



Dragonshadowed – Book I
Dragon Watch: A Dawn Before the Storm (Second Edition)

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Dramatis Personae

Areskel: An elf warrior with a mental connection to his mentor, the great golden dragon ‘Delgarathon’. He wears blackened scale armor marked with a single dark grey upright sword on both breastplate and shield. He moves fast, and uses a bow from which he releases a variety of enchanted arrows with uncanny accuracy. In close quarters he relies on a blue sword. As an elf, he is pale skinned with light blonde hair, pointed ears and arched eyebrows. He is best friend to Rarnok.

Boulder: He is a tall blue-skinned warrior with a physical connection to the earth. He is usually quiet and is possessed of powerful mental abilities. As the newest member of the company, he uses only those items permitting him to slip beneath ground surfaces. He dresses in a grey, stony robe and carries a staff.

Dairug: A dwarvish ambassador and metalsmith. He is stout with a bushy red-brown beard decorated with small jeweled talismans. He is deceptively clothed in common street clothes, but actually wears armor that changes appearance at will. His favored weapon is a two-handed hammer that speaks and occasionally taunts him. He also wears a dwarvish ring permitting him to change the shape of earth, rock and metal while providing protection so that these same materials are unable to strike his body.

Gyrfalcon: A charismatic human warrior in service to the temple of Melqart and a tactical leader. He wears sparkling silver scale armor beneath dark blue robes. Gyrfalcon is a ‘knight’ and the rightful ‘Baron Gyrfalcon’ of Satori County. He is ruggedly handsome, usually clean shaven with blue eyes and golden blonde hair. He is the best friend of Tamsin Satori, and while close, they are not romantically involved.

Rarnok: A half-human, half-goblin commonly referred to as a ‘hurk’. In poor light he might pass as a human with spikey black hair, but his pronounced lower fangs and lifeless black eyes betray his goblin ancestry. He has a bad temper and fights left-handed with sword and shield. Rarnok is only comfortable when wearing heavy full black armor and a blacker hellhound hide cloak. He is best friend to Areskel.

Volver, a small brown creature with a fluffy tail resembling a squirrel with a pointed snout, usually follows Rarnok. Volver is a ‘larm’ that subsists on grubs, mold and slime and possesses the ability to warn of pending danger.

Tamsin Satori: Priestess of the warrior god Melqart and also the countess by birth of the County of Satori within the kingdom of Powys. She is human and has a fair complexion, hazel-flecked blue eyes, and pale blonde hair. She typically wears light glimmering silver scale mail under her mid-blue robes. She prefers to fight with a series of short silvery blades that weave from her hands like fans, called 'skirtblades'. They are used in a series of sweeping, curved motions to attack opponents while providing a confusing defensive screen of flashing metal. She is the best friend of Gyr Falcon, and while close, they are not romantically involved.

Tamsin's constant companion is 'Shadowcatcher', a small white cat with pale blue wings that attached herself to the priestess in the elven kingdom of Tylyphyne.

Prologue

Steel clashed. Dying men shouted their fear and cried in agony.

A body toppled from the battlement. Crashed into a cart and splintered wood.

Not one of ours. Sir Gyr Falcon batted a spear aside with his shield. The gold surface flashed, blinding his opponent. The man never saw the sword thrust that killed him.

Lightning streaked from above to bounce from a stone buttress. Light burst in the castle bailey. The power crawled over the knight's armor and disappeared.

Poorly aimed. That mage must be panicked. He should be. Gyr Falcon lunged for the stairs of the central keep.

Another warrior stood in his way. Swung his sword in a cleaving blow.

Gyr Falcon lifted his shield, blocked, and crouched. His blade swept out, catching the elevated man at his ankles. The fighter buckled, screamed, and toppled from the staircase. The knight charged up through wafts of coiling smoke.

Fire. Why does some fool always light a fire? This fort is timber above the foundation.

The first of the upper rooms was a plain affair, arranged for defense. Three bodies sprawled near a circular staircase. One twitched.

No one I recognize. He ignored the fallen fighters. *Maybe all enemies. Sort it out later.*

A broken lantern lay in the middle of a puddle of flaming oil. More fire licked hungrily at the supporting wall beams. Weapons crashed a war song from above. He bolted up the stairs

The next level displayed tapestries beneath a bright light globe. Sparse furnishings were heaped in the center with a supply of ready arrows. Men fought in the far corner.

Three fighters hemmed one man against the wall. The outnumbered man wore black armor and displayed a grey sword on his shield.

Areskel! Gyr Falcon's feet hit carpeting as he charged forward. Someone shouted a warning from behind. He stabbed the closest man in the back and glanced to the warning shout.

Another man stood on the staircase. The high collar of his red cloak made his head look small. He wore a jeweled collar over knee-length chain mail, and gems winked from his belt.

The warlord! Can't let him escape!

The warlord turned and ran upward.

Gyr Falcon and Areskel finished the two warriors between them with swift strokes.

"I had them," said the black-clad fighter.

“You’re welcome,” replied the knight.

Areskel shifted his shield forward and led the way up the stairs.

A chair tumbled down. Bounced from the curve of the staircase wall as Areskel knocked it aside.

The Cymbrian barely paused his rush. He was thrown aside as he crested the last room. A bolt quivered in his right shoulder.

Crossbow!

“Get the warlord!” hissed Areskel.

Gyrfalcon brushed by his friend and saw two men. The warlord and a man in beige robes. *Must be the mage.*

The warlord reached for a second crossbow. Yellow bursts streaked from the mage’s fingertips.

Gyrfalcon caught the magic with his shield, and smashed into the warlord. Bodies and weapons scattered. He swung his sword backhand at the mage. Hit nothing, but the robed man was forced into a clumsy dodge.

The warlord grasped a sword and slashed as he pushed to his feet. The tip caught Gyrfalcon’s greave and bounced aside.

The blow was enough to unbalance the knight. Enough time for the warlord to grab a shield and prepare his defense. The mage scrambled to safety.

If the warlord falls, the rest will surrender. Gyrfalcon attacked. His first slash was a feint, intended to draw his opponent off-guard. Swords clashed. The knight put pressure on his blade and slid the point forward.

The warlord brought his shield up and across, avoiding the stab. He riposted.

Gyrfalcon was ready. He caught the blow on his shield, angled the surface, and forced the warlord’s sword aside. He pressed forward, pushing against the warlord’s chest. His sword tapped the top shield rim. Slid forward. Deep. Pierced the man below his nose.

Whirling, the knight looked for the mage, expecting another spell.

The robed man sprawled against the wall. A dagger protruded from an eye.

Areskel said, “A flesh wound. But I’d appreciate some healing.” A bloodied crossbow quarrel lay at his side.

“Couldn’t wait?” asked Gyrfalcon. He stooped near to his friend and touched the tear on his shoulder. His hand glowed white. The flesh knit and the blood was staunch.

“Why bother?” rejoined the elf. He rotated his shoulder. “My thanks.”

Smoke drifted from the open stairs.

“It’s likely to get warm. We should leave.”

“I like warm,” said Areskel as he rose. “Depart the land, or just this keep?”

Gyrfalcon hurried to the stairs. “With the warlord gone, this should be a pleasant place. In need of a strong hand. I’ve a notion we should set down roots.”

Chapter 1

THE NOT DREAM

The inn seemed haunted when wrapped in early morning darkness. Too quiet, as if deserted. Sir Gyrfalcon stepped from the stair-landing onto the floor and carefully navigated his way past the battered chairs and tables.

The small common room was barely illuminated by the fluttering stub of a candle that cast distorted shadows against a wall. Dark and light danced to no discernable tune. Dying embers glowed softly from the hearth. Faint smoke mingled with the odor of old spilled ale.

A lad snored softly, perched upon a stool, his back leaning against the wall.

The floorboards creaked beneath the knight's feet as he took each step. *It's surprising how loud each board sounds when the room isn't filled with celebrants.*

He reached the tapster without waking him and smiled as he rapped smartly upon the wooden surface beside a small cask. The thin lad jumped at the sound and looked about wide-eyed and wild. "Great Melqart!" he exclaimed. "I pray you stop sneaking up on me like that. I near stain my britches every time!"

Gyrfalcon suppressed his smile. "Morning ale and two cups."

The tapster scowled slightly as he reached beneath the counter and withdrew two clay mugs. He turned the cask's spigot and filled both with watered ale, then pushed each in turn toward the knight.

"And a new taper," added Gyrfalcon.

The tapster repeated his motion and placed a dish beside the mugs, lit a candle from the burning stub and set it in the center of the dish. He looked up at the knight checking for another request and smiled shyly. The familiarity was an old joke between the two, played out every morning. Gyrfalcon returned his smile warmly. Tapsters rarely associated with lordly knights.

The knight scooped up the mugs and shielded the candle as he made his way across the common to their usual table, expecting to see Areskel in his usual seat. The bench was still vacant. Gyrfalcon was mildly surprised. *It's earlier than I thought. Well before first light. Areskel must be tending the horses.*

A small noise alerted him as he neared the table. Someone was there, hidden in the darkness, doubtless crouched in the corner or behind the table. The knight made no move to indicate anything was amiss. He continued on his path with all his senses heightened, and carefully placed the candle on the table as far into the corner as he dared without being too obvious. His legs tensed to react in an instant.

A figure huddled in the corner, wrapped in a cloak against the morning chill. *Tamsin?* Gyrfalcon felt a mixture of relief and concern as he recognized his dearest friend. He thought rapidly. *She's always a late riser. What is she doing downstairs before unta?*

The knight took his usual seat and pushed the extra mug across the table to Tamsin. He allowed the bottom to scrape across the scarred surface. The sound was a little louder than intended. The lady stirred, and her pale hand reached from beneath the clenched cloth and paused. Still silent.

Gyrfalcon remained quiet, willing Tamsin to speak. He sensed not to rush her.

"I dreamed," she said.

Gyrfalcon's stomach lurched. It wasn't Tamsin's words, but her tone that caused the reaction. Her voice was both ominous and final. He said nothing, giving her more time to compose her thoughts.

Tamsin leaned forward to grasp the ale mug. A lock of her pale blond hair glimmered as it swept forward. Gyrfalcon caught the first glimpse of her face in the candlelight. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her forehead was creased in the middle as if annoyed or concentrating. It might just be the way the taper cast shadows.

Gyrfalcon smiled at her as she lifted her eyes to look at him. Not the overly cheerful smile he used to flatter others into doing his bidding, but the intimate smile reserved only for Tamsin. She knew him too well to be swayed by pretense.

She smiled slightly in return, and the crease in her forehead relaxed.

The knight thought, *Good. At least she's not concerned about me.*

Tamsin brought the mug to her lips and took a small sip before leaning back into the darkness. It was as if the light bothered her, and she preferred to be invisible. Gyrfalcon remained silent, his mind still groping for possible reasons to explain the priestess' odd behavior, unable to settle on anything specific.

"I was in a high place," Tamsin began. "Not on a mountain or in a tower, but high. I could see clearly in every direction and knew that fair lands were spread out at my feet, shrouded with fog. The sky was clear and blue and seemed to go on forever. As I looked, a little gray gathered at a distance. The gray grew, and moved toward me, boiling and darkening as it came closer and gathered speed. I was frightened, but not by the clouds." Her voice stopped.

Gyrfalcon felt an uncomfortable certainty rising in his heart at her words. They echoed something he knew as well, but had pushed from his mind, unwilling to face the truth. He waited for seven heartbeats before letting her know he was listening and encouraged her to continue. "Go on."

"I think this was more than a dream. It wasn't the clouds, or even what I thought was a storm that frightened me. It was what was underneath." She paused once more. "It was nothing. Absolute nothingness. Not like nothing was there, but like everything was gone, totally disintegrated as if it never was! Then I heard a single word. Void."

The word pounded the knight's midsection like a mallet blow through to his spine. He hadn't realized he had been holding his breath. Gyrfalcon exhaled softly and controlled his breathing. "We've understood that there would be a storm."

"Not like this," replied Tamsin in a dead voice. "We've faced all kinds of evil. This is not another despot seeking to enslave folk or establish some personal tyranny. All of those are pawns. It was insanely ravenous, insatiable, implacable. This is the utter eradication of literally everything."

Gyrfalcon knew with certainty that although Tamsin was not always right, there was no denying this vision. He paused once again, carefully considering his next words as he decided upon a plan. "A true omen. We've had enough rest and put this off too long. There's one place where those with power reside. We must warn the high folk of what we know. But we'll need to resume our noble titles or our message won't be heard. It's time to confront old arguments with family and our home temple. The catch is, how do we convince the others to travel to the kingdoms of Valdain?"

Gyrfalcon prepared their departure with a visit to the wharves. He was pleased to discover that some merchant vessels had docked to take on fresh water as members of a larger trading fleet. After speaking with three captains, he agreed to pay the shipmaster of the *Laughing Gull* for group passage to Valdain.

Once accomplished, he and Tamsin gathered their friends. Most were bored, and saw little difference between travel by land or ship, except for the dwarf Dairug and blue-skinned Boulder.

Dairug was never comfortable unless he had firm earth beneath his feet, and observed that, "Dwarves don't swim, they sink." He was mollified when Gyrfalcon convinced him that he had selected a sturdy ship and they would travel with an escorted fleet.

Boulder was visibly upset when informed that the party intended to sail to Valdain. He had only been to sea once before, on a three-day voyage from Nova Valdain to Gododdin. He remembered the trip as extreme torture, sure he would die.

Dairug suspected that his reluctant friend's real problem was a sundered connection to land. Both Dairug and Boulder shared a bond with the good earth that was profound for Boulder. The dwarf suggested that he would endure the trip better if a cart were filled with stone and earth as a bed. Boulder was only partially convinced but consented when assured of every possible support.

Prior to boarding, Tamsin and Gyrfalcon confided to their companions that although they were native to Valdain, they were uncertain of their welcome after an absence of twenty winters. They hoped to visit their home temple to renew their vows. It was most important to convey a warning to the high folk, the archmages, and those with power in the great temples. Both thought it would be most prudent to act as unremarkable as possible, until able to discern what had transpired in the country and settle upon a plan.

CHAPTER 2

SPECULATION

A duel!

After a long, boring voyage, word had spread like a spring squall from ship to ship among the small fleet. Lucky patrons would witness a contest of crossed swords between two acknowledged masters. There would be a duel!

The contest would take place upon a small merchant ship that rolled lazily with each passing wave as it rested at anchor. The calm sea swells were a stark contrast to the crew's rush to clear the deck, secure obstructions, and assist arrivals to board from nearby vessels.

This would not be a common duel between rivals over a debt or a lady's affections. Both fighters wore the same heavy black armor of the elite guardsmen in service to the high king of Rhydychen. This was a grudge match where blood would surely flow. After all, one of the fighters was a fierce goblin from the northern wastes, while his opponent was a mysterious warrior from the eastern kingdom of Cymbria. And hatred of goblins was natural. Who didn't hate goblins? Everyone agreed this would be a most interesting bout.

Rampant speculation increased as word spread. This would be a fair fight, no magic allowed. Both combatants would wear full armor and use only sword and shield. The duel would be held in a small ring divided by a center line. Leaving the ring for any reason would cause that warrior to lose automatically.

Speculators adjusted odds and accepted wagers according to each informative tidbit. At first, the balance clearly favored the strange foreign fighter, but quickly evened as it became known that the goblin fought left-handed. Most fighters fought right-handed, so that a left-handed fighter might have an advantage as they were used to dueling right-handed opponents. Betting waned when it was announced that the duel would not be fought with metal swords to the death. Instead, both fighters would use notched ironwood training clubs filled with colored chalk dust to mark and score hits.

But who would judge the match? Swordsmen of sufficient skill and unquestionable impartiality were rare. This dilemma was resolved when a Valdainian knight dedicated to the order of Melqart agreed to officiate. Enthusiastic, furious betting resumed on the proclamation that the fight would finish within one hundred heartbeats. A sure sign that the exchange of blows would be brutal and bloody.



Countess Tamsin Satori, priestess of Melqart, and Sir Gyr Falcon stood together at the railing of the main deck of the *Laughing Gull*. This station was well removed from crewmembers working to clear the designated combat area. The mood was light but filled with anticipation as the men bantered or shouted orders. Other crew hauled arrivals aboard and provided directions.

Some occupied themselves by taking final bets, adjusting odds, or tallying receipts. Those most eager occupied posts for the best view unless paid to hold a place for an important better.

A smile crept across Tamsin's face as she watched the activity. "Almost like a fair. Who do you think will win?"

Gyrfalcon shook his head slightly. "I have no idea. I'll be glad to finish this endless bickering about who would or could do what. It pains my ears!"

"What! You haven't placed a wager yourself?" the cleric teased.

"Can't have the judge betting. No matter who wins I'd be accused of cheating even if I'm a knight of Melqart. Besides, what if either of our friends found out I'd bet against them? I'd never hear the end!"

Tamsin laughed, "Well, I could place a bet on your behalf. I'd just need to know who was going to win."

"There will be none of that. Most of the crew is sure we're married or betrothed. The result would be the same. An accusation of a fixed fight if your bet became known. Besides, we don't need the coin," the knight finished seriously.

A stout crewman carrying a bucket sauntered onto the cleared deck with the easy rolling gait of an experienced sailor. He reversed his path and walked backward to carefully spread a line of bright blue sand upon the weathered boards.

Gyrfalcon continued, "Remember, neither captain nor crew were happy to have a woman—even if you are a priestess—or a goblin on this ship when we took passage. We got charged triple the usual rate in gold paid in advance and had to throw in your healing services and our pledge to act as marines! I'd prefer not to squander our good will."

Tamsin considered her friend's words. *He always acts honorably. For justice.*

When she had first boarded the ship, the priestess had been received with lowered eyes and turned backs. She'd been concerned she might have to spend the entire voyage below deck to avoid being the cause of trouble. Fortunately, Captain Rustrom had addressed his crew's reluctance by announcing that the lady would have exclusive passage in his own cabin and was not to be disturbed by anyone, himself included. The lady would be available to freely heal such injuries as might occur during her stay.

The first days were boring for Tamsin. She found a seat at the bow each morning following her night fast in hopes that she might be useful, and even attempted to catch the eye of any person who ventured nearby. Few did, and those who did averted their eyes as if her presence was a curse. She fought back a sense of dejection, grateful to her few friends for companionship and conversation.

It was on the third day that a young crewman timidly approached her with his hand carefully tucked beneath his armpit. He looked furtively in every direction avoiding eye contact while mustering the courage to choke out the single word, "Lady."

Tamsin had to use all her considerable charm to coax him to reveal his badly mangled hand. The crewman had been caught between cargos and wounded when the ship rolled unexpectedly. The skin was torn and blackened, and some bones were obviously broken. An easy fix for her skills. She murmured the needed words of blessing to direct the flow of healing energy into the wound. She restrained a smile as the man gaped in wonder, watching his hand heal and knit while the pain disappeared.

He stared with amazement, flexing his fingers slowly and experimentally, then faster. “It’s perfect! Thank you!”

“You’re very welcome. What name would you like me to call you?” Tamsin used the formal Valdainian request of introduction rather than asking his name directly. She didn’t know his culture and Valdainians could be very wary of revealing names. Some believed a witch might use this information to direct spells.

“I’m known as Hofor, if it please your ladyship.”

“And I’m pleased to meet you Hofor. My name is Tamsin.”

Hofor grinned broadly, then remembered himself and backed away, bobbing his head with every step. This was the opportunity Tamsin needed that broke the barrier between herself and the crew. Slowly, different men approached her each morning with requests for minor healing. At first some refused her help preferring to demonstrate their toughness but were won over as the days passed. She suspected many invented ailments for the chance to speak with her and receive a kindly smile. She treated each man with respect and dealt with every wound as if it were of utmost importance.

Ministering to shipboard scrapes was a natural reflex for the priestess. She had spent many winters healing dreadful wounds. Unmagical small folk like the crewman didn’t appreciate the difference between the way a mage or a cleric manifested magic. Magic was always wonderous. Both spell casters had a limited ability to utilize specific manifestations, depending upon their skill. Use too much power and both became exhausted or made dangerous mistakes. The difference between mages and clerics was their source and means of gaining necessary power. Clerics meditated and prayed to their deity. Mages leached power from their surroundings or other realms.

Tamsin halted her reverie with a start. Self-consciously pulling herself a little more erect, she glanced at Gyrfalcon to determine if he had noticed her lapse. If he had, he covered her distraction as a gentleman by continuing to observe the crewman spreading sand to outline the duel’s boundaries.

The knight casually remarked, “It’s unfortunate that both Boulder and Dairug are confined below deck. Under different circumstances, I’m sure they’d like to watch today’s bout.”

Tamsin knew her other companions were nursing the symptoms of a prolonged, severe bout of seasickness and had confined themselves to bed. Their ailment defied her best healing efforts. Both had heaved their stomachs empty, and neither was accepting more than small amounts of water. “They’ll have to settle for a description later. Two descriptions I’d imagine.”

The man with the sand completed his circuit to encompass a passable circle. He changed direction to draw a new line and divide the area into roughly equal halves. Men scrambled, choosing vantage places upon the deck, rails, higher decks or rigging. Someone began to cheer. Other voices joined quickly.

“I suspect our heroes approach.”

Sir Gyrffalcon pushed lightly from the rail and walked carefully to the circle of sand. He'd become accustomed to the movement of the ship but didn't wish to spoil the importance of this occasion with a comical fall. He saw one of the black-armored figures making his way up the deck and imagined that the other combatant must be approaching from the far side of the central cabin on the main deck. Both fighters looked similar from a distance, but the blank, round black shield on his right arm informed him this fighter was the half-goblin, or hurk, Rarnok. The knight knew that the other fighter, Areskel of Cymbria, carried a shield marked with a single upright grey sword on his left. It wouldn't look good for the fighters to stroll into a duel arm-in-arm! Gyrffalcon was aware that both warriors would wear enchanted armor for safety, and not use their heavily enchanted swords. Those swords were deadly weapons to be treated with respect, not for games. Both also owned an extensive array of other enchanted items they had collected, purchased, or been given over many adventures but were prohibited from using this day.

The knight nodded approval to Captain Rustrom as he descended to the main deck. The gathered spectators and crew quieted as they saw the captain carry a small timing glass and two ironwood swords. The captain solemnly handed the swords to Gyrffalcon.

Gyrffalcon made a show of carefully inspecting the weapons. Both swords were carved from a single beam of ironwood almost five hands in length, cured to obdurate hardness. These practice swords had grooves along the length of the blades and were filled with colored chalk dust that would explode and leave a mark upon any surface according to the strength of that blow. Red for Rarnok, green for Areskel. Impacts from these practice swords would hurt. The knight nodded to the captain signifying that he accepted both swords were in good condition.

The crowd erupted into deafening cheers as the heavily armored warriors entered the ring from opposite sides. Booted feet pounded the boards rhythmically.

Areskel folded his arms and remained outwardly calm and motionless. As usual, the Cymbrian kept his visor lowered to disguise his true nature. Gyrffalcon and Tamsin knew his secret but had said nothing to these simple folks.

The hurk Rarnok had his visor raised. He used the opportunity to contort his face into a crazed scowl and stared about wide-eyed. His jaw gnashed so that drool slopped from his lower fangs.

Gyrffalcon felt the deck vibrate as the volume of noise increased and raised his hand for silence. Conversations were punctuated by a loud whistle or ended with a sharp jab from an elbow.

It took a few moments for the excited men to quiet.

The knight handed a sword to each warrior. He shouted as if on a parade ground. "This is not a fight to the death. There will be no use of magic or other enchantments. If either fighter is found to use magic, or departs from the ring for any reason, he will be considered defeated. This duel will last for one hundred heartbeats as timed by sand glass. The goblin strikes first at my command. Take your places."

The two black figures stood inside the ring, leaving the centerline undisturbed between them. Gyrffalcon and Rustrom moved to a position with a clear view of the sword side of both fighters.

Every spectator held their breath as they leaned forward on the balls of their feet or craned their necks for a better view.

The knight raised his hand. “Strike!” roared Gyrfalcon, chopping down with his arm.

CHAPTER 3

THE DUEL

The command of 'strike' triggered Rarnok's body as if struck by a whip. His reflexes reacted to the sound faster than his mind grasped the word. He felt detached as he lunged forward with a murderous sword thrust above and slightly right of Areskel's shield. He recognized the jolt of excitement he always felt entering a fight, then made a conscious effort to rein in his enthusiasm. Areskel was a dangerous opponent who wouldn't fall to the first attacking foin.

The hurk anticipated the Cymbrian's easy parry and immediate riposte, catching Areskel's blade with his own. He allowed the green blade to slide and leaned forward under his opponent's guard. The Cymbrian responded instantly and moved back, but too late as Rarnok scored a weak tap upon his adversary's breastplate. *So much for elven speed!*

Each clash of blades trailed green and red dust, twirling patterns in the air. Although the exchange of blows was too fast for most to follow, cheers erupted from the crowd when they spotted the small red smear on Areskel's black armor.

Areskel was mildly embarrassed that Rarnok would score first. The hurk was a master swordsman able to rely upon clever bladework in addition to great strength. Areskel might enjoy superior speed but could not use his enchanted trick to slow the appearance of time about him. No matter, the Cymbrian sprung back to the attack, intent upon forcing his opponent to defend. His first blow was a weak slash ending in a thrust, easily parried but designed to draw the hurk's sword away from his body. Each warrior's weapon blurred in a tempo of crossed blades, blow and counter blow as Areskel drew his opponent's sword further from his body.

Suddenly, the hurk wrenched his sword by main strength, foiling the Cymbrian's deliberate strategy and shifted his blade inward! Areskel gritted his teeth knowing his sword was out of position. He pivoted his body and swung his shield across his front. Just in time, he was able to catch his opponent's sword before it made another contact. The Cymbrian felt his shield vibrate with the blow as the red blade glanced away.

Rarnok pressed forward, intent on following up his advantage and forcing Areskel to give ground. Only the shade of the hurk's sword marked the slice of a second swing against Areskel's weak side. The Cymbrian continued to pivot allowing his blade to swing backwards and wide while using his shield to block and entangle Rarnok's attack. Rarnok realized that the Cymbrian's sword would strike from his right and shifted his shield to protect his body. Areskel didn't aim high but dropped his blade and rapped Rarnok's extended foot causing the metal to ring.

Once again, the crowd roared approval as a bright green smear blossomed on the foot of the hurk.

Rarnok stepped back smartly, choking a growl of anger, and forcing himself to remain calm. He should have expected tricks. Both fighters paused for a moment and took a single sidestep. Rarnok turned his movement into a short lunge. His attack was swiftly countered with a riposte that the hurk parried in return. The Cymbrian's blade seemed to fade and twist. Rarnok's sight was momentarily confused. He hesitated slightly as he recognized the maneuver but

couldn't quite understand what was happening. Too late, Areskel's blade flew over Rarnok's guard. The hurk desperately ducked as he pressed his shield upward, but too late! The elven sword tapped him on the helm just above his eyes, obscuring his vision in a thin veil of green dust.

Rarnok snarled a curse. The blow to his head was minor and didn't make the metal ring, but the hurk resented being outmaneuvered. He squared his shoulders to gather his strength.

Gyrfalcon remembered seeing Areskel's trick and imagined Rarnok's brow descend to a glaring squint. The lord of Dragonhold had trained both fighters with this technique less than a winter previously, including the counter stroke. The hurk had been dealt a reminder and wouldn't make the mistake again!

The crowd roared like surf against a rocky shore. Each spectator was drawn into the contest as if personally performing every slash and parry. The blue sand vibrated and jumped as the deck boards bounced beneath their pounding feet.

Rarnok slid his shield back upon his forearm to assume a two-handed grip. Areskel took a half step forward to reduce his opponent's new reach advantage. The hurk took a corresponding step backwards, aware that the edge of the circle was near, then leapt forward with a powerful overhand cleaving smash. Areskel attempted to dodge and force the blow to glance away, but he was unable to do more than reduce the attack's power. The Cymbrian raised his shield and sword, using both to block the bruising impact.

Tortured metal screamed, but only resulted in a broad red smear over the face of the Cymbrian's shield as he staggered backwards, almost crossing the circle line.

Rarnok rebalanced and faced his opponent.

The Cymbrian whirled his blade at the wrist, testing and regaining his grip.

The hurk realized his opponent had suffered from the impact throughout his sword arm. Rarnok gave voice to a low canine growl building into a howl he hoped would unnerve his opponent, even slightly, and then rushed forward.

The Cymbrian didn't wait for a second charge and dodged low to move under the hurk's assault. He struck upward as Rarnok chopped down, both blades clashing briefly before the combatants whirled to exchange another series of blows. The duelists exchanged swift attacks and ripostes while each carefully shifted position seeking any small advantage.

Rarnok grinned as he detected a slight slowing of the Cymbrian's responses, guessing that the recent punishment and his great strength had begun to wear upon his opponent's bruised sword arm. He pressed forward leading with his shield from the right to bash against the lighter Cymbrian.

Areskel was not to be taken so easily. He angled his shield in turn, causing the hurk to over balance. A lesser fighter would be fatally exposed, but Rarnok instantly corrected his stance. Rather than attack, Areskel used the moment to disengage and recover.

The hurk sensed victory and lunged forward, causing his blade to waver in the same manner as Areskel used previously. Normally, the Cymbrian would be prepared with a counter stroke, but his numbed arm was not fast enough to complete a proper parry. Rarnok's sword slid up to ring upon the Cymbrian's helm! The crowd screamed in frenzy!

Clearly on the defense, Areskel responded with a weak attack that was contemptuously parried by Rarnok. The hurk continued his relentless assault, then realized that his opponent was

biding his time and gathering his strength while he wasted precious energy attempting to batter away both shield and sword. Rarnok momentarily slowed his attack, seeking an opening. The Cymbrian responded with a sudden change of tempo and switched his attack to the right, shield side. Rarnok was momentarily blinded by both shields and heard a clanging of metal even as he felt vibration in his side. He didn't need to glance down to know that a new green smear decorated his breastplate.

Both fighters slowed, succumbing to fatigue. *Could it be that the time was not ended?* They crossed swords again, looking for openings and testing the other's resolve. It was a quick exchange, but neither was confident, suspicious that the other might be preparing another trick.

Rarnok's sword leaked a thin cloud of red dust, having cracked when he struck his cleaving blow.

Areskel risked a sidewise glance to the timing glass held by captain Rustrom. *Twenty heartbeats remain. Time to end this!* The Cymbrian commenced a series of attacks that increased in tempo, in expectation that his opponent would not be able to match the pace. Areskel ignored the nagging pain in his wrist and concentrated on each cut as a work of art, more concerned about the precise angle and placement than striking home. Rarnok realized what was happening, and lunged savagely into the midst of the Cymbrian's defense to disrupt the pattern, daring a blow. Areskel was momentarily caught off guard but recovered to parry and neutralize the attack. Rarnok would not be outdone but pivoted on one foot and reversed his attack to the Cymbrian's exposed side. Areskel responded faster, ducking low and swinging high, but was still too low to strike the rising hurk. Rarnok thrust low but was too high to catch the Cymbrian as he continued to duck. Red dust sprinkled the top of Areskel's helm as the blade passed within a hair of striking home.

Both fighters gulped air. They made no attempt to parry. Rarnok hit the Cymbrian's leg and Areskel pounded the hurk's left arm. Metal rung like a bell, almost drowned by the shouts of the crowd.

The timing glass drained as both combatants used the last moments to exchange another series of blows. Suddenly, Rarnok's sword exploded in a cloud of red dust! Before the cloud dispersed, Rustrom shouted, "Time!"

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Areskel dropped his ironwood sword as he looked to his friend. The hurk stared at his split sword, still dribbling red dust before throwing it contemptuously aside. Rarnok saw that Areskel was covered in a welter of red and green dust marks, and he suspected that he must look similar. He reached out his hand, which was grasped in turn at the elbow in a warrior's clasp of respect.

Competing chants of "Cymbrian" or "goblin" vied from hoarse throats. Each man attempted to promote his champion to victory by yelling louder than his neighbor.

Both fighters walked to Gyrfalcon. "Who won?"

The knight of Melqart looked bemused. He tapped each upon the shoulder at the same time. "Turn and face the audience." He spoke just loud enough to be heard over the shouts of the assembled men.

Gyrfalcon raised both hands gesturing for silence, but the din didn't stop until someone blew a horn from the upper deck.

The knight bellowed into the silence as if ordering a battalion. "Friends, we're privileged to observe the test of fighting skills between two masters. All of you may recount this marvel for the rest of your lives. And I expect each of you to collect many free drinks in the telling!"

The men laughed raucously, nodding in agreement. "But who won?"

"Friends," continued Gyrfalcon, "We're all witness to the truth of the Valdainian proverb, that when two masters meet in combat, both lose. I declare that both these masters have won and lost. This is my decision. If any man disagrees, you may argue your case to either master. Now let's drink!"

Gyrfalcon's pronouncement was met with some grumbles, but ill feelings were overcome as ale barrels were breached and mugs were filled.

Rarnok and Areskel exchanged glances. Rarnok spoke first, "That ale looks good."

"A quick drink and let's clean this gear. I don't fancy grit in my breaches."

Both warriors seized mugs and elbowed their way to the barrels, accepting claps and words of congratulation.

Gyrfalcon stood apart from the mob of men, carefully watching their mood as they filled their cups.

Tamsin rejoined him by the ship rail. "So, who really won?"

The knight replied, "You saw that exchange. There's no way of telling what blow might have turned the tide, or when. Bad enough I was elected to judge. I suppose I should be grateful I wasn't dueling!"

They watched Rarnok and Areskel walk to their quarters, discussing each part of their duel. Rarnok snorted loudly in response to Areskel's claim of victory.

"I suppose," conceded Tamsin. "I'm not like to get your honest opinion. No matter, there will be bruises to mend. I'm off." With that, the priestess walked away in the wake of the two fighters.

The knight watched her while a faint smile played on his lips.