his partner traced their footsteps back to the main streets. Prejin hefted the wooden cask like a bale of

hay on his shoulder. The weight of the treasured mead didn't seem to bother him much.

They arrived at a trading center for spices. They didn't need to look at the inventory of the shops. All they had to do was breathe in the natural fumes to feel the plant material running down their windpipe. The usual hubbub of customers and traders argued, talked and bargained about the goods available for sale.

Cold, rushing winds blew over the people and toppled lightweight objects over. Oil lamps swayed and danced in accordance to the merry tune of a nearby harpist and piper.

Hama searched around for his bag of coins. When he failed, he suggested that he had left the bag back at the 'Purple Whiskers'.

"Let me go and get it back," he tried to convince Prejin to follow him but couldn't. He offered a 50-50 offer to the distribution of the money.

"No, no! I'm not going back to that stranger's sanctum!" Prejin brought the cask down to the ground with a *thud*. "That wizard is a creep. He makes me feel nervous for some reason."

"Fine. Then I'll go by myself. But give me your blade first!"

"Here. Take it. I don't need it anymore," Prejin handed him his hidden assassin-tier blade. "Now don't come back for a reward from Master. I'm going back to the castle to claim my own gold."

Hama watched Prejin lift the cask back up to his shoulders and let it rest there. Then Prejin turned south and was walking along the road of Eagle's Peak.

Eagle's Peak was the enormous mountain that shed its shadow over Gondelin's Castle. Its namesake road connected the town of Honeybrew to the rural villages.

With his nose, Hama tasted onion, garlic, cinnamon, clove, mint, oregano, basil, paprika, nutmeg, cardamom, and many other sought-after spices whose names he had read in a book called 'The Wayner Plants', compiled by a philosopher who was an expert in studying plants and their uses. Hama couldn't recall the name of the philosopher though. All his mind thought about now was the pile of fortune lying on Rondellof's desk.

He knew that the wizard said he wouldn't charge any purchases. All he had to do to pinch the gold coins was to make up an excuse to grab them.

Finally, after dodging another mule cart, a drunkard's spit, and an angry scribe's quill, Hama retraced his steps back to the 'inn'.

He wasn't sure whether to knock or to kick the door open. Everything seemed as lifeless as it was before. Not a single sign of life was to be seen, heard, smelled or felt.

To get rid of the uneasy sensation, he unsheathed his blade and posed to strike. With the blade's fastenings and belt secured to his left wrist, he stretched out his

right arm and knocked with his fist. The dark oaken doubled doors echoed like a hollow boulder.

He tried opening the doors inwards but they didn't budge. He pressed his body up against the wood and pushed. With both hands, he pushed. But nothing happened.

'That's weird,' he thought to himself. 'A little while ago the door was free as an oiled gear. But now, why is it refraining to open?'

A person cleared their throat behind him. Hama turned to face who it was.

It was the wizard, Rondellof, again. But something was wrong. He wasn't smiling that friendly smile anymore. Instead, he was frowning. His wand in his hand.

"Well, well, what are you up to, lad?" the wizard used his left hand to throw a charm onto his wand. The wand began to grow longer and longer, till it became a staff. "Hadn't I told you to return back to your master?" He threw another sparkly charm onto the staff, turning it pearl-white. The top tip of it twisted around a shiny, red diamond-shaped ruby. "Perhaps now the time has come for me to show you my true form."

He held the staff high, one-handedly, and dropped it down to the earth with a *slam*. The ground cracked where the bottom tip had touched.

“T-there’s no need, sir. No need!” Hama didn’t want to see any more of the wizard’s revelation. “All I need is my bag of coins, sir. That’s all I need.”

But the wizard wasn’t listening. His eyes turned fully white with power. His energy glowed white throughout his body. His dirty robes fell away to reveal a shade of white light so bright, Hama had to squint to look at him. His entire body was full of light. Night had become day. Only his face, buried amidst tufts of hair, and his hands clutching the staff, was visible.

“You’ve made a big mistake, my boy. Very big, indeed!” the wizard pointed the blood-red ruby, shimmering with energy, at the squire. “Azadon Kezaladeen!”

A bolt of blue charge headed towards Hama.

“Noooo!” Hama tried to stab the wizard with his blade, but all his memories turned to shadow as his soul was blown off by a breeze.

Nikneferon

Human

He'd been trying out new recipes for new potions again. The way his back ached told him the truth of it. The old wizard, Nikneferon, had once been called a legend, one of the greatest wizards that had ever lived their bountiful lives in the entire continent of Emetria.

Although once accused of a failure in making a health potion for King Utheros the First, he'd still kept his laboratory equipment at the cellar of his tiny hut.

Wizards kill enemies when there are. Wizards make charms and enchanted items when there's a need. Wizards take part in wars when there are. Wizards can do anything they like. But all the wizards of this world, great and small, had to spend more than half of their lifetimes seeking new recipes for potions.

Generally, an average wizard could remember up to 2000 important recipes for their basic survival. Knowledge of their lore and tales were a birthright to all wizards in the province of Azgamdore. And yet, every single job or activity of the wizards were monitored by the High Elves of Eldron.

Previously, all the potionmaking and research was mainly handled by the talented alchemists. But the age of chaos had deprived Azgamdore from the

number of alchemists. There were still a few more left in the wild, seeking peace and meditation and living their lives in hermitage. Even the wizards had no idea where could these geniuses be hiding.

Some truth stays hidden for centuries, millennia, or even, forever. Some truths are lost and local storytellers make up false fables and events that never took place. Not here. Not in Gondelin.

Nikneferon sighed and got up from the wooden three-legged stool and arranged papers on his desk.

The cellar was bigger than his bedroom. Places built under the ground have plenty of flexibility for space. The walls were covered with niches cut into the rock to serve as shelves. In some niches, candles burned with bright yellow flames. Candles weren't much better than oil lanterns, but they were cheaper. Candle wax lasted longer than the fuel for oil lamps, even for equal volumes. Within most other niches, books of every culture, subject, region and size took care of the empty spaces. A quarter of the niches were also fully stacked and crammed with scrolls.

Four tables surrounded the single stool at the middle. On top of these tables, stood a range of papers, quills, inkpots, and candle wax.

Majority of the cellar was covered in wax.

Nikneferon was a man grown old, but he still had the qualities of an energetic athlete, like an everlasting hint of summer during a long winter. Such characteristics were rarely found in people nowadays.

The wizard's age had gone well past retirement. The only reason he lived was because of the king's throne. Not the king who lived a life of luxury and ignored all the innovations of the new age, but his royal seat.

"Why the hell do we need any new inventions when there's a lifetime's worth of it in our realm?" was King Utheros' favorite excuse. But even though he was selfish, he knew how to run a nation. All he had to do was sprinkle some of the gold from his royal treasury and give it to the people to form an alliance with him. In case of any revolt, the king had plenty of allies to rely on.

Nikneferon pushed the western table aside and got out of his little 'sanctuary'. In fact, the four tables were accurately arranged according to the four directions. Each table contained maps and documentation of the regions in their respective direction. Whatever was the case, the southern table was always full of papers. It was the busiest desk.

"Damn those squires!" the wizard cursed their names several times before getting to the ladder that led up to a trapdoor – the only entrance and exit to the cellar. The ladder was composed of rope fibers. In his days, the price of wood was equivalent to the price of iron due to unusual tax policies.

Each step on the rope ladder brought cramps in his muscles. If he could get his hands on a health potion, all his handicaps could be easily cured. Just a single drop of the potion was all he needed.

He climbed back up to ground level.

Windows were drawn open, flooding his bedroom with streaming sunlight. Dust flakes were visible, floating freely above his bed. The trapdoor was located at one of the four corners of the hut, far from the door at the eastern side. A few wooden planks had been nailed into the spruce walls of the room, to be used as a shelf for storing tools. A heavy, brutal-looking battleaxe was hung, horizontally, atop two wooden blocks. A sword and a spiked mace also had positions leaning vertically against the wall, flanking a stone fireplace.

After Nikneferon finally set foot on the woolen carpet covering the earthen floors, he slowly laid the cover of the trapdoor down and closed it.

"If those two blockheads hadn't taken the bag of gold, I could've bought the mead myself from a local inn," he struggled to get to the bed and sat down. The view from the windows was splendid. Flowers bloom usually in springtime or in the summer; preservation enchantments in Nikneferon's garden allowed the plants to achieve them ever after.

He was nearly surprised when there was a sudden knock at the door.

"Oh, great! Let's see if it's my stupid squires!" he groaned and grumbled away about the nincompoops as he made his way to the door. There was one more wave of three more knocks before he unlatched the door and greeted the person standing outside.

It wasn't any of the squires. It was a hooded assassin, with his forsaken blade ready to stab the wizard.

“Hoh!” the wizard caught the aggressive assassin’s hand and blocked his hand from reaching further into his neck. “Hah!”

Nikneferon caught the other arm, as well, armed with a matching hidden blade. It wasn’t a welcome sight to see an assassin from the Sand Eagles brotherhood try to kill an old helpless man with cold-blooded steel. It was even more ominous to see an assassin who was skillful enough to wield a blade in each hand. Double-bladed assassins were considered as brave and glorious as the Knights of the Flowery Sea.

“Who are you? And by the name of Utheros, what business have you here?” the wizard strained to keep up with the opponent’s strength as he tried asking the first questions. “For the king and his kingdom’s sake, please stop!”

At the king’s word, the hooded man finally stopped the fight. He twisted his wrists inwards and the blades sneaked back into his sleeves of the greenish-grey cloak. Metallic components on the torso of the cloak gave it a luster, determining that it was brittle armor.

Nikneferon could breathe now. He was unarmed. He had forgotten both where he had kept his staff and also the spell which could locate and retrieve it.

“I’m Tokish, one of the elite charges of the Sand Eagles,” the hooded figure began introducing himself. “I’m from the Council. I’ve come in peace but had to test you to make sure whether you still served the nation or not. I’m sorry if I have offended you.”

“Good, good! Now an enemy becomes a friend and the dusk becomes dawn! I’ve never seen such strength in an assassin,” the wizard tried to control his shock and temper. Once, when he was young, back in the days of King Onodruin, before the age of chaos, Nikneferon was a valiant warrior wizard capable of madly slashing at hordes of enemies with a large battleaxe. The same battleaxe now rested upon his wall.

“Such strength isn’t easily acquired, Feron,” the assassin entered the hut. “Especially when the dragons from the East are coming in large numbers to devour any village or settlement they find in their path.”

“Dragons? Why’d there be any dragons flying in our skies?” the wizard was finding every moment of this talk, strange. “They had been put to sleep by the great arc mage and ruling wizard Azadnudur! I thought they were extinct!”

“Extinct? Never! Open your eyes, wizard. Here’s what I heard – the dragons from Vaak are fleeing. Fleeing!”

“Fleeing from what?” Feron was getting anxious now. If there was a powerful force that drove dragons from their own hideout, it meant danger. And he was getting the feeling that Tokish was more than just a mere assassin elite.

“Undead. Usurpers of the East,” Tokish just had to speak one word. He said five. One word was enough to give the old wizard a chilling shiver. Hearing the

four additional words made his face turn bloodless and his mind numb.

For a moment, a dark aura was formed in his bedroom. Right there. Right in the middle of Gondelin's Castle.

"And also not to forget an Orcish legion advancing from the west. Twenty of our best men keep the bay from the tides. But the Usurpers would impale them and shove their forces aside like a fly. That's why all able people are training hard to fight. Our scouts report a large battalion arriving at Axe Island, and are establishing a base there."

The wizard sank into deep thought. Never had he heard about the Undead crossing the Sea of Sickles. "Who are you? Tell me the truth of it. You don't address me as your elder. You call me by my name. My nickname! Only wizards of Eldron and of the Council know my true identity. Tell me, who you are."

The assassin's eyes lit up.

"So finally you've recognized me, my old friend!" he smiled as he drew out a white staff tipped with an emerald out of thin air. "I'm Bamir, the wizard of war. Surely no other ordinary wizard would be a match for me."

He held the staff up and tapped the floor gently. Then he transformed into his true self. A flowing green beard reached down to his belly button. His cloak turned into a blue robe with green patterns that looked like a forest of trees. His hair also had a green tinge and reached down to his waist. And atop his

head, a black wizard's hat appeared. It began twisting and rotating in curlicues.

"Hoom, hmm. Stop that, stupid hat!" he poked at his hat with the tip of his staff. When it didn't stop still, he roared a spell out and aimed the staff at his head. "Crisenythemum Corpartil!" A bolt of green energy hit the assassin wizard's forehead, sending him falling to the floor.

Feron chuckled as he lent a hand to lift Bamir up. "Ha, ha! If I'd not seen you do that since I was a youngster, you can have my head blown! Come, my friend, let's have a tea to our reunion!"

"No need, thank you. I'm not only a wizard of the arts of warfare! I can also do this," Bamir clicked his fingers and twigs began growing out of the wood in the walls. "I'm a master of plant magic and herbal healing powers," he clicked his fingers again to stop the twigs from growing. "Now let me use some traditional spells and get that ache off your body."

Nikneferon thought his friend was about to claim his soul, but instead, to his relief, he just used his staff to zap a healing spell at his age-worn body. The effect was instant; Feron could feel his arms and legs become strong as ever. No more cramps. No more pain. His friend had done it!

Then came another knock at the door.

This time, Bamir went to receive the guest. As he opened the door, a squire of about 20 years of age came staggering into the room and dropped at

Feron's feet. He was carrying a wooden cask of Honeybrew mead.

"Sir, master... I've brought to you," Prejin held up the cask. "The Honeybrew mead you asked for." He was quite out-of-breath. A fear had petrified most of his mind. His clothing was soaked wet with sweat. Some beads of perspiration still remained on his temples. "Master, you won't believe what I saw!"

Feron leaned close to his face. "Tell me."

"Last night, once we'd got the item you asked for, we were on our way homeward bound. But on the way, Hama said he'd left something back at the inn," he tried his best not to mention much detail. "So I left him and was about to leave the town, when I changed my mind and got back to fetch him. When I arrived, just before a corner in the street, I saw a bright white light and heard a zap. And there he was... tall, elegant and powerful... a wizard with a white staff tipped by a ruby. He'd zapped a spell at Hama. Hama's soul dissolved away like smoke, and only his ashes and the hidden blade I'd given him, remained. He was —"

Prejin's fear had reached his heart. His heart gave a quick jolt and his dead body fell to the floor.

Fear cuts deeper than swords. The words rang in both Bamir and Feron's minds as they watched the youthful man lay still on the woolen carpet. There was nothing the wizards could do now.

"Muzanthus!" Nikneferon finally recalled the spell for summoning his staff: same as everyone's white but tipped with a blue sapphire. But the tip wasn't wholly

sapphire. It was also part purple amethyst and part magenta garnet. The three colors of his staff's tip shimmered with the sunlight reflecting.

Together, the wizards Bamir and Feron put a 'fog of war' charm on the squire's body. Bamir inflicted a 'thornbush' charm at Feron's garden. They carried and kept the invisible body under the thornbush and went back inside the room to discuss about what Prejin had said.

"Prejin was a brave lad," Feron put Honeybrew mead into mugs and placed it on a round table for two. Bamir was adept at making furniture and objects out of wood. All he had to do was click his fingers and wait for a nearby tree's lumber to float midair and assemble themselves into wooden parts. Then he clapped his hands together, twice, to make the wooden pieces arrange themselves into meaningful shapes. He made a chair for himself and sat down.

"Yes, but all squires' words aren't to be trusted," Bamir didn't find Prejin's tale the least bit amusing. He had the habit of distrusting unknown people. "I bet that he must've drunk some of that stuff at an inn and began to hallucinate. Hmph!" he snorted as a mug of special Honeybrew mead was laid before him. "What is this stuff, anyway?" he inspected the brownish liquid with froth floating at the surface.

"That, Bamir, is the most exquisite brew you'll ever have tasted in your lifetime. Come on, give it a try," Feron himself sat on another chair and took a sip of the drink before gazing out the windows again. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

“Pardon me, Feron, but I have to tell you this: you’re the first person I’ve ever seen who finds death amusing!” he broke off into a grin. “So even if we have to believe that squire’s foolish talk, you’ll be the one explaining to me.”

“Well, you see, he’d seen some wizard with a red-tipped staff at the ‘Purple Whiskers’. Might that be Rondellof or Mortin. Both own red staves. One has ruby, one has philosopher’s amber. The lad seemed to apply that he’d seen a ruby one. And there’s only one person among the Council who owns such a staff. It’s Rondellof.”

“How can you be so sure?” Bamir’s mead was still untouched.

“Because he owns...” Nikneferon clutched at his throat. It was stuck. The mead had turned into a lump of stone. Steel stone. “H-help! Help!”

“What’s wrong? Choking?” Bamir instantly got off his chair in a flash and cast a healing spell with his staff. “Lithelife!”

A bolt of green energy hit the other wizard in his Adam’s apple, turning the stone back to a liquid.

Bamir got to Nikneferon to help him revive.

“That was a really close one! Just a moment too late and the Council would’ve declared a wizard dead!” Bamir assured him.

After his normal breathing was restored, Nikneferon turned to face him. “This is a very serious issue, my friend,” he retrieved his staff and the sword that was

leaning against the wall. "A wizard never tries to cause so much harm to his fellow companions. The Council must hear about this," then he spoke the last four words he thought he'd never have to use. "We have been betrayed."

Rondellof

Human

Dusk was breaking and the wolves were howling. But wolves rarely dared to sneak into the town's business workplace. Direwolves lived far away in the distant Blue Hills, where they hunted and stalked their prey.

The warmth of the sun was fading away as Rondellof shut the covers of a thick leatherbound book called 'The 55 Steps To Adept Pyromancy', by Winston Redfyre. The book was good. Mostly it was about starting fires and creating splash potions concerning fire. Every page contained something to do with fire, violence, and evil thoughts. If you could read the wizard's mind like a book, you'd find that the contents of both were no different.

His mind was made up for the preparations of the Dread Fleet, a huge array of Undead warships, frigates, galleys and transports vessels. The Dread Fleet was supposed to be settling down at Axe Island before commencing a mass invasion into the mainland.

He put the book back among its other brothers and sisters and family, before collecting some parchment and a quill. Why did he need an inkpot, when he could just apply an enchantment to the quill so it could

write without having to dip it into the pot again and again, wasting time and energy both? Rondellof laughed at the way other wizards would spend hours to write a simple letter, when it could be accomplished within minutes by the powers of sorcery.

The stuff of magic – mana – flowed through countless mages, witches and wizards alike. But only a few knew how to use it efficiently. Rondellof was one of the few.

He sat down at his desk and noticed another one of the overgrown rat-like creatures. “Damned critter spies!” he stood; his staff clutched by his hands. “Sending messages to the others, huh? Take this!” he aimed the ruby-tipped staff like a spear at the innocent-looking creature. “Thuponikas Shomongous!” the burst of red energy roasted it alive.

The rat gave out a tiny squeak before burning off. Rondellof was pleased to see improvement in his ‘flame charge’ spell.

He began working on his letter. But before he touched the tip of the enchanted quill with the dry parchment, he changed his mind. Why do it the ancient way? If he had to deliver a message, he could do it by magic.

He chanted, “Retroleagus Mororathetus,” as he slowly rotated the staff in a loop. When the loop was complete, he thrust his left hand’s palm forwards. “Haah!”

And a portal appeared. A shimmering portal, with the edges sparkling with a dark, unholy aura. The area within the perimeters of the portal displayed an image of purple water. Waves rippled out from its center, skimmed along the water and produced dark smoke every time a wave left the edges. New waves automatically generated to replace the previous ones. The process kept going on and on.

“Aha, I’ve done it!” Rondellof never tried this spell before.

As he slowly put his hand through the purple waters, it seemed to flow through his fingers like silk. The touch was icy cold. But the cold burned like fire on his knuckles. He withdrew his hand and resumed his chanting. The portal was nearly complete.

“Avelthos Vath!” he raised his staff high into the air and thrust it inside the portal. The portal gobbled it up like a hungry monster. “Ai, what’s this? Stop, portal!”

The portal didn’t obey. He himself was sucked into the world of shimmering darkness. He felt chills up his neck and down his spine. The aura was availing him.

For only a minute, Rondellof thought he was about to die. But he was one of the supreme wizards; all such wizards knew how to cheat death.

And after a minute, he landed on the deck of a ship.

An Undead frigate. Black, torn sails fluttered uselessly in the wind. A hundred skeleton oarsmen rowed with

black-painted, rotten wooden oars. Wooden plank boards were all that made up for the deck of the ship. One of the skeletons bowed low to pay his respects to Rondellof. A tattered grey rag was all that covered its exposed ribs. Its skull was strangely engulfed in a greenish flame. Crooked and rotting teeth on its jaw gave the skeleton a fierce look.

Undead travelled in wooden vessels, but the wood wasn't any ordinary wood, alone. Within the living material was a layer of reinforced obsidian. Wherever the Undead fleet travelled, a blight of death and decay was left in their trail.

"So, Monorg," Rondellof spoke forth to the skeleton. "How are things going onboard? Any news from afar?"

"No, m'lord," the skeleton stood back up and replied with chattering teeth. Its eyes were two dark holes sunk deep into the skull, with only two tiny pinpoints of green light for pupils. "We hail and sail from our temporary settlement at Doronto in the west of Vaak. The city was quite easy to capture. However, many of our archers lost their souls while invading Sigerto in the south. Both of the cities were rich in resources. But we mean to form another temporary settlement at Axe Island. Legend says that a thousand-year-old cave lies near the east coast, which may conceal a few hidden artefacts. Lord Arthagannon wants us to search for the Seal of Solm."

"Oh, that sounds like a brilliant plan. But there are some flaws, I must tell you! There are rumors about the dragons of the East awakening and fleeing from

their habitat. Normally, dragons would never stir from their endless sleep. The great arcimage Azadnudur the White had put a curse on them. Until a much more powerful force tried to summon them. A stronger, darker force that everyone fears!"

"Yes, but we believe the stronger, darker force refers to us! We are the Undead, stronger than ever. We are feared by all living matter! Oh great Rondellof, if your job here is complete, then please leave us be! We soulless demons require no assistance from a human wizard."

At the skeleton's harsh words, Rondellof realized what he was doing. But he couldn't help it. Rondellof allied with both friendly and hostile units. That was his duty. He supported neither Undead nor humans. All the other wizards of the Council had banished him from Gondelin, having to take refuge in Honeybrew.

"Retroleagus Moronathetus!" Rondellof chanted the portal spell. But the shimmering portal began to consume everything in its path.

Daniel

Human

Dubbed Sir Dancelot by the old king Utheros, Dan wasn't a proper knight by birth. Born as the son of a nobleman, Daniel had a mind made for fighting. Never cowering, never fearing, always valiant.

The morning was done when the summons called. Bells blared within Gondelin's Castle. Dan was having a peaceful sleep, dreaming about some beautiful princess from faraway lands.

The oaken door was creaking when he awoke from the noise of someone knocking constantly. Light streamed through the cracks in the ceiling. The king seldom checked the living conditions of how the royal knights lived in the barracks. Hence, the wooden shelter was all that Daniel could afford.

"Awaken, knights! There's a conflict outside the castle walls!" the caller pounded on the door. But suddenly, the pounding stopped and the caller's voice could be heard far off. "Alas! The dragon has entered Gondelin's Castle!"

With a quick jolt, Dan jumped out of bed. Dragons? What kind of madness was this? There had never been any dragons sighted in the kingdom of Utheros.

Sir Dancelot put on his special mithril-plated armor from a rack in the dusty corner. The armor was a gift

from the old wizard, Nikneferon. Then he picked up the longsword. A yard-and-a-half-long piece of regular iron, double-edged and required two hands to wield it. But this longsword had chopped off more than a dozen heads of village criminals. And still, the blade was as sharp as it had been when the iron was smelted and forged, and still sharp as it had been when it was first rubbed with a gritstone on the day the sword was born.

To Be Continued.