

CHRONICLES OF A  
MERCENARY CAPTAIN

A SHORT STORY BY THE WORLDSMITH

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## *Chronicles of a Mercenary Captain*

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Elrean crushed the parchment that she had just finished reading into a ball and threw it into an empty metal bowl to her right. Pouring a large measure of lantern oil into the bowl she lit the parchment with one of the many candles that were scattered across the table she now sat behind. The flames took quickly to the oil and Elrean had to pull back so as not to singe her own hand. Then watching the flames engulf the parchment she sighed as the day had not gotten off to a good start.

Satisfied that the parchment was destroyed, Elrean moved to the tent's entrance and opened the flap. She recoiled as the bright glare from the morning sun forced her to squint her eyes, and bring one arm up for shade it gave her eyes time to adjust from the tent's gloomy interior. After a few brief moments she looked around to spot one of her runners and signalled for him to approach. "Find Kenras and both my lieutenant's, tell them to report to the command tent in half an hour."

"Yes Ma'am" Was the only response the runner made as he gave his commanding officer a quick salute, then turned and ran off into the camp.

The camp was comparatively quiet this morning; Elrean put it down to the winter chill making it hard to build up the energy to get out of bed. Although she admitted that the lure of warmth from the fires that littered the camp was definitely an attractive aspect to the morning. With this thought she let out a jet of frosted breath in a deep sigh as she turned back towards the shelter of the tent to prepare for the coming meeting.

Captain Elrean Crothus was a mercenary captain for the Guild of Swords. Three months ago Elrean had been given command of two hundred and fifty soldiers and two mages as the guild had been hired by the ruling council for The Dales to lead a secret but very dangerous mission. For over a year now The Dales had been fighting a border war with Dathek and were looking to end it quickly this summer by going on the offensive. However to break through the front lines of the Dathek army was seen as being a very costly process with regards to manpower, so the ruling council had constructed a new plan. They were to hire a contingent of mercenaries who would secretly make their way during winter behind enemy lines and set up a magical gate. When spring once again came around they would send the main body of their army through the portal who would attack the front lines of the Dathek forces from its rear while the rest of The Dales' forces made a fake attack to distract the Dathek army from the front. The two mages who accompanied them were not members of the guild but had been attached to her command by request of The Dales ruling council and as such they were the only ones allowed to operate and construct the magical gate.

Surprisingly the mission had gone relatively smoothly despite Elrean's concerns. She had put forward a complaint to her superior officer that the entire force bar a few key people was made up of new recruits and that not only will this make her task more difficult it will also jeopardise the chances of success. Unfortunately her complaints fell on deaf ears. As a result she had already lost sixteen of her men to enemy patrols as they had made their way over the Sentinel Ranges and into the Fire Light Forest where they had now set up camp.

Elrean returned the salutes of her lieutenants and then gestured to some nearby seating. As always the command tent was very cramped as what little room it actually gave them was taken up with tables and cabinets that held all the maps, ledgers and materials needed to command their

operations on this mission. The lack of support that the guild gives to some of its members often left Elrean debating whether she had chosen the wisest path by joining. Still in her short career with them she had been promoted three times twice due to her actual deeds and talent and once as a field promotion. Although she knew that her initial rank had been given to her due to the influence of her father and his previous relationship with the guild, she could at least feel confident that her progression was purely her own work.

As usual Elrean stood as they waited on the last member to join them, the mage Kenras.

Kenras was the head mage attached to her force and as a representative of her employers he was not under her direct authority. As such he and Elrean had not gotten along well at the best of times and she was sure that his consistent tardiness was intentional and calculated.

Finally the tent flap was opened by a guard, allowing Kenras to enter. Kenras wore thick red felt robes with silver embroidery which cut out the chill of the morning air. His brown shoulder length hair, which is normally kept in check by a golden circlet, had been blown out of place in his travel from his own accommodation to the command tent and now obscured part of his face. Taking a moment to settle himself Kenras cleared the hair from his eyes by brushing it behind his ears and bringing himself to full stature by broadening his shoulders he peered at Elrean with large eyes conveying a sense of pride and confidence.

As the flap was held open it let in a gush of air that although cold made Elrean realise how stuffy and confined the tent was and she longed to finish this quickly and get out into the camp to start organising her troops.

“Glad you could join us Kenras if you would like to take a seat then we can start.” Elrean’s words were laced with a disrespectful tone that was not lost on the mage.

“My affairs and matters of concern are my own Captain; I do not come begging at your heels like a lap-dog just because you have asked. Know that if I am late by your account then it is for a reason far greater than your tribulations.” With this the mage took his seat and feigned an interest in what the captain was about to discuss.

Well accustomed to the arrogant nature of mages Elrean ignored Kenras’s rebuttal and started the proceedings, “I will keep this very brief as time is of the essence.” Giving just a slight pause to build some drama she then continued, “Gentlemen we are leaving.”

In visible anger Kenras rose from his chair, “Preposterous, we have taken a contract out with you for the duration of this mission until its success and I will hold you all to it.” Pointing a long finger at each of the mercenary officers it was obvious that Kenras’s initial belief held that the guild was pulling the plug on his mission.

Elrean’s stern glare returned him to his seat as she explained further, “Calm yourself Kenras no contract has been broken. However I have received word from an informant that a large Dathek column is coming to reinforce their front lines and it will pass near enough to our current location that their scouts will undoubtedly find us. Thus we are to dismantle the camp and move further into the mountains, there we will wait until the enemy have passed or we can scout for another location to setup the gate.”

This seemed to placate the mage whose mood quickly altered as he returned to his seat replying, “It will take us time to dismantle the gate and pack it ready for transport but I will see it done as soon as is possible if that is the case.”

Elrean exhaled in relief glad her adversary was for this one moment, co-operative with her endeavours.

Pulling the reins of her chestnut steed back and bringing the charger to a halt Elrean looked back from the trail that they now followed. She could now see in the distance smoke rising from the forest where they had previously been camped. It was now obvious that the Dathek scouts had found what remained of their encampment and would be following their trail shortly if they weren't already. Turning her attention now to the terrain ahead of them she brought a spy glass up to her right eye and surveyed what they would be facing.

Before her loomed the tall mountains of the Sentinel Range and hopefully within them some shelter for her forces to ride out the next week or two in safety from both their enemy and the weather. The ranges themselves marked the boundary of Dathek and although rugged in most parts many trails and tracks had been worn through its valleys and peaks over the centuries and it was now to one of those that they were headed.

Replacing her spyglass into its container she got the attention of her nearest messenger and issued her next orders. "Tell the wagon drivers to flog the mules and inform every officer in the column that we will be forced marching for the next two hours. Make it clear that we need to gain as much ground as absolutely possible." Dismissing the runner with a wave of her hand she looked around. Unable to find the man she sought she yelled out, "Where are my scouts?" Knowing that they had left their departure too late and that the enemy was closer than she had expected urgency was required. Kicking the stirrups into her horses flank she moved it towards the head of the line in search of one of the few men in this band that she had worked with previously and knew she could count on, Tamaris Harburrow.

Eventually she came across the familiar cloaked figure of Tamaris and reigned in her steed as the sergeant gave her a salute which she hurriedly returned, "I have a new task for you; up ahead this path starts to weave into the mountains through a chasm and would be a perfect spot to lay an ambush. When we pass through it I will leave you and however many men you require to lay a trap for the enemy scouts. As you are no doubt aware our previous camp has been discovered and is burning as we speak which means their scouts will be on our trail already. We need more time between us and any force that Dathek sends in chase. So it will fall to you to buy us some time my friend."

With a nod and a wink the seasoned veteran replied in a deep calm voice, "Consider it done ma'am."

The word's of Tamaris surprisingly came as a relief for Elrean and letting out a sigh she took a few moments to watch her soldiers pass before her and once again looked over the men she had been given charge of. Most wore an assortment of armour types depending on what they were able to afford prior to taking service with the guild. Most commonly however for the infantry were chain and ring mail armour with a small or medium shield. These folk made up the majority of her force but she was also given a detachment of archers, lightly armoured in leathers but very agile, however her greatest asset was the 20 light cavalry. Although their steeds were fast and quick at least those who rode them seemed to be well equipped as all the riders were wearing chain and many of the horses had leather barding for some protection. It would be these troops that she may have to rely upon most of all but she feared how they would fare against the Dathek Knights from the Order of the Shield. Poorly she suspected. In all this was far from the greatest military force at the guilds disposal, but so far in her career it was the largest she had been granted, never the less she couldn't

help but think that if this mission was so vital for the Dalesmen then perhaps they should have paid for a better army to make sure of success.

Tamaris's ambush on the Dathek scouts, the previous day, had been successful and with it some breathing space between their column and that of their pursuers had been granted. Elrean knew however that it was only a matter of time before they would again be faced with the prospect of combat, but now it would mean that it would be with a larger force. Still luck had smiled upon them as her own scouts had managed to find a ruined keep a short distance from the main trail. There were many of these ruined keeps littering the mountains, this one was slightly dishevelled but with a small amount of hurried repairs it would be defensible and also secure for the two mages to construct their portal. In her experience however, Elrean knew that fortune was rarely given freely to a mercenary or came with some sort of double edge, and this was true for this encounter as well, because although the keep offered a potential hideout and defensible position it was currently inhabited by goblins.

With that in mind Elrean led her troops against their new opponents. As quietly as they could the mercenary force crept into position either side of the canyon that the keep was located in. Knowing that goblins were creatures more akin to the night Elrean had ordered the attack to occur during the day so that the advantage would be theirs for the battle.

With a signal from her first lieutenant that his squad was ready, Elrean raised her right hand and gave a forward motion, indicating for her archers to cover their approach, she then led her squad out of cover and charged one of the breaches in the wall as her lieutenant's squad simultaneously charged the main gates.

As they emerged from the rocky terrain that they had been using as cover a volley of arrows whistled overhead and struck three of the goblins that had been guarding the front gate. The noise of their charge however could not be covered and a few goblin archers that had been patrolling the walls let out shrieks as they noticed the approaching force. Several of them loaded arrows themselves and hastily let them loose at Elrean's company as they drew closer. Their attempts were short lived as they soon became pinned down by the covering fire of the mercenary archers and were reluctant to expose themselves any further.

Although five of her squad had been hit by the enemy's volley they now were unhindered by the enemy and the mercenaries were able to make their way through the breach in the wall. So far things had gone to plan however as they could see beyond that the continuing shrieks of alarm from the goblin archers had started to rouse the forces within as a mass of them started to pour out from the huts and caverns that they had created within the compound. Quickly Elrean looked to her right and made sure that her lieutenant and his soldiers were on the move and they had nearly made it to the broken gateway.

Eager to push their advantage and try to catch their enemy off guard as much as possible, Elrean gave the order for her company to push through the breach as she paused quickly to relay a message to her Lieutenant. "Take a squad to the walls and deal with those archers I don't want them hitting us from behind."

To this her Lieutenant gave a quick nod of understanding and started to issue the new orders. Satisfied Elrean turned back to the fray which had now started to be fought within the centre of the compound. Shielded slightly from the noise, by the wall that she had rested behind, Elrean was now confronted with a cacophony of sounds from the clash of steel against steel the swearing of her men and also the screams of the maimed and dying. These were all too familiar

sounds for her and as she took them in a smile crept upon her face as the adrenalin started to course through her veins, a feeling that she enjoyed, and a spark light within her eyes.

Anticipating that the walls will be cleared soon she signalled for the archers to advance and take up elevated positions within the courtyard then searching for the weakest point in her line she tightened the grip on her sword's hilt and charged into the battle.

Although the goblins wore nothing but a mismatch of hides and leathers to cover their bodies and wielded a mix of weapons, some of which were no doubt stolen from raids, they did have growing numbers to help their efforts.

Unwilling to be complacent about the skill and threat of the enemy Elrean approached the flank of her first target as it pressed one of her soldiers with a wild flurry of attacks driving him backwards. Elrean was calculated with her strikes and two quick thrusts into the creature's midriff saw it fall to the ground jolting in pain and gasping for breath as it tried to deal with the shock of its injuries.

Now starting to find her rhythm she set herself to face a group of three goblins, who were part of the next wave that crashed against the mercenary force, by holding her shield in front of her and her sword up high. From the corner of her eye she saw the soldier she had just helped take up position next to her with a spear set to impale their enemies.

Her soldier was the first to act in the fray as his spear offered him the advantage of distance and he used it to good affect thrusting it into the chest of one of the goblins it easily cut through the crude hide that the creature wore and pierced through its ribcage. The soldier tried to pull it out but decided to let it go and draw his sword as the other two goblins closed, shrieking at them both as they did so.

Elrean guess that the creature's untrained skill would lead to it striking first came true and her new opponent thrust in a wild frenzy at her. The attack was crude and untimed allowing Elrean to batter the sword away with her shield and then with a half step forward she brought down her weapon from its raised position and cut through the creature's shoulder embedding it into its chest. Then pulling it out effortlessly she thrust it once more into the midriff of her enemy.

Elrean left the creature, confident that it no longer posed a threat and turned to face her next combatant, when out of the corner of her eye she saw an eruption of flames coming towards the battle. Unable to get out of the way in time before the flames exploded amongst the ranks of the goblins all she could do was raise an arm to shield her face from the heat of the blast.

A thick pungent cloud of smoke and ash lingered in the air after the explosion dissipated leaving the stench of burnt and charred flesh in her nose. Looking around Elrean saw most of her men were now starting to regain their composure and a few were quick to carry on the attack against their enemy while others started to cough up bile to clear their lungs of the rancid air. The goblins however fared quite badly with very few in a state to stand and fight. Seeing no immediate danger to herself she helped a couple of her men who were nearby to their feet, then turning to find her Lieutenant she yelled "Lieutenant take your squad in and clear those tunnels I want these rats cleared from this keep."

"Yes Ma'am" was the quick reply of the lieutenant who rallied his squad, who up until this stage had seen little battle as they were securing the gates and walls. Elrean was satisfied that the main battle was over for them, now it would be a small job to clear up any remaining pockets of resistance and measure the cost of this move.

After the area was cleared of its inhabitants the rest of her force had been called up from reserve and reconstruction had now started to begin. Elrean had chosen some quarters for the officers and a room from which they could command their operations. It was in this room that she now sat and was looking at the cold face of the mage Kenras with a steely glare, "Do not take my words as being unappreciative of your efforts in that battle, but understand that I will not tolerate such blatant disregard to the welfare of my men when you use your magic in our engagements."

Kenras snorted and turned his head to his left in a show of complete contempt for the captain's words. "What are you talking about? Due to my efforts the battle was won and in short time as well. I do believe that you were only stressing how imperative it was that we not only move quickly but also set up our defences as fast as possible for fear of reprisal from the Dathek forces."

Angered by the contempt and arrogance that he showed Elrean raised her voice and became visibly more animated. "That battle, was a sure victory from the start what I am objecting to is not that you used your magic in the battle, far from it. What I cannot condone however is the loss of seven of my men because of it. So it is a matter of placement rather than abstinence, as both you and I know that that fireball could have been centred further back and it wouldn't have killed any of my men."

Kenras held up a hand to halt the captain interrupting her as he did so, "It also wouldn't have killed as many of the goblins, and it surprises me that you of all people would bring up a topic such as this with your families track record of incidental deaths in combat. I am aware of who your father is captain, and I have personally witnessed how reckless he is with his magic and how he justified all those casualties and injuries as being for the greater good. So I'll not stand for such commentary coming from you. And get one thing clear captain I do not care about the lives of a few mercenaries what is important is the success of the mission and it was my understanding that time was the most crucial aspect considering our position. With that I see my decision and actions as prudent. Now if you have finished captain I have to get this gate constructed."

Furious with rage Elrean leapt to her feet and shouting her response with wide eyes she slammed her clenched fist upon the desk, "Even if you think you know my father it is obvious that you know nothing of me. I will be lodging a direct complaint with the guild over this incident. If it happens again I will ensure our generals blacklist your country from our books. Never again will you receive the aid of the Guild of Swords, so I expect from now on that you change your attitude and start to value those who are working to make your aims a reality. Now get out of here." With this the mage gave Elrean a cold stare then walked out of the room and beyond the captain's sight.

The wind whipped around the walls of the keep as it passed down the canyon that led out to the main trail. The overcast sky and cold conditions mirrored the grim situation of the mercenary force with regards to the impending battle. Although spirits were low amongst the men as their mission hadn't gone quite to plan, Elrean was confident that their morale would not falter for there was still hope in the form of reinforcements.

Kenras and his companion had worked feverishly over the last three days constructing the gate and were but an hour or two away from being able to activate it. At Elrean's request they had also contacted their superiors and advised them of their situation and had organised for a force to be mustered and placed on immediate standby to enter the gate once it was activated. At the last communication there was a force nearing eight hundred men ready to march through that gate so all Elrean and her force needed to do was defend the keep's walls and gatekeep so that Kenras could complete his work. It was this ray of light on this otherwise dismal day that kept the men at their posts and weapons in their hands.

Elrean stood atop the gatekeep and looked down the canyon towards the approaching army of Dathek. Her trusted scout Tamaris had been keeping an eye on their progression and numbers over the last few days and she knew they were in for a tough battle. Their enemy numbered over six hundred which due to her losses against the goblins now put them at just under one third of the enemy's size. Still they had managed to patch up the breaches reasonably well with wood, wagons and stone debris, but the gatekeep was a different story. The doors were badly battered and the portcullis was rusted so badly as to be inoperable, their best defence was a strong unit of pikemen to build a phalanx across the opening and archers lining the walls.

In the distance a horn blast could be heard and dust started to rise at the canyon's other end. *Well there goes the option of wasting some time with a parley*, thought Elrean to herself. With this she started to bark orders to the defenders as she made some final adjustments to her troop's positions.

Elrean deftly parried the spear thrust of her attacker with her sword and brought her own weapon back down in an arcing manoeuvre as she stepped into striking distance. The spearman could not react in time as Elrean's weapon glided effortlessly through the air connecting and cutting through his leather armour, biting deeply into the spearman's left shoulder and down into his chest. With a cry of agony the spearman dropped his own weapon and raised his right hand to the wound in a futile attempt to stop the flow of blood that now started to spill over his chest.

Kicking the dying man away Elrean continued to move forward to engage her next opponent. Her forces had held well against the first two assaults made by the Dathek army but with this third assault they had broken through the thinned lines that were defending the gatekeep and now the mercenary forces were madly trying to push back against the flood of enemy who had started to pour through the break in their lines by.

Above the din of battle Elrean heard the flight of arrows as they arched over the wall and started to descend amongst them. Without even thinking she brought her shield to bear, covering her torso, and relied upon its innate magical abilities to block the missiles which would normally hit her. As expected the shield magically moved to block three arrows, each time it did so a small flash

of light could be seen and the snapping of the arrows could be heard as they smashed against its reinforced metal.

With the danger passed Elrean lowered her shield and was immediately confronted with two new enemies who had rushed through the breach in the line. The two combatants were from one of the Dathek heavy infantry units and were well equipped and armoured with plate mail and shields. As they approached the warrior on the right moved in a semi-circle so that he could attack Elrean's less armoured flank. Realising that this was his ploy Elrean made the first move rather than waiting until her enemies are ready and fighting on their terms.

With shield raised ready to block her second combatant Elrean levelled her right fist at her intended target then issued the command word for one of her rings, "*Aquis*". With this three thin foot long shards of ice shot from her ring and impaled themselves, like crossbow bolts, into her enemy, driving through the steel breastplate of her foe and knocking him backwards.

The attack was not enough to kill the warrior but Elrean could tell that he had been severely injured by the blows and was quick to back up her initial attack by closing the short distance in three strides and driving her sword through the chain links just below the fauld of his armour. The cry of the warrior was dulled by the full faced helm that he wore but blood started to flow from the wound in his lower torso as Elrean pulled her blade out and he staggered backwards.

Just as she was about to turn around to face the second opponent a pain erupted on her right shoulder as the other warrior brought his Morningstar down and landing a solid blow against her. The force of the blow unbalanced Elrean and she stumbled forwards a few steps. The pain was immense as the spikes from the weapon managed to penetrate her steel armour and the wound now restricted the movement of her sword arm. None the less she pivoted to face her opponent and set herself to receive the next attack.

As the warrior drew closer Elrean could see behind him that more of the heavily armoured infantry were coming in through the gate and that after an initial charge what remained of her light cavalry were now drawing back to reset for a second charge against the new wave of combatants in an attempt to slow their progression.

For a few moments Elrean gauged the quality of her opponent by blocking and parrying his attacks, the rest also allowed her to adjust to her shoulder wound. Eventually she saw her opportunity and parried his Morningstar to the side then bringing her shield in close to her body she quickly moved forward and used it as a ram to knock her opponent off balance.

The force of her charge was enough to make the warrior step backwards and fortune was with her as he tripped on the uneven terrain falling to the ground. With his entire body now exposed and at her mercy Elrean raised her sword and thrust it through the chain coif and deep into the warrior's neck.

The warrior's body went into spasm for a few brief moments and then slumped against the ground. Kneeling over the corpse Elrean took a moment to catch her breath. As she looked up from the blood soaked ground a bright flash of purple and blue coloured light emanated over the keep bringing the battle to a momentary halt. Turning her head in the direction of the flash, a smile broke her face as she saw the gate now radiating with light, its magical glyphs and runes could be seen clearly and Kenras now stood in front of it as the first of The Dales reinforcements stepped through to land on what remained of the cobblestone courtyard of the keep.