

MITHRINGAAR

A novelette by G.E.M. Simov



Art by Radoslav

I

-

The smith

In the land of Tribeloria lived a smith by the name of Ere'khan. He was a great master of his craft, having forged weapons that served warriors of all kinds, and that rested above the fireplaces of lords who ruled over men.

Ere'khan was never in search of fame, and so fame had failed to find him. Never had it been a matter of whether or not the weapons were made by him, but rather how finely the tools had been forged.

Ere'khan, like many ordinary men, did not have lofty aspirations, nor did he desire things that could not be his. His hometown was small and apparently insignificant, but it was close to the border, and folks passed through. Thus he spoke to people, be they rich or poor, and he heard many things about many other things.

Ere'khan liked hearing about things. He liked it so much, he wanted to hear of things he already knew about. He planned, upon hearing a tale that he knew already, to smirk knowingly and ask for another. Once, that had happened to him - he was told of a master smith so devoted to his craft that he had no wife, and would end up having no heir to inherit his knowledge. That smith had then passed away, his secrets gone with him.

The story of that old master smith who died with no pupil he knew from first-hand experience. After all, he had inherited the wisdom of that long dead master smith, even if he had kept it secret.

Ere'khan had learned many things from his teacher, both what he should and what he should not do as a smith. He had found time to have a family, for even if his face was not the most handsome and looked a little queer, it was still attached to the body of a capable man. His pupils were many and toiled away at large scale orders, while some helped him deal with the lower scale things, such as the production of special weapons.

However, the most important lesson that Ere'khan had learned from his teacher was that one day he would be given a task he would be unable to perform - an order so demanding that his ability and experience would be lacking.

When that day came, Ere'khan was told that he had to travel to the mountains in the North and seek aid. He knew not what kind of assistance he would receive, if he were to go to the mountains, as they were wild and dangerous. Not many things that thought lived there, and he doubted that those who did dwell on those peaks would approach and aid a stranger.

Ere'khan, even though uncertain as he was, had chosen to be ready. His wife had prepared, for him, a bag full of things she thought would help him on a trip through the mountains. The bag he could carry, and so it always waited for him at home, by the door.

At first, he had been enthusiastic. He had expected and anticipated that great order to make him doubt his own ability, to urge him to look for help, for it was that thing he would make, which would brand him a master smith.

The years, however, passed, and no such challenge presented itself. He grew older, and weaker, and his students came to be the driving force in all the processes at his forge. He still gave directions, hammered away at the iron while it was hot, but he tired more easily. Everything seemed to have been for naught, until one day, a person appeared before Ere'khan.

"Make me a weapon," he said, "A weapon to reflect its true nature."

Ere'khan asked this stranger why was it that he sought such a weapon, and the answer made the smith certain that this was the task he had been waiting for. 'Twas a weapon for a person to forge their way through history and remain known until the end of time.

The stranger then left, promising to return in a month, and Ere'khan was left with his task. The smith, at first, tried to see if he could handle this task by himself. The drawing board became a mountain of scrapped ideas, all more fancy than the last, all unable to capture the true nature of a weapon.

He pulled his hairs as he struggled to think of a design. What did the weapon need to be, even? A mace? Nay, that had other uses. An axe? Alas, that, too, could be used for other things. A sword, he had decided, would reflect the true nature of a weapon best, for a sword cannot be used for much else.

What, however, should the sword be? An elegant weapon to be wielded with one hand? A brutish, two-handed slab of metal to cleave through man and beast alike? A versatile tool of death that could be both? He thought long and hard, but could not decide.

Ere'khan was stumped on other fronts, as well. If the weapon were to be such and such, would it have to be double edged? Could it only be sharp at one side? Would it be one to cut or to stab? He spent a week thinking about these things. A week that could have led him North instead.

But his pride, his want to challenge himself, they stood in his way. Ere'khan was a capable blacksmith. He could do some of it himself, at least - he did not need help, not at all!

Another week passed as Ere'khan struggled to find the solution to his quandary. It was to be made of the finest metal, but it needed to be the most robust as well, for one who becomes eternally known leads many great battles and faces impossible odds.

Alas, the metals he had at his disposal were neither the finest, nor the sturdiest. A hardy metal was steel, no doubt, but there were many which held the power to cut a sword of steel in half. A fine metal was silver, but it would be soft if it were on its own, inferior to others.

And so he threw about his options and slowly despaired. When the month had come and gone, the stranger returned. Ere'khan dared not show himself out of shame, but the stranger, in knowing of the smith's predicament, spoke and announced that the struggling artisan had another month.

Ere'khan, uplifted by this mercy, knew what he had to do. He picked out his finest speculative designs, shoved them in the big bag by the door, put it on his back and left for the mountains in the North.

Late Autumn was not the ideal season to visit the mountains, but it was the time that Ere'khan's fate had picked for him. His journey took him through abandoned hamlets, thick forests, and vast fields, until the elms started giving way to snowy bushes.

The mountains were deadly, the cold biting at his knees and sapping his strength, lessened by age. The wind was whipping him ruthlessly, the snow blinded him and the clouds hid all semblance of light.

He struggled through the tall peaks of the mountains, calling for help at every new landmark that he could see. Ere'khan lasted for a very long time. His wife had prepared meals so satisfying for him that they kept him standing hours after he should have collapsed from exhaustion. The cloak she had woven for him kept him warm even in the face of this remorseless, early winter.

Alas, Ere'khan was old. He succumbed to his exhaustion, falling to the ground. The cold snow nipped at his ravaged face, his taut skin cracking from the impact. The prickling of the frozen water remained a constant sensation in his face, but another feeling welled up within the smith.

Fear. Ere'khan was afraid of failing his teacher, of failing his wife and himself. He could become a great smith, known all over the world, if he were to craft this weapon.

The man made to stand, but he could not, for it was as if a great weight pushed him down into the snow. Indeed, there was something else there. 'Twas the horrible demon that tormented every member of mankind, the unspeakable horror that growled and whined in the ear of every elder, the nightmare that sat upon the chests and backs of men, suffocating them with its tenebrous stench.

Ere'khan fought hard to rise up, but the vicious evil that age was had an ally in this moment. The cold hands of the mountains had risen from beneath the snow and gently held the old smith down. He could not do it, his strength was not enough.

As dark circles started swimming before his eyes, he thought to himself and asked - why had the order not come sooner?

Then the horrible weight was gone, and the icy touch of the grave receded into the earth, hiding itself beneath the snow. The old smith looked up.

Above him loomed a great dragon, with scales like diamonds and eyes like the sun. The majesty of this mythical being had, no doubt, sent death reeling. The magnificence of this dragon, even if shadowed by clouds, was so incandescent that the smith found himself blinded, yet unwilling to close his eyes.

The titanic being, without a care, held its clawed limb above him and lowered it. The smith, much like a tiny insect, was lifted off of the ground, and with a blast of its wings, the dragon flew into the blizzard. All this was too much for old Ere'khan and his consciousness faded as the air became thinner with each beat.

When the old smith came to, he first felt the cold stones beneath him. Then, he looked around himself, but his eyes were greeted only by darkness. Lastly, he recognized that, although the stones beneath him were relatively cold, they were, compared to the snow, quite warm. The air around him was, also, somewhat chilly, but overall far more agreeable than the roaring wind in the mountains.

"You move, and so you live," rumbled the darkness as someone spoke, and Ere'khan knew the voice belonged to the magnificent dragon. It was a voice that commanded respect, yet soothed his nerves. It was a voice that both threatened him with its magnitude and also calmed him with its depth and wondrous trembling, much like the purr of a cat.

"I don--"

"Speak only when asked to, mortal!" Interrupted the dragon, his lordly intonation making Ere'khan forget his intended words, and he felt compelled to obey the great creature that rested somewhere within the dark cavern the smith had been brought to.

The man was stricken with awe, for the creature that spoke had displayed such an overwhelming presence, such a stupefying air swirled around it, much like the moon circles the world, that it had been enough to scare death, itself, away. He remained silent, intent to listen to the entity until it commanded him to speak.

"You come to these mountains with no invitation. However, you bear the hands of an artisan," rumbled the voice of the dragon, and its sun-like eyes opened somewhere above Ere'khan. They glowed, yet they did not illuminate the cavern and they gave off no light. He continued, "I have given the artisans of your land directions to my dwelling, for I have said that there will be a task for each that will be impossible to succeed in with their own skill.

I have spoken, and so it is. Thus you come to my mountains in search of aid. I will help you, mortal artisan, but know that once your creation is complete, you shall know no peace until you return to these peaks and surrender to the death I saved you from."

"Now, then, tell me of your task!" The dragon spoke at length, and ended its speech with a command. Ere'khan found himself wanting to know what was the name of this dragon, but he dared not ask.

"I was asked to forge a weapon that reflected its true nature, to be wielded by one who would remain forever in the annals of history," answered the smith, sharing with the great being his task. For a moment, the dragon remained silent, yet its eyes remained still, much like the sun - unflinching monoliths of majesty.

"Your task is difficult, indeed. A weapon that reflects its true nature will be a hideous one indeed, yet with a great destiny... Fitting that it would be I, Onerkiral, to bring about its existence," the dragon stated, sharing its name. Ere'khan could tell that Onerkiral was boastful and proud, but he also felt that it was not unfounded.

The great dragon gave orders to the smith, pertaining to what he should bring on his next visit. His tools, as was to be expected, but also a metal that was difficult to work with and quite ugly in color, found deep beneath the eastern reaches of mount Orun. He needed to also bring an anvil, for there were no such things in the mountain, as well as wood, nails and the softest velvet he could find.

Ere'khan was allowed to leave the cavern after receiving his directions, and he set out to collect these things. His wife was overjoyed to see him back, but she worried greatly for him when he

told her it was not yet done. His pupils were curious to know what he was to work on, but as they had agreed to not pry when taken on, they did not.

His tools and an anvil he loaded onto a small cart he bought from the carpenter, from whom he also obtained the wood, while his wife prepared many meals for him. He took nails of his own, and the velvet he procured from the tailor. However, the crude ore was to take a whole week to be delivered from the capital. And so he waited seven days, his mind buzzing with excitement.

Ere'khan had not shared with anyone what had happened on the mountain. He had been unable to believe what had transpired himself. A dragon, true to the legends, was such an awesome creature that it made him feel the urge to begin groveling at its feet.

The words spoken by Onerkiral were worrisome, but Ere'khan heeded them not, for the moment. As it was now, he had grown old and was not going to remain a smith much longer, but the time he had left he would use as best he could, for the greatest weapon to be forged by him awaited his work.

The ore arrived when it was promised, and Ere'khan loaded it onto the cart. In the stone, untreated as it was, it looked like moss, and the smith could not help but wonder how come this was the metal to be used in making the weapon he was about to forge.

The cart was heavy, but the old smith was driven, and with a strength he had forgotten he once possessed he dragged it along the road. Many of the folks in town came to see him off, for his pupils had shared that he was going back to the mountain to forge a great thing there.

They cheered him on and even helped him pull the cart, but at the boundaries of their home he asked to be left alone, and so they did. Ere'khan's trip was far harder this time, and there were many moments when he felt as if he could not carry on. But with a little rest and a bite from the food his wife had lovingly prepared for him, the old smith regained his strength and he marched onwards.

Ere'khan found himself braving the peaks again, but this time the cold was not so great as to root him to the ground and hold him in a single spot like a statue, nor was the wind so cruel so as to make him bundle up and bend over in hopes of it subsiding.

There he waited from morning until evening, and then did Onerkiral appear, the dragon's majesty washing away all exhaustion within Ere'khan, forcing away all cold and silencing the wind. The smith felt great joy and incredible trepidation, for his heart was pounding and his eyes were wide with wonder.

"You have done as I commanded, and that is the first step. I shall now bring you to the summit of mount Garr'kra, and there you will forge a great blade!" Spoke Onerkiral and took hold of Ere'khan and his cart, which both appeared like toys in the great paws of the dragon.

His wings beat at an incredible rhythm, and he flew into the sky. This time, the old smith was conscious, and his heart was filled with glee and a spectacular sense of the sublime, for he was small and insignificant, yet Onerkiral was great and lordly, and it was as if he would remain forever more, while Ere'khan would die and be forgotten.

The flight through the skies filled him with such inspiration and dread, that he resolved to create the finest weapon to have ever existed, one so great it, too, would remain forever more, together with the diamond dragon.

Ere'khan was let down upon the summit of Garr'kra, the mountain belonging to Onerkiral. He could see the whole world from here - his home, the capital, even the ocean, far to the South! And there was no wind, nor was the cold as freezing as it should have been, nor was the air thin and hard to breathe, for it was how Onerkiral willed it to be, no doubt!

As soon as he was firmly on the ground, Ere'khan dragged the anvil from the cart and placed it down, and then he put his gloves on, his apron hanging from his neck down, his tools each ready to be used.

And so Onerkiral directed him, and the old smith followed. The chunks of mossy ore he brought down from the cart, and prepared his tongs as the great dragon took them in its palm and took a breath, which made him even bigger than before, and then he breathed light, freezing yet scorching, and the ore melted onto his limb.

Ere'khan raised his tongs, and Onerkiral held the liquid metal and stone in such a way that only the metal would leak, so slowly that it became stiff, and all the smith had to do was grab a hold of it and direct it until it was done, becoming one long beam of metal, so hot it was white, yet he felt the warmth not.

The dragon spoke his command and guided Ere'khan to the anvil, where the smith started hammering down on the slab of metal. Each strike sent sparks flying, and each one rang out into the clouds beneath the summit. And so he began his great masterpiece, toiling away at the anvil for so many days and nights that he lost count.

But he counted other things - every one hundred strikes he raised the slab of metal and Onerkiral would scorch it with his breath of light, and then Ere'khan would strike it a hundred more times, and Onerkiral would breathe upon it this flame of cold light, and the smith would hammer away, again and again.

The guidance of the dragon, and the great inspiration the man had experienced, served to catalyze all of his experience and the entire duration of his life, allowing him to see the best way to bring the hammer down, allowing him to know how the metal would bend and how to strike again.

Ere'khan raised his right arm and brought it down with such force as he had never known he possessed, and he forged on for far longer than he had ever thought he could. Even when his arm became so heavy it felt as if it were made of lead, he neither slowed down nor did his blows grow weaker.

And the metal took form, and a hideous form it was, as had Onerkiral said it would be. 'Twas a long and straight sword, with only one of its edges to be sharp, and a curved point that was so vicious in the eyes of Ere'khan that he dared not look at it too long. A longsword it would be, to be light and easy to wield.

Seven nights and seven days did the old smith toil over the weapon, and at the end of the seventh day did Onerkiral order him to lift the sword in his tired arms and hold it firmly. So did Ere'khan, and then the great dragon breathed in, and so great was the effort, that the awesome creature seemed to be as big as the mountain itself!

Stricken by this sight, the old smith held tight, as Onerkiral breathed out. For many hours did the light of the great dragon's breath stream out upon the sword, and for many hours did Ere'khan withstand the pressure of holding the sword. At first, it was hard, for the sword's edge felt like a flat surface against the freezing fire of Onerkiral, but gradually it became easier to hold.

Ere'khan realized that through this process the wise dragon was sharpening the blade beyond what any other creature could achieve. And the smith saw that it would be a sword so sharp it could cleave through any enemy, regardless of whether or not they wore armor, and it was a sword so fine it would cut other blades in two upon meeting them.

Then Onerkiral ordered that the smith throw the sword in the snow of the summit, and so did Ere'khan, without so much as thinking about it, for it was the right thing to do. Loud was the hiss of the metal as it landed in the piles of snowflakes, and steam did flow up from its landing, but neither the dragon nor the smith had the time to watch.

They set to work on the wood, giving the form it needed and halving it, to then place the dark velvet that Ere'khan had brought within. Onerkiral's claws darted over the surface of the cloth, and so did they dart over the wood itself.

But when the smith made to bring the nails, he felt his power flee from him. And then the days and nights spent hammering away did come back to Ere'khan, and he fell in the snow, the fear of death within him.

Ere'khan came to. The snow his cheek rested upon was cold, and the wind was rough as it whipped at his back, but a fire burned within the old smith, keeping him warm and reminding him he was not ready to succumb to death.

Onerkiral had laid itself down on the summit. Even while lazing about, the great dragon inspired such incredible awe within the old smith that he found it hard to even consider the creature had needed to rest.

On the anvil before the man rested a scabbard. It was a fine thing, simple, lacking in ornamentation and any intricacies. The sun-like eyes of Onerkiral gazed at something far beyond the sight of Ere'khan, but the smith knew he had been taken note of. It only made sense.

"The task is complete. You will need to add the details one normally does, but I have done my part. The weapon, reflecting its true nature, has been forged, and it will be wielded by a great person to remain forever in the annals of history!" Announced the dragon, and then Ere'khan took the scabbard in his hand, and it was light but fine.

And then he walked to the sword in the snow, and bent over to pick it up, but he saw it had no handle and no handguard, but he felt as if no such addition was needed. He made to pick it up, but stopped. There was something ominous about the sword in the snow, its form so fine yet so crooked, its color so vibrant yet so vile, the air about it so hot yet so cold.

Gulping, he took hold of it and felt sick. There was no pride within his soul, nor was there a sense of fulfillment. All he could see was a blade, so abominable and cruel it already leaked blood, and the lives that would or could be taken by it he saw, and an agony of the soul he felt.

Truly, it was a hideous weapon, truly, it reflected its nature perfectly. With an effort, he managed to place it within the scabbard, and suddenly he could breathe. The sword was heavy in his hand, even if he had made it light. That weight was different, not one physical, but rather of the mind.

Onerkiral brought Ere'khan back to the mountains where the smith had first met the dragon. With no farewell did the creature depart. It was Ere'khan's opinion that the dragon had been greatly disgusted by the sword.

The smith returned home, with time to spare, and he was received with cheers and smiles, but he could not smile or be proud, saying he was tired and needed rest to make his receivers go away.

Over the next few days he had the scabbard carved and then enhanced with fine metalwork, but even if he put his all into it, and even if he felt as if it was his duty to do it himself, his hands shook and the result was something quite peculiar.

Lastly, he busied himself with the handle of the sword, but as soon as his fingers touched the metal, it made him cringe, it made his bowels churn and left a sour taste in his mouth, so he worked quickly and left the handle wrapped in leather straps, crude, but efficient.

And then, with three days left, he felt truly exhausted from the great ordeal of creating this legendary weapon. Ere'khan went to rest, and he slept. In his sleep, while his body recovered, his mind was assailed by the sword's visage and its cruel form, its horrible purpose and sickening essence.

Ere'khan dreamed of the sword for two nights, waking somewhat startled from many nightmarish visions, each more disturbing than the previous. Even if he had never gone to war, he felt as if what his dreams showed him was enough to terrify him so greatly, that it made him glad he had never faced men in armed combat before.

So vile and unspeakable were these dreams that Ere'khan rose early at the dawn of the last day of the extra month he had been allotted. He clambered out of bed, and put on his apron, took hold of the scabbard of the sword and went out into the woods.

He knew that the sword he had made was exceptional. After all, it had been forged with the aid of Onerkiral, the only dragon to have been known to Ere'khan. However, no matter how wondrous the blade, the smith felt as if it was an evil thing. A weapon that should not have come to exist, for its very essence felt as if it were tainted by something.

Thus did Ere'khan bring the sword with himself into the forests and pondered, and fought with himself, and could not make up his mind. He remembered that it would be used by a great man, but he feared it might be wielded by someone for an evil purpose. Even so, how could a great individual be associated with such a sword? Such a heinous weapon, the likes of which had never before been seen, not even thousands of years ago?

And while wandering, he thought about his own reasons for having made this sword. Had he wanted to be recognized as a great smith, much like his former master? Had he wanted to become so well known that people would flock to the town just to see him work?

He was certain those were not the reasons. Why, then, had he made this weapon?

And he remembered why, and he knew a semblance of peace. The stranger who had come to make the order spoke as if of a great prophecy, and so did Onerkiral. It only made sense that he, too, would play a small part, as the smith to forge the sword to be wielded by the great hero of that prophecy.

Ere'khan returned to his home, and wrapped the sword in a piece of leather. He needed to neither see nor touch it to finish it. 'Twas a name that sounded wrong, as if he, who spoke it, meant to spit, but could not, yet it bore a sound similar to the word myth, for it would become the tool of a person to be known as a myth himself.

When the day came, so too, did the stranger come. As soon as Ere'khan presented the weapon, still wrapped in leather, the one who ordered the making of the tool raised a hand to stop the smith.

"I can see that you have completed your task. That is good, as the time is nearly upon us. As its maker, you should be the one to grant it to a person great enough to become forever forged in history, as was this terrible weapon," spoke the stranger, taking out a purse full of coins so clean and shiny that Ere'khan could not help but wonder if they were brand new, or maybe even fake.

But he accepted the terms of his contractor and they parted ways. Quite the queer fellow, that stranger, asking for such a great thing for someone else. It was as if there was no need to know who would end up wielding the weapon - fate, itself, would see to it.

On the next day, after a great feast to celebrate, it occurred to Ere'khan that his task was not yet done, and he could not simply go and rest for a while. He had to find a suitably great person to whom to grant this weapon.

For a while he thought, and for a while he pondered, days passing and becoming weeks. While he thought, he rested a bit, as much as he would need to make one big trip before resting again.

Finally it occurred to Ere'khan that, perhaps, the great Duke of Tribeloria was a person who could find himself becoming forged in the annals of history, be it through the use of the sword or otherwise. After all, he was the duke of an independent and prosperous nation!

The old smith decided that it would be so, and he set off for the capital shortly thereafter. His wife and pupils, although worried for his well-being, could understand that he wanted to present his work before the greatest person in the land. Were it to be accepted, the honor it would bring to Ere'khan would be enough to feed him for the rest of his life.

The journey down south, to the capital at sea, was quite different from the trips to the mountain. Long, smooth roads with plenty of places to rest left Ere'khan feeling as if he had grown unfit for them, having braved them very rarely in the latest years of his life.

But it was a calm trip, and he met some interesting people on the way. They spoke of a great faire in the capital, of how the duke had called forth the great masters of the land and all their works were on display. Each artisan had presented the duke with a gift, and the duke had remained quite pleased, prolonging the faire and finding himself in a good mood, quite unlike his usual self.

That was a great opportunity, felt Ere'khan, for he could present the sword as a gift to the Duke of Tribeloria, and the chances of it being accepted were, doubtless, quite high, as the duke was a man who had a taste for artistry, as shown by his hosting of the faire.

So the old smith went, and he reached the capital. First he heard the sea, then he heard the bustle of the great city, and at last did he see it, almost pouncing at him from behind the trees. Walls as high as five meters, with guard towers even taller, majestic gates standing open to allow all people of the land a chance at attending the faire.

The banners, great and noble, bearing the most regal of colours, flew upon the peaks of the capital. The proud knights who guarded the gate stood at attention and received all who would ask to enter, their armor and weapons polished until they shone in the sun like clear, still water reflecting the light at noon.

Beyond the walls the city was even more splendid, for every house looked like a mansion, and the duke's dwelling, perched atop the hill, was so magnificent it looked like the palace of the greatest king.

The streets were crowded as people from near and far had come to see the faire, where the great artisans of Tribeloria displayed their best achievements, and competed and compared, and shared tricks and gave out tips, for it was a good time to be merry.

Ere'khan was curious to see if any men he recognized were about, still working their crafts and forging great things. Alas, his curiosity was only secondary now, and his task was to bring the sword to the Duke.

When he approached the palace, he was permitted, on account of his age, his station and his person, and was asked to wait prior to being brought before the great Duke.

II

-

The Duke

Qyian of Krar-Herol, fabled to have lived a hundred years, sat upon a magnificently gaudy throne of gold, his pale hair framing the sharp features of his lordly visage and his lean frame wrapped within the finest silk with a violent violet color. His dark eyes pierced the souls of those that came before him, and he knew that none would lie were they to speak in his presence.

Around the Duke, on steps descending from the throne, stood his guards, each as strong as the next, each more loyal than any hound raised by Qyian, and each about a smidgeon less intelligent than the man they served. Great weapons did they wield, enhanced by boastful sorcerers, secretive warlocks and old wizards, and shielded by impeccable armor, these warriors were the greatest in Tribeloria, and even the world, as far as the Duke was concerned.

They had slain so many things they no longer could recall what it was their weapons had last destroyed, nor did they keep count of the bodies left behind them. Qyian was quite proud of them.

What he was not proud of, however, was the air of tension that descended upon the hall when an old man, barely even alive, walked in. And it was not the presence of the haggard fellow who was being led towards the Duke that had tensed up the entire chamber, it was the demeanor of his guards.

He looked at them, each one, and they slowly relaxed, but the air of worry did not leave the hall, and Qyian of Krar-Herol was left displeased, and when Qyian of Krar-Herol was displeased, things went awry for anyone that was not deemed important by the Duke.

"Speak!" Urged the lord of the land, raising a hand in the air. The old man bowed his balding head and looked to him with glinting eyes. "And be quick. I am quite the busy man!" Added Qyian, sensing that a long speech was about to be held by the tiny fellow beneath him.

"Oh, great Duke, I shan't bother thee for long! My name is Ere'khan, and I'm a smith by trade, been one all my life. Two months ago a stranger commissioned me to make a sword that would be wielded by a man to remain in history for as long as men live, and so I made that sword," spoke the old smith, Ere'khan, and although his speech was already quite long, Qyian of Krar-Herol was becoming quite intrigued.

He had heard many legends of weapons with incredible power. He had even seen one, a few years ago, at a Santian celebration. Some noble of that kingdom brandished an axe so flamboyantly sublime it had drawn the eyes of all attendees to himself. Qyian did not even remember what was being celebrated anymore, but he did remember that axe - a legendary weapon indeed.

And so now the Duke of Tribeloria found himself listening to the hoarse old voice of this insignificant little smith, waiting for him to spill the beans. A weapon like what he was describing would certainly be something to look forward to.

"Alas, my lord, the commissioner also said that I ought to make the weapon reflect its true nature, and so I did. Toiled away for two months, I did, till I was done, and the sword I made is just like the commissioner ordered," Ere'khan continued his tale.

Qyian was growing tired of the drawling way the smith spoke, but he also felt more and more intrigued by the weapon, the sword, that was being described. The Duke carelessly neglected to pay heed to the words uttered by Ere'khan, for he built up his expectations to quite a degree.

"But he, that fellow, said I ought to present the sword to the man I thought ought to wield it and become forever known in history, so I brought it to you, my lord," and, as he said that, he brought out a lengthy leather wrap, tied with a thick cord, from his bag.

Qyian's guards perked up, but did not move to prevent the old man from doing anything, and so Ere'khan unwrapped the piece of leather. Within rested a sword, with an ordinary looking hilt, which had been wrapped in leather straps for ease of handling. The rest of the weapon was hidden within a scabbard that looked like it was made by a master craftsman, but that same craftsman had been unable to stop shaking while plying his trade.

"I present to you, my lord, Mithringaar," said the old smith and kneeled, holding up the sheathed weapon, and all was silent. The name of the sword echoed through the hall, and as it did the tenseness of Qyian's guards grew.

The Duke of Tribeloria rose from his golden seat of power and started moving towards old Ere'khan. His dark eyes glared at the smith, but they seemed unable to pierce whatever veil hid his mind.

The hilt and scabbard of the sword were underwhelming, considered Qyian of Krar-Herol, as he gazed upon them, moving closer to the old man. No valuable jewels, no regal colours, no royal metals. It was all quite simple, but the Duke could not shake the feeling that there was something else about the sword, something that escaped his eye.

So Qyian of Krar-Herol, Duke of Tribeloria, laid his thin and gentle pale fingers upon the rough leather surface of Mithringaar's handle, and it was cold to the touch, even though the day was warm and winter had barely just begun.

The chill of the sword was quite severe, biting the fine palm that held it. This cold, insidious feeling clambered up along Qyian of Krar-Herol's arm, and stayed there, as if to fester and freeze him from within.

But he had not yet seen the weapon Ere'khan truly spoke of, for that weapon was hidden by the scabbard. And with his left hand did the Duke of Tribeloria hold it, and with his right arm did he pull the blade from its binding.

As if a cloud descended upon the throne room of Qyian of Krar-Herol. And it was no ordinary cloud, but rather a miasma of sickness and fear. The Duke looked upon the weapon in his hand and could not believe it.

It was hideous! Long, to be held with either one or two hands, with only one blade. The opposite of the sharp, incredibly thin edge was a flat surface, adorned with growths that resembled rotting flesh of lepers, tumors of those afflicted with the rot of life or birthmarks and hideous scars. They all clamped together, barely visible, upon the backside of the sword, and

they made it so ugly to behold that Qyian of Krar-Herol could bear it no more and sheathed the sword back into its scabbard.

The air in the chamber returned to a more reasonable temperature, but, to the Duke's surprise, not one other person seemed to have noticed the rapid changes in the environment. Qyian looked at the old smith, and in his eyes he saw something, now, after he had held the sword forged by him.

The Duke of Tribeloria returned the sword to the leather wrapping still held in Ere'khan's hands as if it were a platter, waiting for the freshly cooked meal that was Mithringaar, ready to bring it to the one to sample it. Why, then, had Qyian of Krar-Herol returned it?

He walked up the steps to his great throne and sat down upon it, leaning deeper into it than ever before. That made him look small and frail.

"That is a very ugly sword..." started the Duke. He had to pick his words, for he knew not what to say. He shook his head. "No, no, not ugly, rather... Unsightly!" Corrected himself Qyian of Krar-Herol. That was a very rare occurrence.

Ere'khan, the poor old man, seemed confused by the Duke's reaction. He nodded in agreement.

"Yes, my lord, it is not nice to look upon, but that is its true nature - a weapon is an ugly thing, my lord, but that doesn't mean it isn't deadly. Simply test it, my lord, and you'll find it's like no other," urged the smith. He appeared intent to grant this gift of his to Qyian. 'Twas flattering, no doubt, as being told that one would be forever remembered in history was among the greatest words of praise.

However, as much as the Duke of Tribeloria wanted to accept those words, he had to take the weapon as well. And that he did not want.

"So be it. My knights will test it. However, I may not be convinced by just that!" Spoke Qyian of Krar-Herol and nodded to his guards.

Each of the armored men stepped towards Ere'khan, one by one, and then drew the sword, and held it in their hands, and tried it and swung it, and it whistled through the air as if it was cutting some invisible thing. They tossed it about each hand, to test its balance. One even ran his finger, gloved, along the blade, and pulled his hand back as if he had cut himself.

The Duke watched and saw that they seemed to be pleased. He, too, could see that the weapon had been quite light and wieldy, and the handle, although ordinary and boringly simple, was comfortable and accommodated the hand perfectly.

As he watched, his eyes once again sampled the sword, and Mithringaar did not fail to puzzle the Duke. What had seemed like tumors and rotting flesh now looked like metal that had been molten and cooled in an instant, as if by great force. They looked like the pustules on a man's flesh as it burned away. They resembled warts carried by witches and evil folks.

His guards were done, and each reported to him the same - the sword felt right in their hands, it felt as if it was just light enough, but not too lacking in weight. It was superbly balanced. It appeared to be immaculately sharpened.

"My knights tell me your sword is quite splendid," began Qyian of Krar-Herol, fighting his own self and trying to understand whether or not he wanted the sword or not, "but I would like to see how it matches up against another weapon!" Announced the Duke of Tribeloria. No victory had been reaped, but no loss had been suffered.

He had seen the sword appeared to be as great as Ere'khan claimed it was, and the prophecy the old smith had uttered, too, was appealing, and both those things made him want the sword. However Mithringaar, although it had rested easy in his palm, his hand had been frozen stiff, his fingers clenched about the handle and holding on as if he was a dead man. That made him crave the sword to be anywhere but in his possession.

Qyian of Krar-Herol, in his want to convince himself, ordered his guards to stage a friendly duel - to cross blades once or twice, to see how the sword performed in battle. If it were as legendary as Ere'khan claimed it was, it would be able to withstand a blow from the enchanted weapons wielded by his knights.

And so two of them, one wielding Mithringaar, another his own weapon, took their stances. The chamber was quiet. Many of the duke's courtiers had discreetly made their way into the throne room, and now many looked upon the frail old smith and the sword he had brought to present as a gift to the Duke.

Even if there were many, the chamber was deathly silent. The two knights, one to be on the receiving end of Mithringaar, another to wield it and attempt to tame it, were cautious. They had both tested the weapon, and they both knew it was a fine sword, with an even finer blade.

"Begin, we have not all day!" Ordered Qyian of Krar-Herol, although he, too, felt as if he had wanted to wait a while longer, so as to prevent this moment of triumph for the side of him that wanted the sword.

The knights began, and their duel was over with the first swing, for they followed the directions of their lord, and they attempted to lock blades. The air had whistled, and a sickening sound had carried through the hall. Some gasped, others stared on with mouths agape, unable to comprehend what had just occurred.

There stood both knights, and in their hands they held the hilts of their weapons. Mithringaar was still, as if cool and unimpressed, while the other sword was shaking wildly, its enchantments broken, its integrity compromised. The blade of the old smith's masterpiece had cut cleanly into the enchanted sword, and was less than an inch away from completely halving the other weapon.

Had either of the knights reacted any slower, one of them might have lost his life. The one wielding Mithringaar stepped back and, hurriedly, put the sword back on the leather in Ere'khan's hands and returned to his post by the Duke. So, too, did the other knight, but he was slower, looking down at his weapon, as if wondering how had that happened.

After a while, Qyian of Krar-Herol spoke, and he sounded sure and certain, although his soul was quivering in doubt. Still he craved not to have the sword Mithringaar, for it was hideous and foul, and in his mind he sought to find a way to decline it without appearing unreasonable, for only an unreasonable man would decline such a great weapon.

"That is proof enough that the weapon you have forged is incredibly mighty. To be able to cut through an enchanted sword of a quality so great it was believed the best money could buy, and with such ease, as if it were bread - you are truly an incredible master of your art," were the words uttered by the Duke of Tribeloria, and he had not lied. That was truly what he believed, but another thing he had failed to mention was his growing dissatisfaction with Mithringaar.

And this lack of satisfaction was not just because of how great it was and how impossible that seemed when compared to the sword's appearance, for it was clear that the blade was finely crafted, even if adorned with its ugly protrusions. There was a feeling of discomfort. An air of wrongness about the weapon. That drove him to avoid Mithringaar with all he could muster.

"Thank you, my lord," said Ere'khan, bowing down before the Duke of Tribeloria, who was feeling uneasy. His admission that the weapon was, indeed, fine, made it more likely that he would accept it, were he a reasonable person, and he was, indeed, reasonable. However, he felt the most unusual urge to act unreasonably.

"However!" Quickly interjected Qyian of Krar-Herol, worried, only in his mind, that either the old smith or one of his own courtiers would speak up about the unusual amount of time he was taking to decide on whether or not to accept the gift. "There is something else I would know. Bring me the smiths from outside, one by one, so that I am ask them a question!" Ordered the Duke.

Ere'khan was asked to stand behind a curtain, so as to not be noticed and so as to not affect the decisions of the others. The Duke of Tribeloria hoped that he would find himself convinced by the smiths to not accept the weapon. Convinced, of course, only in the eyes of the observing courtiers.

And the other smiths were brought before him, and he asked them to appraise Mithringaar from just a first glance and then after handling it. Most of them said that the weapon was shoddy at best before handling it. Only a few saw some promise within the quality of the sword.

But when they handled Mithringaar, each and every one of them changed the tune of their songs. Those who had claimed that the weapon was shoddy found themselves vigorously retracting their claim and heaping praise upon it, quick to hand it back to the knight who had

been tasked with presenting it to them. Those who had seen promise in the quality of the craftsmanship found themselves announcing the sword to be of the few masterpieces they had seen in their lives.

The smiths left, and Ere'khan was brought before the Duke once more, and he stood, waiting, expecting an answer. And an answer Qyian of Krar-Herol had, for while the smiths had walked through, one of them, a half-orc, had reminded him of the existence of a race of people he loathed greatly. How convenient it was that Mithringaar had the same colour as the skin of these sapient beings the Duke of Tribeloria so despised...

"You are indeed a great master of your art, Ere'khan. Alas, you have made the mistake of forging your weapon with a metal that appears green in the light of our sun. Normally, I would not mind, but your weapon I cannot accept, for it reminds me of an orc!" Proclaimed Qyian of Krar-Herol and knew he had found his reasonable explanation for being unreasonable in not accepting the weapon that was being presented to him.

With those words did the Duke of Tribeloria send the old smith away, and the faire continued. Ere'khan was stricken by this, for he had thought great Qyian of Krar-Herol would have accepted Mithringaar graciously, and the task laid out before the man would have been done. Alas, it had not been so.

And defeated did Ere'khan return home, his hope nearly dashed. He spent a few more days thinking of what it had been that had happened, and he found himself saddened greatly by those events, for he was not certain what great person he could find and give the sword to. Perhaps he could find another ruler, one who lorded over the neighboring countries... But the journey would be far harder, and he doubted he would be able to do it. Not only that, but would the lords let him enter their courts and present the great weapon he had crafted? He doubted that they would even consider.

And so, saddened beyond his expectations, Ere'khan retired from working the forge at all. He only taught his students, hopeful that one day a great person would pass through and appear great in the eyes of the old smith, so that he could give Mithringaar to them.

However, Ere'khan was not well versed in the ways of the courts of lords and ladies. Unknown, as it was, to him, he had not noticed how the courtiers of the Duke of Tribeloria began to chitter among themselves and glance at his back as he had walked out of the throne room. He had not noticed how the other smiths looked at him, and had seen in his hands the sword Mithringaar, and their eyes were filled with great respect, and he had not thought that they would share the tale of this gift that was declined.

Word of this spread across the land, and even in the furthest realms of man did the story travel, and many men, women and children heard of this weapon that was so well made that it had cleaved through a magic sword. Not only did those rumors spread like wildfire through the guilds and communities, built around smiths helping one another, it also became popular among the common folk. They focused, quite sternly, on the statement of the Duke - that it reminded him of an orc.

Many fellows had concluded that it was a mighty fine, but ugly, weapon, and so it had not been accepted. Others figured the Duke was a fool for not taking it. Yet more had different opinions. But, the most important opinion was that of the orcs themselves.

Those who had heard of this story were hard pressed when it came to sharing their thoughts about it. A sword that was reminiscent of an orc? But how could a weapon remind somebody of a race of people? In any case, the orcs felt as if that weapon had been, doubtless, wrongly accused, and the smith who had crafted it had been wronged.

Hearing the sentiment of these green folks, an informant made his way to Marnum, and there he whispered to a soldier. And that soldier, knowing what he knew, thanked the informant and paid him a few gold coins, and then he, too, went to tell someone else. As these news went around, they finally made their way to a certain general, one who was planning a war.

And that general, knowing what he knew of the Tribelorian Duke, knowing what he knew of royalty, knowing what he knew of aristocracy, knowing what he knew of battle, knowing what he knew of smithing, knowing what he knew of orcs, and knowing what he knew of his enemy, decided that, perhaps, he could benefit from having that weapon.

So the general spoke to a few people, gave some orders and returned to planning his war. Those who had been given orders set out to complete them. Weeks passed, as the trip from Marnum, in the distant east, beyond the great mountain Orun, was long and arduous.

And one day, late in the afternoon, shortly before the Sun would set, two Alentumian riders found themselves before old Ere'khan's home.

"Hail!" Greeted one of them, his voice strange to the old smith's ears. "We come seeking Ere'khan. Is that you?" explained the rider and finished with a question. Ere'Khan nodded.

"Yes, I am Ere'khan. Why, pray tell, do you seek to find me?" asked the old smith after confirming. The riders, looking to each other, nodded, and got off their horses. One presented a large bag to Ere'khan, while the other bowed courtly.

"We have ridden for fifty days from our land of Alentumia, our God-given goal to find you and obtain the sword you tried to give to the Duke of your land, but was declined. We have brought coin - enough coin to buy a hundred normal swords, and even more, for we know how great the weapon you have wreathed is. Please, Ere'khan, allow us to buy the sword you've crafted!" Pleaded the rider, remaining bowed before the smith.

Ere'khan was stunned. A year, if not more, had passed since his visit to the capital of Tribeloria, and he had lost all hope of finding the great person the sword was meant for. And yet these riders had ridden for almost two months only to buy his sword, and then they would ride another fifty days back to their homeland. Who could it be that they were doing this for, other than their ruler? For a moment, he considered. He would sell them Mithringaar, but first he would know a little more of the person who had sent them.

"Tell me, Alentumian riders, who is it that you are buying my sword for?" inquired the old man.

"We have been given the order to purchase the sword made by you, directly by General Corvus," informed the rider holding the bag. Ere'khan could imagine it was full of money.

"I do not know of this man, General Corvus. Could you tell me a little about him, so that I may learn who it is that wants to own the sword I've made," demanded the old smith. The two riders looked to one another again. The one holding the bag nodded to his companion.

"General Corvus is an honorable man, devoted to serving the Empire. He has been in the military for twenty-five years and is known as the most brilliant strategist of our Emperor. He speaks with a harsh tone, but his words are never cruel," the rider told Ere'khan of the man, named Corvus, and the old smith considered, for a moment, that perhaps the Alentumian rider was regaling exactly what he had been informed to say, in the event he was asked about the general.

That was a possibility, no doubt, but it was of no consequence. Ere'khan had known little of his own Duke, and still knew far less than was to be desired, but he had attempted to present Mithringaar to Qyian of Krar-Herol. It had been based off of his belief that, occupying a position of power, the leader of Tribeloria was bound to be a great person, to be remembered for countless years after his passing.

Now, after that person had declined, Ere'khan had seen that his choice had been the quickest, least difficult one. It would have been a very ordinary situation for anyone involved. A smith comes in, presents his gift, then the Duke accepts it and everyone ends up happy, having invested little effort.

Perhaps there needed to be effort on both sides? Ere'khan's own effort to forge the sword, and now the effort of those riders to come and obtain it, and then bring it to the general. That, figured the old smith, would be the way. So he nodded to the one who had spoken.

"I see. A worthy man, this General Corvus seems to be. I will sell to you my masterpiece, so that you may bring it to him," announced Ere'khan, and the riders were happy to hear those words.

They paid him a fortune, far more money than the old smith had ever seen. In truth, it had been more money than all three of them, combined, had ever seen, but the riders were loyal to their country, and they sought not to steal from it. Ere'khan, now richer than anyone in his hometown, concluded he would give the gold and platinum away to those who needed it, and

for his wife he would keep a small fraction of it. The mountain awaited him, where there was no use for money.

The riders thanked him heartily and set off at once, their journey through the vast continent was bound to last a long, long time.

III

-

The General

Lucius Corvus, General of the Alentumian military, serving directly under the Emperor, was informed that there was a delivery for him. Lucius had been overwhelmed by deliveries lately. The war was brewing, and he was planning on leading the legion delegated to him as diligently as always. The deliveries were, without fault, letters and declarations, information about enemy movements and suspected plans.

Their spies were doing lots of work to keep them well informed of what the thoughts of their enemies were, and General Corvus was pleased by their own diligence. So far, everything was going well, according to plan. The Principality of Biduronis, who had been challenging the authority of the Empire for many years, was now going to get what it deserved.

Much to the General's surprise, the delivery was made by two individuals he had not seen in quite a while. They were unshaven, tired and filthy, but in their eyes he saw something he had wanted to see upon their return. The glimmer of pride.

"Sir!" They saluted, placing their hands, balled up into the form of fists, upon their chests. General Corvus replied in kind, puffing his breast up and slamming his mighty fist into his armor.

"At ease. I see you were successful, but, still... Report!" Commanded the leader of the legion, for a moment relieved by the knowledge he would not be listening to chatter about the war effort. The soldiers, as sore as men could be, relaxed their postures and breathed, each, a heavy sigh of relief.

"Sir, we found him after asking about his whereabouts at the Tribelorian border. He sold us the sword, but first he requested to know who would we be buying it for," informed one of the riders. They were, normally, cavalymen, but Corvus had needed to be certain those he would have sent were going to return. Their presence had, thankfully, not been needed in battle.

"Good. The sum that I provided you with was, I hope, enough. You may keep any leftovers, as a bonus. You have done me a great service, and it should pay off for our Empire in the long run!" Announced the general, turning to fully face his men, leaving the battlemap behind himself on the table. Now his plan could go into effect.

The riders bowed their heads in a sign of thanks and then one of them, he, who had not yet spoken, pulled a wrapping from behind himself, one that must have been tucked away in his backpack. Slowly his hands moved and undid the binding of the large piece of leather, and then he uncovered the contents.

A scabbard, within which rested a sword. At first glance General Corvus found himself confused, for the appearance of the weapon was not, at all, as ugly as it had been fabled to have been. The scabbard was made of fine wood, framed by metal that had trickled all over the once living matter to form a web of nigh unbreakable solidity. Each section of the web was unique in its own right, and each looked like it had been made exclusively to serve some unknown purpose.

To General Corvus, the weapon's scabbard was fine and beautiful. The description he had heard of it was not, at all, fitting. So great was the difference, in fact, that he felt uncertain. Was that truly the sword named Mithringaar? Was that truly the weapon to have made the Duke of Tribeloria, known to be greedy and wanting of things, want for nothing more than to part with it? Had his men tricked him?

As he was about to inquire, he stopped himself. He could not truly know of the sword's truth if he did not draw it from the scabbard. He could not tell if it were the weapon he had sent for, unless, of course, he handled it.

And so did General Corvus, mighty leader of the Alentumian army, take hold of Mithringaar for the first time. And as he held it, he felt its weight - a weight so great it was almost unmanageable, but, simultaneously, a weight so meager when faced with his awesome power that it felt like a toothpick resting in the palm of his hand.

He held the handle of the sword. The leather was perfectly wrapped around the metal, creating an immaculate buffer. The lack of a handguard hinted that this weapon was made for a true master of war, one who would need not cross swords with anyone, for his victory would always come quickly and would be assured from the beginning of the battle.

Corvus drew the blade of the sword from the scabbard, and a silence descended upon the tent in which he had stood up till this very moment. In front of him were his men, curious to see the weapon they had not dared to inspect, and then he knew that he was no longer there. All that was before him was an endless, barren field. In his hand rested Mithringaar, and he heard its song of bloodshed, its song of honor and pride, and its weep of death.

He knew that the weapon in his hand was great and powerful, and he knew it was to be wielded in battle, for the sheer purpose of war. And his palm grew sweaty, his arm started shaking, his eyes widened...

Back in the tent, he sheathed Mithringaar into its scabbard. The General nodded to his soldiers and dismissed them, thanking them for a job well done. They excused themselves and left, allowing his return to solitude, and the presence of his own thoughts.

Corvus was certain that Mithringaar was as great a weapon as he had suspected it was. He was certain that the Duke's words, equating its appearance to that of an orc, were also closely connected to the sword, as he had thought. With this weapon in his possession, the General had no doubt that the orcs, who had been, so far, hesitant to join the army and fight alongside their fellow countrymen, would have no reservations about taking up arms.

The orcs, even though they had lived among the Alentumian people for a very long time, were still foreign in the Empire, and they had yet to integrate well enough within it. They were the only group that was not subject to mandatory conscription, having been given the opportunity to decide whether or not they joined the army, and that had been a mistake.

An orc was twice as strong as a man, even their women, and they all made for the finest warriors. General Corvus knew that, for he had seen the Emperor's personal guard, and he had recognized that many of them were orcs. Another reason why an orc was a great soldier was

their faithfulness. He knew of it first-hand, for he had served with orcs, and he knew how brightly the fire of love for their country and their emperor burned within their hearts.

But the orcs did not feel loved by the people, and while General Corvus could not make the people love the orcs, he knew that if the orcs fought alongside the people, they would become closer to one another. And to get the orcs in the army, he knew that the sword that looked like an orc would be helpful.

Yet the more he held Mithringaar, the more uncertain he became. Was it truly because of that, because of the great need to unite the two peoples, or was it because he simply wanted stronger warriors, so he could take Brapland? Was it for his personal gain?

General Corvus repelled those thoughts. He knew why he was doing what he was doing, and it was not to benefit himself. If the Empire prospered, he, too, would prosper. Life would only get better with time, and the bigger the Alentumian Empire was, the more time would be had.

He untied his old sword from his belt. Giving it one last look, admiring its truly beautiful form, fine craftsmanship and wonderful, glimmering jewels, encrusted into the handle, he bid it farewell with no words. And then he tied Mithringaar's scabbard to his belt, so that he could get to work.

The days passed, and he was called to a war council. Each available general had been working on a plan of attack, and they were to be presented to the Emperor on this day. He had ridden to great Marnum for two days, and the sight of the glorious seat of Alentumian power was beautiful to behold, as it always was.

General Corvus mconvenedade sure to carry himself openly, displaying the sword for all to see, and look upon it people did, and see it they did. On his way to the palace, he caught the stares of passers-by and he heard their murmuring, and he knew they would speak of this again.

And he reached the magnificent center of Marnum. There, the towers of the Imperial Palace pierced the skies, the grand citadel standing proud and unreachable by evil meaning hands. Its beauty, thought Corvus, was the perfect juxtaposition to Mithringaar's unsightliness. The best place where he could display it, and show the orcs that they were welcome.

As he walked into the great hall, and there, within, sat upon the throne, the Emperor waited, surrounded by his guards. The table before him had been taken up by maps and papers, and around the table stood the other generals. Mithringaar exemplified Corvus' great purpose, and it only grew in magnitude as the eyes of all who were present fell upon the sword.

"Ah, Corvus, you're finally here!" Exclaimed the Emperor, elated that all who were called had come, "I've no doubt that your journey has been long, but I know you are capable, thus the council may begin!" With that announcement, made by the ruler of Alentumia, it was so.

The generals presented their plans, they spoke at length about the benefits of each, as well as the possible drawbacks they had, and they debated the best course of action. The Emperor listened, asking questions from time to time, but never voicing his thoughts, for he knew they would sway the debate. All of them knew, yet none of them tried to convince the Emperor that their plan was best.

They truly sought the greatest course of action, for the Empire's growth would mean a good future for them all. Corvus knew that, and he looked upon the plans that were proposed, and he found some to his liking, and others he considered poor.

As was expected, the day was not enough for them to decide, and so they ended with a great meal. On the next day, and the day after that, they again, and they considered.

Every day, while riding to the palace, General Corvus took the longest route and went slowly, for Mithringaar had to be seen by all in Marnum. The orcs had to know that his welcome was extended to them all.

All eyes in the throne room spent more and more time gazing at him and at Mithringaar, whenever they wandered onto his form. Even the Emperor looked at him, and there was a wink in his ruler's curious glance.

On the eve of the fifth day, they finally made their choice. The strategy was sound, and even with the possible hiccups that could occur, it was still the best they had. Plans would be drawn up so that these potential issues could be addressed, and the council officially ended. With that,

the preparations for war could begin, and Corvus knew that many orcs, who would not have considered joining the army and taking up arms in the name of the Emperor, were going to enlist, for he had shown them that they were equal among the people of Alentumia.

He decided to spend a little bit of time with his son, for, soon enough, he would once again be consumed by the great work that had fallen onto his shoulders. The boy was not old enough to wield a weapon, and yet he showed great interest in his father's activities. Most of all, however, he asked if he could see that ugly sword.

"My son," said General Corvus as he drew Mithringaar from its scabbard and looked upon its menacing form, "you must know that the sword is a weapon, and weapons are used to take away the lives of others." He finished, while pointing the curved tip of the weapon down and presenting the hilt to his son.

The boy, gleefully, grasped the sword, but, as soon as he did that, his eyes went wide with fear, and a scream so visceral and haunting erupted from Mithringaar, that, without giving it much thought, and simply reacting as fast as he could, Corvus swatted at his son's hands, forcing him to drop it. The blade clanged against the floor, as the General's son collapsed, unconscious.

After that, Corvus kept Mithringaar firmly strapped to his belt at all times, and considered the frightful power of the weapon. It seemed as though it had reacted, as if with a hateful howl, to being held by an innocent child. Maybe its appearance was so foul as a means to convey how horrible it truly was. And, like the sides of a coin, it could never be wielded by a thing of beauty - for innocence was, truly, something truly beautiful.

The General spent his preparations for the war thinking of the awesome power of the sword, and considering whether or not he, himself, was capable of wielding it because of his great purpose, or because he, much like it, was hideous and vile? For was not Mithringaar's horrible nature rooted in the essence of a weapon? A tool made to kill, and to kill not animals, with the intent of using them as food, but to kill other sentient creatures. Other humans.

And he, albeit not created and conceived with that goal in mind, with that simple, abominable purpose, he had molded himself into such a being. He sent countless men into battle, to meet their deaths, and he had learned, for many years, how to best kill others. With his own two

hands he had slain at least a hundred men. War was, as he would put it, in his blood, and it was to forever be associated with his family, his name.

So, truly, he was horrible. That realization dawned upon him days after the accident with his son, from which the boy had recovered after but a night's rest, and a great feeling of guilt had washed over him. And guilt led to doubt - he questioned himself, his methods, and his purpose. Even if he retained the belief that his purpose was righteous and just, even if he maintained the faith he had in his nation, a very real concern swelled up within him.

His parading around the city did not cease, though it only changed in frequency and continuity. He still presented himself, and the weapon, and many onlookers always gathered to stare, for the gleaming armor and beautiful apparel that he wore made the sword appear so unfitting for his waist, and yet he wielded it still.

And he diligently prepared for war, and he did all of his duties as if nothing had happened to shake him to his core. Yet, when there was time, he pondered. Lucius Corvus was an intelligent man, which was part of the reason as to why he had been made a General of the Alentumian Empire. However, it was known that with a deeper understanding of things came a greater possibility of finding oneself... Saddened by the state of affairs.

Maybe, as he held Mithringaar and considered its meaning, he was finding himself in a most unfortunate situation. Perhaps he, himself, was starting to understand this thing that he had devoted his life to, and as a result of that, he was becoming saddened with the state of affairs. Maybe the sight of his son, motionless, feared, if only for an instant, to be dead, had made him change his outlook. War was a necessity, and wielding a weapon, much like war, was necessary. It could be reasoned that they were not truly needed, for if the world was just, then there would be no war and no conflict, no need to harm other people. But it was not so, and thus war was the only answer to many questions.

Alas, it was the answer to the question currently plaguing his land, and so the time for war came. General Corvus rode with his legion, headed north, to the Principality. He knew that this war, if it were handled correctly, would be easily won. Brapland was meager, while Alentumia was mighty. And one needed not do much, other than look, and it would be obvious why.

The great armies of the Empire marched forward, their purpose true, their faith unfailing. Trained warriors, of all walks of life, marched to the North, and their footsteps echoed like the thunderous roar of a storm. At his side, the blade Mithringaar hung heavily, and its terrible song echoed in the mind of the General.

Scouts, sent forth to gather intel, returned, and the Legion corrected its movements in accordance, if there was any need. The other Legions, each tasked with its own duty, either marched into Brapland through other roads, followed in the footsteps of the leading Legions, or remained in Alentumia, stationed at the borders, so as to dissuade any potential attacks from neighboring countries.

The communications were good, and everything was going as planned. Opposing armies had yet to assault Corvus' Legion, and any that were spotted kept retreating in the same direction, evading battle. Bravely, with great certainty, the General marched through the mountain passes, headed for the heart of Brapland.

And that was when the scouts returned, and reported that a large Braplandian force had made camp to the North, and had even fortified itself with barricades. By the looks of things, the enemy would make a stand here. The communications from the other invading Legions had no information concerning similar occurrences, and so, with great urgency, he wrote a letter, informing his colleagues of his intention to assault the fortification and sent it by courier.

A sense of foreboding dwelled within him, and the weapon at his waist became heavier and heavier, as if something was wrong. Or, he thought, its thirst for blood grew greater, as it could feel the battle brewing. He sent his scouts out once more, and told them to be more diligent than they had been ever before. They were to look through every nook and cranny, to venture further than they had before, and to make sure that things were clean, and that no trickery was afoot.

In addition, he consulted with a man in the employ of the Legions, but not a trained soldier - a wizard, taught far to the North. That man was old and wise, and he wielded unnatural powers which granted him insight that was not readily available to most people.

And he said he felt a great unease within himself when he thought of the battle that would be led, for there was something very crooked and foul surrounding the Legion. Corvus, considering that the legendary weapon at his side could have a hand in this, informed the wizard of its presence, and even displayed it to him. That, the General concluded, had been the correct choice, as the old man grew relieved, and stated that, if it were at their side, then there was little to worry about.

At that evening, Lucius Corvus rested, his mind heavy with the burden of making a decision. His scouts were prone to return tomorrow morning, and the communiqué should have reached the following Legion by then. He dreamed that night, and his dreams were not like what he usually found himself experiencing.

There was no wonder of incredible sight to behold, there was no hidden desire of his that made itself known. In fact, it was reminiscent of a nightmare, though he did not find himself waking up with a start. It was just a great, plain field, spreading far, far beyond the horizon, a seemingly infinite place. The ground was white, and its surface was chalky, as if a mixture of gravel and sand. The skies were pitch black, and no clouds flew overhead. There was no Sun and no Moons, nor were there Stars.

It was empty, vast, and silent. However, in the middle of it, straight ahead, was Mithringaar, imbedded into the ground, looming menacingly. It had a shadow, a line of darkness in the pristine white floor. Corvus looked upon the weapon, and he reasoned that this dream was a test, of sorts, one that would decide if his will was strong enough to do what his duty demanded of him.

Thus, he marched toward it, and with each step he took, a feeling welled within him. Not one that he knew, but one that could be described. As one signs their name on a piece of paper, and sees the ink take place onto the parchment, written by their own hand, one feels some form of finality. And Corvus, having signed his name under many documents, knew that feeling well.

And that was why it was so strange to him that he experienced it as he approached the sword, and, as his hand wrapped around the hilt, that same sense of finality seeped into himself.

Upon waking up, Lucius Corvus was well rested, and his mind was clear. He felt healthy, and he seemed younger than his years, at least to himself. A great knowledge had been ingrained within him, and it was an answer to a question he had not dared ask himself directly, yet he knew that it was the thing that plagued all of mankind.

And the answer was negative. For he had wielded a weapon with the intent of harming another, for he had killed many men, for he had surrendered that right to life that he possessed, by taking away the life of another. And, thus, he knew that he was destined to die, as were all mortal beings, though he felt no fear of that inevitable demise, for he recognized that he had, willingly, made it known to the Universe, and to the Gods, that he was in agreement with losing his life before his time, before age took him away.

It would not be an injustice, not to him, if he were slain, for he had done that to many others. Thus, on that morning, with all the doubts gone from his mind, Lucius Corvus was calm and content with his life. Not only that, but he was incredibly confident, and that confidence that he displayed was contagious, as his men grew emboldened by him.

The scouts reported that there was nothing unusual. One had evaded a close call, having almost been caught by the enemy, but the intelligence he provided was valuable - a vantage point whereupon archers could be stationed. General Corvus congratulated him, and his colleagues, on a job well done. Weighing his options, and considering the consequences of each, as well as the probabilities of things unfolding, he concluded that victory was assured.

He gave the order, and the men gathered. The might of an Alentumian Legion, standing before him, at his beck and call. Each soldier trained splendidly well, each warrior armed and ready for a great battle, in the name of the Empire.

"Men!" He roared as he addressed them all. "Today, we have come to make history!" General Corvus spoke, and his soldiers shouted in agreement with him.

His eyes locked with many others, and he saw within them pride, excitement, uncertainty, fear, bravery, and a great, unflinching loyalty to the Alentumian Empire. He could tell that these soldiers were going to fight tooth and nail for the glory of the Emperor, for the future of

their children and their homeland, and for the prospect of raiding and looting villages that would wind up in their path.

"Our great destiny is to crush our enemies. Brapland has spat upon our great Empire, and has dishonored us, its citizens. And we have all the right to be scornful, for this is a great affront to us, the Alentumian people!" As he said so, the men roared, many slammed their fists against their breastplates, others clanged their weapons against their shields. He continued, "today, we will fight for the future of our children, and for our own, so that we may live better, free of bitter resentment born out of envy! For they wish they lived in a land as beautiful as ours, for they dream they had a leader as graceful as our Emperor, for they wish they had what we do!" The Legion roared once more.

General Corvus tended to know what to say when addressing his soldiers, especially when it came to knowing how to rile people up, how to incite an urge towards violence. Everything he had said, he believed, and most of it was right. And his men had faith in him, and they believed him.

"Let us take this land, men, and make it our own. Let us make the lives of these sad, scornful people better. Let us teach that stuck up Prince of theirs that respect is earned, and we have more than earned our own! For the Emperor, for us, for the Empire!" General Corvus shouted, and slammed his fist into his breastplate.

The Legion's cry was like a rumble of the Earth, like an Avalanche rushing from the peaks of a mountain to turn everything beneath itself into mush, like the eruption of a volcano. The clang of their gauntleted hands onto their armored chests was deafening, and the great euphoria that took the soldiers, as if by surprise, was incredible.

They marched towards the enemy barricade, at the helm were those most heavily armored, their tower shields capable of withstanding great blows and preventing arrows from reaching them. Much like a turtle, the formation had them clumped together, half of them keeping their shields overhead, covering those before themselves and their own bodies, while those at the front held their shields so that nothing could harm them from the front.

The cover of night was not needed. The vantage point was seized, and the bowmen began their rain of arrows, forcing the Braplandian soldiers to look for cover. The enemy was not going to be able to respond in kind, and, thus, the approach of the heavy infantry was secured.

As soon as the barricade was breached, the light infantry charged forward, assisting their heavily armored comrades. General Corvus had not joined the battle himself, as had the cavalymen. There was barely any opportunity for them to ride into battle under these conditions, and, thus, they cheered their companions on from the camp. The Braplandian force, although resilient, was not going to be able to deal with the Legion's might.

However, a scout came rushing in. An army, riding from the West, numbering in the thousands. And that was just the cavalry - how much infantry and how many archers were following in the riders' path, the man did not know.

Corvus was devastated. Negotiations had been led, over many long months, to ensure that Brapland's neighboring lands would not come to their rescue. Great tributes had been paid, and the spies stationed in their cities had not reported anything of armies being levied. However, he had to think fast.

Considering the speed at which the makeshift fortification was falling, and the fact that the cavalry that was approaching from the West, Corvus came to the realization that, even if the soldiers did manage to take the position, it would be of little use to them. Not only that, but the size of the army that was riding towards them was vast - with a cavalry force many times greater than that of Corvus' own Legion, judging by the reports of the scouts - and that meant the possibility of the Legion coming out victorious would be very slight.

General Corvus took hold of his warhorn, and blew into it with all his might. It howled through the mountain pass, calling for the men to retreat. However, the rearguard that had been left behind was very small, and it would be crushed by the incoming cavalry, which would proceed to flank, to great effect, the Legion's retreating infantry.

Lucius Corvus, thus, made a decision. To make sure that the Alentumian Empire was going to lose as little as possible, and so that its forces would remain strong, he opted to lead the cavalry,

in an attempt to reinforce the rearguard and buy more time for the retreat of the Legion's main force.

What was it that drove him to do such a thing? Was it honor, and the call of duty he had to heed? To do all in his power to save as many lives as he could, in the name of the Empire? That could have been it, indeed, and yet it could have been something else. After all, it was Lucius Corvus' own failing to properly gather intel before attacking that had left his army in such a situation.

Perhaps it was a need to redeem himself for wronging his men and the Empire in such a manner? It was plausible, yes, because Lucius Corvus valued the future of his country more than he valued his own, for he knew, in his heart, that one life was not worth more than one other. He could not tell himself that his expertise was valuable enough to sacrifice the larger part of his Legion, just so he could escape.

And yet those were not the reasons, no matter how good and sensible they were. In fact, what truly did drive General Corvus to do such a thing was unheard of, for everyone would always come up with an explanation that was at least a little glamorous or sensible, and no one would want to point out that the reason had simply been 'just because'.

Lucius Corvus had held onto Mithringaar for many days now. Weeks, months, even, and not once had he wielded that weapon in battle. Not once had he been granted the opportunity to use it, to test its mettle, to see what the great power it possessed was. A return on this investment of imperial funds that he had used was needed, and, to use the horrible sword was the only way to obtain that validation.

As he charged with his men, meeting the enemy head on, in an attack so reckless and obviously futile, he pulled Mithringaar out of its sheath, and a cold fell over the battlefield. Lucius Corvus felt a pair of hands - a sensation that was so unlike anything he had ever experienced - and they wrapped themselves around him. As the vicious weapon was raised into the air, high above his head, the General realized that it had not been his own decision.

It had simply been the purest being of Mithringaar, a compulsion to seek confirmation that it did, indeed, exist. One that had not come from him, but, rather, from the nature of his deeds. A

weapon exists only to murder others - to take life away from those who still possess it. Upon taking a life, one's own existence becomes unwarranted - for they are guilty of ending another's.

And as there is nothing to make one life worth more than another, the fact that Lucius Corvus had taken hundreds of lives over his own lifetime and still lived, was evidence enough that his own life being lost would be no tragedy. If anything, that would be the repayment of that debt, for it was not the investment made during the purchase of Mithringaar that needed to be returned, but, rather, all the borrowed time that he had been living on.

These hands were the hands of death itself. He could feel the cold, cruel embrace of Lih'Ve, and he knew that he would die this day, for he had drawn a weapon with the intent to kill, and he had done so successfully many times before. That was what Mithringaar was, a horrible thing, a weapon in the truest sense of the word.

Lucius Corvus' force crashed into the cavalry of the opposing army, and the battle exploded in a shockwave of screams, roars, the clang of steel upon steel, the whinnies of horses and the sputter of blood. It was in Mithringaar's nature to take lives, and, as he wielded that weapon, so, too, did Corvus adopt its nature. He would take lives.

The blade tore through the flesh of his enemies, cutting through them as if they were the thinnest twigs in the world, and with each swing it seemed to grow lighter, even though it grew coated with blood and gore. He pondered if that was its power, its magic - to make the act of taking a life so effortless that it was nothing more than moving one's arm?

Or, perhaps, that was only part of it. Lucius Corvus' horse was skewered by a spear, and he flew off the beast, landing heavily on the ground. Around himself, the brutal butchering of his men was commencing in earnest, and yet he could not see much, other than the frames of those who committed the acts. Mounted soldiers, wielding spears and swords, riding with great impunity, as if they were righteous in their approach.

Lucius Corvus knew better, though, and as he rose, unscathed by his fall, he felt as though his youth's power was returning. Mithringaar weighed heavily in his hand, and yet it was as light as a feather, and upon him loomed the staggering weight of thousands of lives, of his legion, and he bore that weight upon his shoulders, and to his great surprise he could manage it.

A roar tore itself from his lips as he dove into the battle once more, cleaving through the legs of beasts and men, toppling any foe that stood before him with incredible ease, and as the life faded from the eyes of those crushed by their steeds or those carved up by the foul weapon, Lucius Corvus felt his power grow. No longer did he feel the aches of old age, no longer did his armor feel heavy, no longer did he struggle to breathe as he exerted himself, and his vision cleared, and his senses grew more acute than they had been in the last twenty years.

That was it, indeed. *Taking* the lives of others, as if to add to his own, for what was murder, if not an act that was meant to benefit exclusively the murderer? And what was a weapon, if not a tool meant to benefit its wielder, with which he committed atrocities against life itself?

Lucius Corvus could not understand how his mind had such great freedom to ponder these things as the heat of the battle around him grew more and more intense. Blood splashed all over his face and body, and painted him red. It pooled at his feet and beneath the corpses of his enemies or allies. A fight required one's full attention, and yet there he was, completely cognisant of his situation, aware of the smallest thing, whilst also wandering through the deepest recesses of his mind with such ease like nothing he had ever been able to manage...

He saw things that he had seen before, and yet, as he looked into the eyes of those he killed, he was overwhelmed with *sonder*. How could he be doing this, he asked himself, how could he be killing so many men, most of whom had wives and children, and all of whom had friends and families, and how all of them led such complex and impossible to describe lives, exactly like his own?

Lucius Corvus told himself that he had to fight for the Empire, for his people. After all, it was to make their future better... But what made their future more valuable than that of others? Definitely, the futures of those who were conquered by the Alentumian Empire were made better, and yet there was never anyone who was unaffected. A son, a friend, a husband, a father - someone was always lost in the battles that preceded these events.

But he had known all that. There was no need for him to think of it, much less while he cut down more men than he could count. Nothing would change, and especially great would be the nothing that would be altered for him, for, even if he stopped, he would die. Even if he killed all

these men, by the thousands, nothing would change, because he would still be called by his duty, for the world was simply that way.

The murder of others seemed to be in mankind's nature, much like it was Mithringaar's nature to kill, and nature was very difficult to overcome. In fact, it was impossible to do so, for it was the expression of the Gods' being. The only thing that could be done was to appease nature, to strike a bargain with the Gods and stave off disaster. Mankind, or, rather, all sapient beings, were slaves to their nature.

Something pierced his body. He barely felt it, and as he moved, the wooden pole upon which the spearhead rested snapped. His sword cut through the wielder of that weapon, and took his life. Lucius Corvus felt as though he had reached a conclusion. It made sense, now, that things were as they were, for they were such due to the will of the Gods, and it was in the nature of all sapient beings to be as they were.

He tried to adopt that as reasoning, to explain it all away with that, to rationalize the senseless slaughter of young lads whose lives were just beginning, and yet he could not help but feel a gnawing at the back of his mind. More and more men fell before him and Mithringaar, and, by now, it was almost as though he was the last man standing, and at his feet a mountain of corpses blocked the passage to the East.

It was in his nature, and that was entirely normal, he tried to tell himself, but a sound kept reappearing in his mind. A scream, so loud and horrible, that it had inflicted upon him agony like none he had ever experienced before. If it was within the nature of sapient beings to murder one another, then why did the sword, whose nature was to kill, cry out, as if in complete anguish, when held by a child?

Lucius Corvus saw, out of the corner of his eye, something on the mountain-tops. A man - or so it seemed - clad in robes that flailed wildly in the wind. He was too distant, and so the General ignored him. No longer were the men surrounding him intent on attacking him, but, rather, they forced their steeds to rear back and retreat.

There were no more attacks that he needed to avoid, no more charging foes. Instead, he darted towards them and carved their bodies to pieces with a single swipe. His whole frame was

covered in blood, from head to toe. Was that natural, he pondered, as he considered the child's existence. The child...

It learned from others. It was born into the world completely pure and innocent. It never truly harbored this nature to murder, no. Its sheer being was based on co-existence, for without others, the child was not going to live. Perhaps that was the answer? Perhaps it was something else entirely that made sapient beings seek to murder one another, rather than their nature? Could it be... Their nurture?

The man on the mountaintops moved his arms, and a faint light appeared between them. Corvus' eyes went wide, for he realized two things. First, he recognized that it was not within any sapient being's nature to murder others, and, instead, it was a perversion brought about by something else, something that he could not point out, but he could tell was important enough to convince all of mankind and the other races that murder was a solution.

And the second thing was that the light was a sphere of fire, and the man on the mountain - a wizard. As he lunged out of the way, the ball of flame crashed onto the ground next to him, exploding in the process, which resulted in his body being flung to the side.

Before he could stand up, he was skewered by a multitude of spears, and his grip on Mithringaar weakened to the point where he could no longer hold the weapon. As the sword clanged onto the ground, Lucius Corvus died.