

4 Warlords, 2 Artifacts, 1 Destiny

The epic conclusion of both *The Vermillion Crown War* and *"To Restore the Empire."*

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For months the collected Elemental armies of the Troll Chieftain, Kossak Mageslayer, hounded the foul forces led by the Warlord Darq, a vampiric member of the Order of Vladd. Since clashing in Ashon Rye, the two warlords have spent the long summer in constant skirmish and combat, with Trolls, Elves, and Undead falling by the dozens to enemy spears, swords, and spellwork. At the shores of the mighty Roa Kaiten the two armies clashed again, with Kossak attempting to prevent Darq's crossing. While Kossak bloodied Darq considerably, Darq's forces were still able to cross the river before the Elemental warlord could stop them.

(Read more of *The Vermillion Crown War*)

Meanwhile, the renegade Atlantean warlord Raydan Marz, victor of the Battle of Ashon Rye, has had his own soldiers spend the summer harvesting prized magestone from the strip-mines at Ashon Rye. Now, with the fall leaves starting to turn, Raydan has taken a small band of warriors to quest for a mystical artifact that could help him preserve his beloved Empire from the corruptions of the new Lord Protector, Jeet Nujarek.

But before Marz could acquire the knowledge he needed about the whereabouts of the mystic Sphere of Jorandal from the scholar-monks at Glenn Cur, the notorious warlord Black Thorn, known throughout the Land for both her beauty and her daring, managed to fend off Marz and steal the pages for herself. As Black Thorn rode out of Glenn Cur victorious, Raydan Marz and his warhost were forced to follow her band west, through

embattled Fairhaven toward the borders of the country of Duncastor.

(Read more of To Restore the Empire)

The Globe of Jorandal: An ancient artifact rumored to have great magical powers. Some versions of the tavern stories talk about this legendary sphere having the capability to turn earth into gold. Other tales refer to the Globe as a creation of the gods, as if it is somehow capable of allowing its owner to control the "bones of the world".

Raydan Marz: A renegade Atlantean warlord questing for the Globe of Jorandal. Hated by the Empire, he has found an unlikely ally in the warlord Kossak Mageslayer. At a disadvantage after his loss at Glenn Cur, he will have to use all the resources at his disposal to defeat the Black Thorn at her own game.

Kossak Mageslayer: Champion of the Elemental League, Kossak has defeated all opponents he has encountered, save for one: Darq the Corrupt. Kossak has spent the summer chasing after the vampire prince. Now, after many fierce battles, Kossak must stop Darq once and for all, at any cost.

The Black Thorn: A warlord who constantly turns most situations to her advantage. The offer of alliance from Darq of the Necropolis Sect was something that she couldn't refuse. She is now one step ahead of Raydan Marz, and thus one step closer to where the Globe of Jorandal lies.

Darq the Corrupt: A member of the Order of Vladd, Darq is trying to get to a secret location where he can unlock the secrets of an artifact called the Vermillion Crown. While Kossak has nearly stopped him three times in recent weeks, the alliance with the Black Thorn should keep Kossak from gaining the upper hand.

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Hendraabi's Journal Entry:

Another full day of walking, and it feels like we're getting nowhere. My feet are sore, my stomach is rumbling, and my shoulders are getting rubbed raw from my pack straps. I think I'm starting to understand why a pack mule spends so much of its time being ornery.

Ahead of us lies the river that marks the border between Duncastor and Fairhaven. Somewhere between us and the Roa Kaiten are the Black Thorn's forces. Where they travel, we must follow if we're to have any hope of finding the artifact Raydan seeks. The Thorn has the monks' pages that detail how to find the Sphere of Jorandal, and as result she knows where she is going. We do not. All we can do is follow her trail, stop her when she finally makes a break for the artifact, and then nab it before she does.

Behind us is Glenn Cur, and very likely between us and that battle-torn town are a sizable number of very angry Fairhaven soldiers wanting our hides for kitbags. One of Raydan's scouts returned from patrol a few moments ago and said that things look grim for any chance of an organized retreat. There are just too many of them, she said, and too few of us.

But all is not lost. Sometimes, gifts can come in very large packages.

A cloaked emissary came through the trees just before sunset this evening, without sword or bow. He asked the first scout he met where he could find Raydan Marz. At first the young soldier started to tell him off, until he looked up into the taller man's eyes – and stopped. Swallowed. Turned pale. He politely told the stranger to wait while he took his request to Marz, and then turned and ran as fast as he could to where his commander rode the line.

Twenty minutes later, under the canopy of a few red-leafed squirrel-oaks, and under the scrutiny of a half-dozen of Raydan's finest crossbowmen, the stranger acknowledged Raydan by name, and then removed the cowl covering his face. What I first thought to be a very big man, was indeed not a man at all – but a Troll of massive size and strength. It was none other than the Troll Warlord Kossak Mageslayer, hero of the Elemental League, battler for the Vale and Ashon Rye. Commander. Champion. Slayer of Rabahn of the Black Grasses at the gates of the Citadel of Luxor.

Raydan looked down at the Troll's hands, knowing well that to look full onto a Troll's eyes can incite rage. Marz politely asked Kossak what he wanted. Kossak's reply was simple.

"You," he said, and smiled in such a menacing way that Raydan's crossbowmen nearly riddled the Troll with bolts.

"Me?" Raydan said, surprised. "We're enemies, as far as I know."

"Not any more," Kossak said with a laugh, and began to lay out his plan.

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Borderline

Soft vellum, decorated with gold leaf around the edges. Line after line written in flowing script. Not one stray mark. Not one error. These pages might have been works of art, once.

Before the Black Thorn ripped them from the monks' histories.

She had folded them back into her pack, creasing them for the dozenth time. The pages were already beginning to look travel worn, with corners dog-eared or shredded. Hardly the common dream of a treasure map, but if we could believe all the clues then these pages would lead us to the Radiant Sphere. To the Globe of Jorandal.

"Mind if I have a look?"

Prince Aaron, from his bedroll. Dawn was brightening the eastern horizon, and Nadia had thought the noble-born still asleep. He wasn't even facing our direction. The prince rolled over, eyes alight with energy and no small amount of anger. He was about to start something.

"Stow this with my gear, Lootan." The Black Thorn handed me her pack. I've known her long enough to recognize the warning signs. A slight flush to the tips of her ears. The hardening around her violet eyes. The mix of man and elven blood in her had produced a rare beauty, sure enough. But there was always something more lurking there. Something feral and dangerous. I stepped away from her as Aaron Verrick, crown prince of Fairhaven, untangled himself from his blanket and took my place. Still, I did not go far. Killing the crown prince would be a dangerous move, and Nadia did not always think things through as clearly as she might when the anger is on her.

"You have something to say to me, Aaron?" she asked.

I could tell that the prince had been building up his nerve for some time. Perhaps even before the battle at Glenn Cur, but certainly in the two days since. "I've wondered more and more about what happened at the abbey," Aaron said. "You packaged off the monks - to keep them safe, you said - and you personally led the defense of its walls. All right, we did as my father tasked us to do. But since then, there have been your secret little meetings and our straight-line path for the western border of Fairhaven. And you

haven't released any of the troops you commandeered before the battle. What does that say to you, Nadia?"

She shrugged. "That I am fulfilling my obligations."

"To my father, or to yourself?"

"Why not both?" she asked.

Aaron was no one's fool, though I have to admit I had considered him far enough under Nadia's spell to remain oblivious at least one more day. Now he threatened our entire position. His hard words roused a few nearby cavalymen, who tensed and readied themselves for any outcome. I saw that Tyrsis was no longer breathing with deep, Draconum snores, which made me feel better. I also kicked a small pebble in the direction of my Khamsin brother, Derrik. It struck him in the face and he blinked awake.

"If you can explain to me how threatening our fragile peace with Duncastor would benefit Fairhaven, I might believe that." Aaron crossed arms over his chest, obviously ready to push the Thorn for some kind of final answer. "We have a large army massing near the border, too close to the city of Tor Lendex for King Wellum's comfort I'm sure."

Tor Lendex. The very city the monks' histories pointed at as the Globe's resting place.

"Are you that worried about the comfort of King Wellum, Aaron? After all, wasn't Duncastor once part of your father's kingdom? Didn't your ancestors rule all the way to the Tibersus?"

"They did," he admitted. "But unless you have received a secret missive from my father, I do not think he was planning on recovering that land in this lifetime. So I have to ask, Nadia, which way do you intend to ride today?"

"West," she said easily, as if it did not matter.

"West." Aaron nodded. "Straight for the border and Tor Lendex. I have asked for your explanation, Thorn, now I demand it. Why are we riding at Duncastor as if you mean to invade?"

"I always have my reasons, Aaron Verrick. You are not privy to them all." Her words were clipped short, but I heard the amused grin peaking through in her voice. The Black Thorn welcomed this confrontation. Was enjoying it, in fact. Which meant she had already set her plans in motion, or knew something that no one else did.

Or, as she had asked, why not both?

"But in answer to your question, we ride west because there is better ground for battle." Before he could respond, she asked, "What would you say if I told you that Duncastor has already sent a small army over the border, and it is perhaps a league or two away right now?"

Aaron frowned, at once cautious. "Are you telling me that, Nadia?"

As if in answer, a warning horn sounded from one of the pickets we had set out toward the west. Its long, low wail shattered the rest of any remaining sleepers. Not that there were many left by then.

Nadia simply smiled. "I may have been a bit off on the timing," was all she said.

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Hendraabi's Journal

Kossak's sizable force should join with us soon, likely before we cross into Duncastor. Any chance that we had to get across the river unnoticed are likely going to be dashed by the appearance of the Nam de'Elvan, Centaur Outriders, and Troll Artillerists. Before, we were just a fighting force. Now, we are the measure of an army.

But the Black Thorn appears to have her own advantage as well. For Kossak's enemy, a warlord that Marz already faced in the bloody fighting at Ashon Rye, is none other than Darq the Corrupt of the Necropolis Sect. Kossak has chased the vampire warlord the whole way from Ashon Rye down and across Fairhaven's lands, fighting battle after battle against Darq's undead host. From what we have learned from our scouts, the Black Thorn has just been visited by a column of undead led by none other than Darq himself. Just as Kossak has joined Raydan Marz, Darq may have just joined with the Black Thorn.

Nothing is ever easy.

While Kossak's warriors have been able to win some decisive battles through the last couple of weeks, there just haven't been enough Elementalists to make up for the growing numbers of undead that Darq has been collecting. But when Darq added a column of Atlantean soldiers to his force, it tipped the scales in the Sect's favor. Kossak knew that his army would never be strong enough to stop Darq entirely. So Kossak came looking for an ally, figuring that the outlaw Marz was his best bet.

Raydan has accepted Kossak's aid, and the two have agreed to work together for a time until both of their objectives are achieved. For Kossak, the defeat of Darq. For Marz, the defeat of the Black Thorn and the acquisition of the Sphere of Jorandal. I feel that in time, if Raydan manages to win the artifact for himself, there may come a dangerous time where Kossak may covet Raydan's tool for his own use. But we shall see.

The Elves and Trolls in Kossak's host seem pleasant enough, but they have an edge of hostility towards us that is easily perceptible. I wasn't there for the battle at Ashon Rye, but I do know that many of the Elemental warriors that Kossak brought with him to the magestone mine died there in battle with Marz's warhost. The only thing that saves Marz from an elven archer's arrow now is the fact that Darq did far more damage to Kossak at Ashon Rye than Marz - and then even went so far as to resurrect Kossak's dead Troll-kin in order to taunt the League warlord with his the shambling horrors.

Now we follow the Black Thorn in earnest, not attacking until Marz is sure that the master thief is about to unearth the artifact. Without the pages from the libraries of Glenn Cur, we are forced to meekly follow until an advantage comes along. Kossak says that the Black Thorn and the vampire lord have old histories together, and that their dark alliance may make a difficult enemy to defeat. But with the renewed confidence and vigor that Raydan's troops are showing since we joined up with Kossak's forces - and the impressed whistles the Nam de'Elvan make when they see the Storm Golem up close - I think we once again have a chance at victory.

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Dark Allies

Who was it that first said, 'Better the devil you know than the demon you don't?' I don't think that man was thinking of the Order of Vladd when he said it.

The alarm had warned us to prepare for battle, and I've never seen Fairhaven soldiers move so quickly. All of them trying to stuff their packs and roll their beds and otherwise do everything they normally would have to do to break camp. The Black Thorn's people know better. We simply picked up our weapons and left everything else lying on the ground. If we won the day, there would be time enough after. If not, it's better not to have anything weighing you down when you're in flight for your life.

Despite the chaos, Fairhaven's people managed to form a ragged line of battle before the first squad of prisoners broke through the brush and straggled into camp, hands laced over their heads. One of our pickets. A second trio stumbled in a moment after, also bereft of weapons and armor. They had a haunted look in their eyes, and only one name on their lips.

Darq.

Of the Order of Vladd.

Damn.

That was the first word to jump to my mind. I heard worse, standing there, my fuser powdered and packed and ready to blow the head off the first soldier - Duncastor or Necropolis Sect - to step forward from the treeline. Except that the Uhlrik Charger which rode out carried his sword at formal salute with a scrap of white cloth tied to its end. A Fell Reaper followed, his scythe exactly the same. Then a squad of Nightstalkers led out a Bone Golem. It squatted there in the shadows of the forest while further back we could just see the ranks of undead, swaying in cadence to some silent song only they could hear.

Darq the Corrupt rode out on his own Nightmare, one of the skeletal horses with a mane and tail of cold-burning flames and eyes that stared back from the infernal regions. The nospheratu prince remained cloaked in shadow, even after passing into the dawn-lit clearing. His armor seemed to radiate darkness, challenging all natural laws, and he rode up to our line alone without any fear that the weapons of a hundred warriors were trained upon

him.

"Well met, Nadia os Darras."

The Black Thorn stood at the center of the line, between Prince Aaron and Tyrsis, blade naked and pistol held at her shoulder. "Greetings again, Darq," she said with exaggerated sweetness. "How's the wound?"

The vampyr's eyes gave away nothing, but was that the slightest shift of discomfort? And os Darras? Darq knew the name of Nadia's mother? I've been with Nadia for a long time, and we've run into the vampyr on previous occasions, but I would not have called those social engagements. Yet the other warlord seemed to know more about the Black Thorn than I. Then again, he was a connoisseur of secrets, Darq.

The undead prince surveyed the forces drawn up against him. "All this, for me? Really, you should not have gone to so much trouble."

"We were expecting to welcome a "delegation" from Duncastor." Nadia leveled the pistol at his head, thumbing back the hammer. "But you'll do."

"Ahhh, Duncastor." Darq sounded as if he was savoring the memory of a fine wine. Unconcerned for Nadia's pistol, he looked away and dug something from his saddlebag. I had thought until now that Darq did not know Prince Aaron or had not recognized the crest on the prince's left breast. When he threw the tattered and bloodstained banner at Aaron's feet rather than Nadia's, and was rewarded with the prince's appalled start, I reevaluated.

"Duncastor's soldiers were a diverting entertainment," Darq said. I glanced back into the forest, at the zombies "Some of my more expendable troops are following the survivors back toward the border. If they don't sleep, they just might make it home. Or, if we push for it, you and I, we may overtake them and ride into Duncastor first."

The Black Thorn did not hide her surprise. "You and I. Working together. Is that what you're suggesting, Darq? Having visions again, or just delusions?"

"Accepting the inevitable. We are being forced to cooperate. For now."

"And you expect me to trust you?"

Darq scoffed. "Of course not."

I saw Nadia's finger tighten ever so slightly on her trigger. "Then why should I believe that we need each other?"

Darq stared back with blood-red, uncaring eyes. "Because from what I have

discerned, Kossak Mageslayer has joined forces with Raydan Marz, and the two warlords will ride hard to catch you." I think it was safe to say he instantly garnered our attention. "I care nothing for your struggle with Marz, Nadia, or your goal at Tor Lendex. I am seeking my own prize. But this association between Marz and Kossak will eventually threaten my plans. So I will help you recover the Radiant Sphere, and you will assist me in breaking their alliance."

Where Darq had come by any of his information no one could guess, but I have to admit that I found myself accepting his bold statements as fact. As I had thought before, Darq is a connoisseur of secrets. The Black Thorn had come to that same conclusion as well, apparently. She lowered the pistol, carefully riding the hammer back into a safe position. "All right, Darq." Her tone was tight and neutral; the trademark of her bargaining voice. "Let's hear what you have in mind."

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Old Stone Bridge

Everyone was looking over their shoulders after accepting the shaky alliance with Darq. Nadia's people, well, we wrote it off as the price of doing business, and so long as we avoided Darq's treachery we thought we'd come through all right. Aaron's soldiers were less sanguine. Prince Aaron was only onboard because we let him in on our secret, that the Globe of Jorandal—the Radiant Sphere—was real and hidden within the borders of Duncastor. In fact, Aaron confirmed that the rulers of Tor Lendex have carried an ancient scepter for generations as the baton of sovereign rights. Which must be the Scepter of Durax.

From what we discovered from the monks at Glenn Cur, the truth of the scepter is that it possesses powers of divination and should lead us to the Sphere. Our intentions are to 'borrow' it, recover the ancient artifact, and return to Fairhaven. Looking at the detailed map, the next thing separating Fairhaven from Duncastor—and us from our prize—was the Roa Kaiten, and Duncastor would certainly have troops stationed at the ancient river bridge we intended to use for our crossing.

Take the bridge. Push through the river town that guarded the far side. Then it was on to Tor Lendex, where we hoped to catch the noble relations of "Good" King Wellem unawares. A good plan.

It should have been simple.

It should have been.

The stone bridge has existed since the Age of Mists, a massive span that the Atlantis Guild could possibly duplicate, but I wouldn't lay odds on it. It is one of only a few safe places to cross the mighty Roa Kaiten, and as such it is often the target of marching warhosts. Fairhaven maintains Fort Bell to guard its side of the river, and it came as no surprise that Duncastor had seized the tower on Fairhaven's soil. Darq had warned us as much.

The Black Thorn halted our warhost outside of bow range, with Darq's army still hidden back within the trees and moving around onto our flank. "Lootan," she called to me, "Derrick, Tyrsis, Rabeus and Rodan."

Prince Aaron rode out with us, bringing one of his own captains. Nadia ignored them. I saw her concentration already focusing on the Duncastor

warhost which assembled before the stone-block tower. It was smaller than ours, though barely. And there were still defenders on the bridge itself. The Duncastor warlord was a man I recognized. Yoquin Darsett, a veteran leader who had served Duncastor for at least thirty years. He rode out with a party of seven to meet with Nadia, dragging along a standard bearing his own colors of a forked lightning bolt as well as the red and gold dragon of Duncastor.

Nadia chewed into Darsett with the vehemence of an Atlantean war dog. There was never a chance for civil discussion, which could have too easily led toward a peaceful compromise and Aaron removing his people from the warhost to take possession of Fort Bell. Instead we bristled and threatened, as per our earlier plan, making a big show of Duncastor's incursion onto Fairhaven soil. Whenever Darsett thought to stand his ground and argue, the Black Thorn always interrupted him, raising his anger another notch and further distracting him and his people from watching the woods as close as they might.

Then Darq's battle cry shattered the 'negotiations' like a hammer through Prince Verrick's finest crystal.

It was a battle and an aftermath that I would care to not remember, and I commit very little to paper only because our forces had so small a part in the fighting. Darq needed us only as a distraction, it seemed, as his army rolled up Darsett's warhost with quick and brutal efficiency. His Fell Reaper and four Screeching Terrors swooped down to cut off any easy retreat. Darq himself led a fist of Feral Bloodsuckers over the walls and into the fort. The lesser undead moved more slowly, and were left at the forest's edge while the bulk of Darq's mounted troops stormed to the bridge to begin clearing the way across.

Yoquin Darsett freed his sword with murder clearly written across his face, but the Black Thorn sat her mount with stoic calm, hands clear of any weapon. The twins were ready with their blades, of course, and Tyrsis is deadly dangerous with his powerful, taloned hands as well as the great blade strapped across his back. Darsett is a veteran. He knows when the odds are bad. I'm not sure why he chose to look at me then. All I did was heft my fuser and shake my head, warning him to carefully consider the price of his actions. Then Darsett wheeled back to recover his warhost and lead it on a retreat away from Fort Bell and into the depths of Fairhaven's nearby forests.

Some regular Duncastor troops had broken loose of the fighting and rushed our small band, no doubt with hopes of salvaging something from hostages. They never stopped to reason that our bodies would have little bargaining power with Darq, or that they were terribly under-armed to deal with a mad Draconum and the officer corps for the Black Thorn's small, but elite

warhost. I dropped one Utem Guardsman with a well-aimed shot that smashed in his sternum. Derrik clipped an Altem Guardsman, and the twins finished off the screaming Atlantean before pairing off with another two swordsmen. Tyrsis moved forward and struck down two crossbowmen before they could cause any real trouble.

Nadia never moved. She sat her horse, lips pressed thinly together as she watched Darq's rampage. I saw the naked fury in her violet eyes and thought I knew the reason. This small scuffle had felt more like slaughter than a true battle. The Black Thorn might be many things. But a butcher she is not.

When we led our forces across the bridge behind the main section of Darq's warhost, then I saw the real slaughter. What Nadia knew was likely to happen, probably from the moment that Darq pushed for the bridge ahead of us.

I don't know even now what the name of the Duncastor river town is. Or was. I don't want to know, though I expect to hear it in passing. It will come up as the village that the Black Thorn helped destroy, though we had so little part in it. It's bad enough that I will remember what it looked like, with homes burning and citizens hacked down in the street. Only a few lucky soldiers escaped—I saw some leap into the cold waters of Roa Kaiten, while others fled into the surrounding trees. They would be no trouble to us as we moved against Tor Lendex. They would have been little trouble regardless. As it turned out, we rode alongside a much greater threat.

His name is Darq, of the Order of Vladd.

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Trail of Biars

Have you ever tried to walk through a bramble thicket? With each step, sharp thorns slash at your legs, arms, and face, cutting and tearing as you fight to move forward. As anyone who has attempted this knows, once you get a short distance into the briars you have to decide: Do I back out now and try to find another way, or do I keep going and try to push through? You know that once you make that decision, you have to keep going no matter how badly it hurts.

I wish we'd gone back.

I was with Kossak's party as we crossed into Duncastor that day. The Troll was on edge, as were many of the League's force. The tales gleaned from the few stragglers we met on the way did nothing to improve morale. As the army drew closer to Darq's force, we met with more and more refugees, people who managed to escape death at the hands of Darq and the Black Thorn. With each story, Kossak's face grew grimmer, until I feared for what would come.

As we rode up to the stone bridge, we saw carrion birds circling in the sky ahead. Huhn drew a sharp breath at the sight, and nudged Kossak to alert him. The huge Troll nodded and gave the order that pushed his warhost to the front. My heart fell, but my hands remained steady as I followed in Kossak's wake.

The bridge itself stood undefended, barren. One of the scouts reported that the few men who had been guarding the bridge had fled at their approach, dropping their weapons in their flight. Kossak's teeth ground audibly, and one of the Atlanteans' horses shied away from him. A little searching revealed a pile of dead Duncastor soldiers, stacked neatly by the river's bank. Obviously a battle had been fought here, and I hoped that was all.

I was wrong.

Just beyond the bridge lay a smoking ruin that had once been a town. As the army came upon it, we froze with horror. Atlantean and League warriors alike. We are hardened men and women, whether Troll or Elf, Human or Centaur. Months of constantly fighting Darq's undead warriors had left us numbed to fear, or so we thought. We had only seen soldiers die, though. Never children.

The streets of that town were literally red with blood. Civilians. Men, women,

and children alike were slaughtered and burned, their corpses littering the streets like weeds. In a few places someone had tried to begin the death rites, but whoever it was had left, not waiting to see if we would kill them too. So much suffering, and nothing I could ease. I thought my heart would stop.

Kossak and Marz talked quietly for a time, giving the rest of us a chance to recover our composure. When they finished, Kossak walked over to me and rested his hand on my back for a moment. "The Land will not forget this, lady. The Land never forgets," he said.

Raising his voice, he spoke to the rest of the party. "Darq no longer cares who he kills, and his trail will be simple to find. Prepare yourselves; this may not be the worst we see. I fear what lies ahead." Huhn and the others nodded as we prepared to move forward through the blasted town. All I could think of, though, was the way it feels when a cut is deep, and blood flows clean through the wound.

Too late to turn back, and the thorns scratch at me mercilessly. I only hope we make it through alive.

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Hendraabi's Journal: Marz at Tor Lendex

Having crossed the river bridge, Darq and Thorn are heading straight for Tor Lendex, a sizable city in the eastern half of Duncastor. All we need to do is to follow the trail of burned homes and corpse-littered fields to learn where Darq has been, and to accurately guess where he will be heading next.

Raydan sent a group of his scouts to ride ahead of Darq's slow-moving army, so as to warn Duncastor's villagers and farmers of the encroaching threat. Kossak assigned a group of his Centaur Archers to ambush pockets of straggling zombies, destroying them with flights of arrows while we have the chance. Because the surrounding terrain is largely agricultural, we won't have any strategic advantage until we reach the open grasslands by the walls of Tor Lendex. From there we can come at Darq's army from all angles without having to worry about irrigation ditches or rows of gamato plants.

But, the question remains. What do they want at Tor Lendex?

Maleficus has a possible answer to that question, but not a sure one. He suspects that Tor Lendex has little to offer for Darq, save as a source of corpses for use in his undead army. But, there is a legend regarding an object the city is famous for. The Scepter of Durax, the talisman of the ruling family of Tor Lendex, reputedly has the ability to reveal the location of whatever the holder seeks. These divinatory powers thought to be based more on myth than fact. But with the beeline that Darq and the Black Thorn are making towards Tor Lendex, the rod just might be what the Black Thorn is seeking as a way to determine the location of the fabled Sphere of Jorandal.

We all agree that the Scepter is a logical next step. Even if it isn't what the Black Thorn is seeking, finding the artifact might help Raydan Marz complete his quest for the Sphere of Jorandal. What exactly is written on the pages that the Black Thorn stole from the monks' histories we will likely never know. But finding the Scepter before she does is a worthy gamble that will hopefully cost few lives, and give us the advantage over our bloodthirsty enemy.

Our plan is simple. Marz will ride ahead of all three armies, and try to reach Tor Lendex before the Black Thorn is even within sight of its walls. Using all of the forces under his command, Raydan will pierce the gates, move through the city, and claim the magical rod from the ruling family. Kossak will engage the Black Thorn and Darq's army just outside the city walls, hopefully buying time for Raydan and protecting the innocent people within Tor Lendex. Once Marz has the Scepter of Durax, he promises that he will come to Kossak's aid against his sworn enemy.

Tonight, we ride. For now, all we can do is watch and wait.

Hendraabi

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Darq's Betrayal

The Black Thorn stood before Darq, her sword stained with Centaur blood. Her glare showed the fierce anger that was seething inside her. Her forces were fighting and dying before the gates of Tor Lendex, and she wasn't pleased about any of it.

"My troops have engaged the Mageslayer's warriors," she said, "but Marz is already within the city walls."

"You came all this way just to tell me that?" Darq replied curtly. "Tell me something I don't know."

The Thorn gestured to one of her subordinates, who unrolled a sketched map of Tor Lendex. "I need your support here and here," she said, pointing to two spots on the map with the tip of her sword. "If we don't neutralize Kossak's troops, there isn't much point in being here at all."

"Yes, of course," Darq said, feigning interest poorly. "I will send detachments of Zombies immediately. Is that all you need of me?"

Black Thorn eyed her gruesome ally suspiciously. "Yes," she replied, trying to read Darq's intentions in his face. "Are you certain you can spare the troops? Your positions will be hard pressed today."

"I said it would be done. If that is all, I am leaving." Darq turned away from the warlord and walked toward his waiting army.

"Wait," the Black Thorn called after him. "Where do we meet once Kossak's horde is in retreat?"

"We rally at the south gates," he called back to her. "Once Kossak falls, the city will be as good as ours. Marz will be trapped inside. Then we can destroy him at our leisure."

"And if Kossak doesn't fall?" she inquired.

"Then you'll be dead."

* * *

“Which units shall we send to the Black Thorn’s aid, master?” asked a newly appointed officer. Darq slapped him across the face, sending the Elf sprawling to the ground. Darq’s other generals quickly stepped away from the scrambling warrior.

“Ignorant cur! I wouldn’t waste even your sorry hide to sack this walled sewer! Prepare to march! Protect the flank but disengage. Black Thorn fights alone!”

Another general, shocked, began to protest, but a poisonous glance from Darq warned him to hold his tongue. All of them dispersed wordlessly to ready their troops--not for the battle they had expected, but for another forced march across Duncastor’s countryside. When his officers were gone and he heard the scurry of messengers and signalers announcing the change of orders, he heaved a great breath and smiled a satisfied smile.

“Mageslayer!” Darq called out into the misty wilderness. “Fight over dirt and stacked stones if you wish! While you’re busy here, I’ll learn the secrets of the Vermillion Crown!” Darq could hear the horns blowing, the signal for his army to advance. “Who knows, Kossak?” he cackled. “Perhaps I’ll raise you as my personal servant one day!”

4 Warlords, 2 Artifacts, 1 Destiny

Battle at Bydalia

Four warlords clashed in the city of Tor Lendex. Two of them betrayed their allies and left them to die.

When Raydan Marz smashed through the main gates at Tor Lendex, he didn't waste any time trifling for war-booty. Instead, Marz marched his soldiers directly against the guards defending the palace that lay at the city's heart. Personally commanding the charge, Marz's fighters tore through the royal guards, smashed down their cavalry, and pierced the royal palace before his nemesis, the Black Thorn, could even begin her own siege of the city's southern gates.

The Scepter of Durax, an object held in great veneration by the royals of Duncastor, was the sole reason that Raydan Marz battered his way into the well-defended city. While the rulers of Tor Lendex had used the rod as a symbol of office for centuries, the scepter had magical powers unknown to its holders. When Raydan Marz lifted the artifact from the hands of a cowering official and commanded knowledge from it, the warlord suffered a powerful vision. A vision of a location in Bydalia where he could find what he truly quested for. The fabled Sphere of Jorandal, which could control the bones of the earth.

Outside of Tor Lendex, the champion of the Elemental League, Kossak Mageslayer, was fighting a difficult battle against the combined forces of two very potent enemies. His chief antagonist was the Black Thorn, a woman of great beauty and significant military prowess boasting a host of veteran soldiers. Supporting her flank was a sizable force of undead that tore and ate into Kossak's Troll and Elven warriors without fear or hesitation. Even though the odds were against him, Kossak knew from his ally Raydan Marz that if the Black Thorn got into the city the cost to the Land would be great. So the Mageslayer fought on at great cost to his own troops.

But unknown to Kossak, when Raydan finally claimed his prize, the warlord turned and moved out of Tor Lendex as quickly as possible, leaving Kossak's warriors to buy time for his flight. And unknown to the Black Thorn, who had been waiting for hours for the remainder of her ally's sizable army to appear on the battlefield, Darq and his host had abandoned her to die against Kossak's soldiers. All in order to buy time for his own troops to get ahead of the Mageslayer. To get that much closer to the mystical place where he could finally unlock the powers of his own artifact, the Vermillion Crown.

By the time the battle was done, and Kossak and the Black Thorn had both

realized that they had both been betrayed, Marz and Darq were well on their way to their destinations. The two betrayed warlords could do little more than regroup, bury their dead, and then each head their own way to hunt down the one that had wronged them.

Now Raydan Marz is within reach of claiming the Sphere of Jorandal for himself, with the Black Thorn quick on his heels. But unknown to Marz, it turns out Darq's destination has been Bydalia as well all along. Soon, clashes will erupt in this ancient city that may well shape the fate of the Land for many years to come.

4 Warlords, 2 Artifacts, 1 Destiny

Battle on the Tibersus

Darq the Corrupt attempts to remove the curse from the Vermillion Crown. Can Kossak Mageslayer stop him in time?

Darq the Corrupt has traveled for many months to reach his destination, the Roa Tibersus, with Kossak Mageslayer of the Elemental League attacking him every step of the way. Now Darq has finally reached the site where the Vermillion Crown was forged long ago. If the vampire warlord can break the curse that was laid over the ancient crown, Darq will be transformed into a blend of vampire and mortal. He will become a *nopheratu* of living flesh, without the restrictions of either the living or the dead.

But, Kossak Mageslayer wants to stop Darq and what the Troll warlord wants, he gets. Ever since the Battle of Ashon Rye the Elemental warlord has chased and battled the Sect warlord. But after months of fighting and his failure to stop Darq at the banks of the Roa Kaiten, Kossak finally admitted that Darq was too strong to defeat by himself.

So the Troll Chieftain approached Raydan Marz, an Atlantean outlaw, about joining forces. At the time Raydan had his own problems with a warlord called the Black Thorn, but Kossak agreed to help Raydan against his enemy if, in time, Raydan would help Kossak put an end to Darq's evil. Raydan agreed.

At the same time, Darq approached the Black Thorn, and offered her a very similar deal. If she would help him defeat Kossak Mageslayer, Darq would help her defeat Raydan Marz and win the prize they both coveted – the Sphere of Jorandal. She agreed, and within days the four armies arrived at the gates of Tor Lendex and clashed in a violent struggle.

The battle was swift, brutal, and short. Halfway through the fight, wanting to gain some lead-time over Kossak, Darq broke away from Tor Lendex and headed for the Tibersus. Leaving his slow-moving zombies behind to fight alongside the Black Thorn, Darq double-timed his regular troops on towards his final destination. Towards the end of the battle, Raydan Marz claimed the Scepter of Durax, an artifact that would ultimately show Raydan the way to the location of the Sphere that he quested for. With his prize in hand, Raydan also fled from Tor Lendex, leaving his ally Kossak behind.

By the time that the two remaining warlords realized that they had been tricked, many of their warriors lay dead within the bloody grass. With grim acknowledgement the Black Thorn left her fallen where they lay and rode

hard after Raydan Marz. After burying his own dead, Kossak turned his troops away from Tor Lendex and marched them hard along Darq's trail, vowing that Darq would soon be dead.

Now Darq and Kossak meet for a final battle near the banks of the Roa Tibersus. If Darq can manage to reach his destination and break the crown's curse, he will become more powerful than ever before. It is up to Kossak to stop the Sect warlord before he can attain his goal, or Darq may become an unstoppable force.

4 Warlords, 2 Artifacts, 1 Destiny

The Vermillion Crown

Will Kossak Mageslayer be able to stop Darq from unlocking the god-like powers of the Vermillion Crown?

Darq the Corrupt traveled for many months to reach his destination, an old Dwarven fortress along the Tibersus river, with Kossak Mageslayer of the Elemental League attacking him every step of the way. But when Darq finally reached the foothills by the ancient Dwarfholt, Kossak moved in for a final fight against his old foe, even though the Troll knew that Darq's warhost outnumbered his own by more than two to one.

Darq knew that the Vermillion Crown was created within the citadel millennia ago. By returning the site to where the artifact was forged, Darq hoped to be able to break the curse on the artifact and claim the powers of the artifact for himself. If successful, Darq would be transformed into a blend of vampire and mortal, and would become a *nopheratu* of living flesh armed with powers unseen since the Age of Mists.

Confident that his army could hold Kossak at bay, Darq took a small group of warriors into the citadel to attend to his ritual. Kossak saw Darq heading into the ancient keep, and pressed his troops against Darq's undead in an effort to break through and stop the vampire-prince. But the wall of shambling flesh was too much for Kossak's warriors to overcome, as for every three zombies the Elemental fighters hacked apart, the undead brought down another of Kossak's finest.

But just as Kossak's battered army finally fought their way up the low hills flanking the Dwarfholt, a rider came out of the eastern woodlands bearing the banner of the Atlantean Empire. Raydan Marz, freshly returned from his successful quest to acquire the Sphere of Jorandal from the Dungeons beneath Bydalia, now made good on his promise to aid Kossak against Darq's warhost. Soon the weary Elves, Trolls, and Centaurs were joined by a host of battle-ready Rebels, Demi-mages and Storm Golems.

The combined force smashed through Darq's defenses. Darq's generals, without their commander to give them orders, fell apart under the double-strength onslaught, giving Kossak the chance to pierce the enemy lines with a small band of brave warriors. Venturing unopposed into the citadel, now Kossak must clash with Darq one final time, and must either smash the Crown or become the first victim of Darq's newfound powers.