

The Therendry/ Blackstone Herald

September, 603



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Goblin and Orc Populations on the Rise...

Reports from various localities around the Duchy of Therendy indicate that in the absence of large standing armies unusually large numbers of goblins and orcs have managed to survive into adulthood. For the better part of a decade such large groups of raiders have been kept in check by Ducal and Comital armies. With the constant attrition of several large-scale conflicts, culminating just last year with the Theren War of the Crown, the most recent generations of tribal humanoid have gone mostly unnoticed, and in some cases have actually been supported by our enemies. The now deceased LaVonde of Richland was especially fond of humanoid shock troops.

These various causes have led to a perfect storm of goblin and orc activity, and very little that can be done about them in the short run. The Genovia family and their many hired mercenary condottieri have managed to secure Richland and parts of Fellmist, but like water rushing along paths of least resistance, there are few other places without goblin and orc raiders.

For now adventurers and local nobles will just have to do what they can to ensure the safety of the populace until Ducal armies and coffers are rebuilt.

Worse still, some rangers in from the field have reported that a lack of food has caused the tribes to be much more aggressive and hostile than usual. While ordinarily cowardly these creatures can fight viciously when their survival depends on it. Starvation and overcrowding have led the tribes to their war drums and onto raids that they may not have considered even two years ago.

What is not being said by the nobles, but is of obvious worry to those familiar with the situation is the potential for enemies of the state to unite the various tribes of orcs and goblins, and to use them as a ready made army. What the plan for battle will be should this worst-case scenario come to pass is unknown, but must surely be foremost in the minds of Theren nobles of all rank.

In This Issue...

Monthly Poll... page 2
Ghosts!... page 3
Announcements ... page 4
Dark Dangers Threaten
Evendarr's Borders ... page 5
Prince Alejandro Defeats
Lich-King, Creates the
Guildmistress Parthynia Home
for Wayward Girls... page 7
Quiz: Are You Honorable? ...
page 9

Yeah, you all know I've got the Count of Richland's daughter. And what have you been able to do about it so far? Nothing. Well, it's unfortunate you won't be rescuing her from me anytime soon. From this moment on, she is officially on the market for sale.

This goes out to any scumbag wanting to charge an insane ransom for this lovely young lady, a slaver looking for that special someone or even a cultist with a need to sacrifice a virgin to whatever cause you champion.

Show up this Friday night in Calais and be prepared to make a deal.

That is all for now!
Your Friend,
Velwerzin

Adventuring Tip of the Month:

Never drink
anything a gypsy
gives you.

Self-Defenestration on the Rise. Should you be worried?

Recently I saw several young women defenestrating themselves in the tavern. This cumulated in a double defenestration, where both women defenestrated themselves at the same time.

We asked an expert for advice on what you can do to prevent defenestration. They said, "Stay away from windows."

So in conclusion, if you feel the urge to defenestrate yourself, step away from the windows. This simple precaution can prevent defenestration from occurring to you.

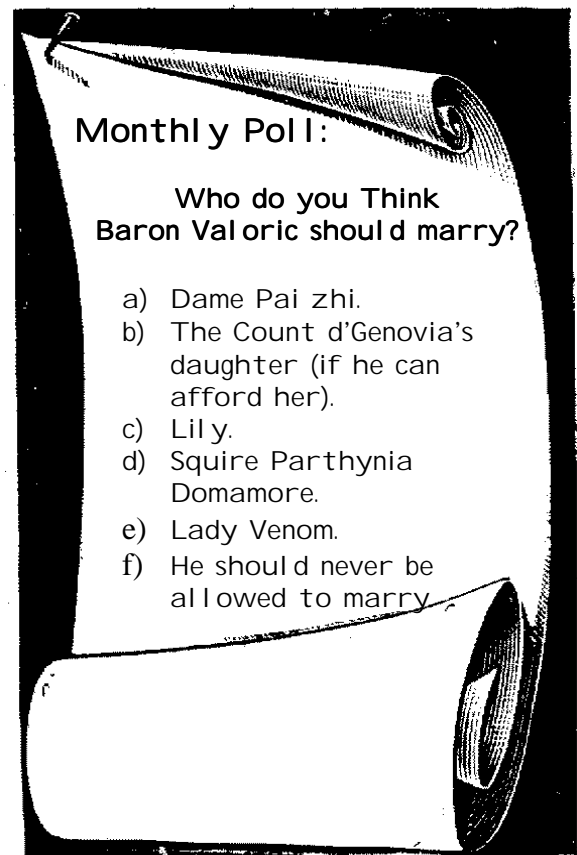
Lord of Illusions Tricks Town!

Last weekend during the gather at Blackstone, the town mobilized to retrieve a book that had been stolen. Under this mistaken belief, they were rifted into the plane of Death and stole what was, in fact, the mask of Death. The deception was revealed to be the work of the Lord of Illusion only after the 'book' was taken.

A similar event happened recently in Therendry, where Liam Andreus led a group of adventurers to steal the Incarnation of War's banner.

As before, ten adventurers were given the task to locate and return the stolen item within a year's time or suffer the consequences. Although only ten people were marked and charged with the task, the consequences should they fail will affect everyone. Please provide them with whatever assistance you can, and share any knowledge you may uncover.

If you, or your adventuring group, are setting out to retrieve something for a stranger, it is recommended that you use an awaken spell to ensure that it is not a trick.



Ghosts!?!

Ghosts have been seen wandering miserably near Calais and the swamps bordering Sword Lake. Each seems to search for something, muttering to itself. When approached, they seem startled and quickly flee -- either sinking into the ground, or dissipating. Citizens are advised to use caution should they see one of these figures. It is not known if they are in fact undead beings, or just apparitions of some sort as no one has been able to investigate fully. A reward is being offered by the Ducal court for an explanation of these events.

Top Ten Most Worthless Threats

- 1) Give me what I want, or I won't go away.
- 2) You may have won this battle, but I'm coming back with friends!
- 3) In two years I'll be back to settle this.
- 4) I'll sell you to Xantorax.
- 5) As soon as my energy comes back, you'll be in trouble!
- 6) Know that you face the combined forces of House Wave.
- 7) I, the Mighty Papaya Effendi, will smite you with my Fist of Greatness!
- 8) Try that again standing ten feet away from me!
- 9) Mess with me, and I'll rift away before you can kill me.
Ha ha!
- 10) Mystics. Any of them. At all.

Things That Should Never be Put on the Fae Tree...But Someone Did...

"Acadia will be saved from your crude joke...and you will either run like a coward or die like a oversized sheep."

"You do not deserve to be the filth that is encrusted in the bottom tread of his boots."

"So, all one needs to do to avoid death is get impregnated? NOW you tell me..."

"Please inform Victus I very much enjoyed destroying him. The current score is Victus 0, Rakurai 2, would you or Zimmerman care to play?"

"Man I'm sorry, really I am. I mean, how cruel does a mother have to be to name their child Licroth?"

"I mean come on, this is Lochwood we are talking about - the best of the best, the awesome of awesome. THE ELITE."

"Xantorax, You still need a hug I see."

"The time for benevolence is over. Your ignorance and stupidity cannot be forgiven blablabla"

"Once again, I very much prefer it when people mock my mentor."

"The second you try anything, whether people defend you or not, you will receive the Belmont treatment."

"Tyrra hath no furry like Cormyn dropping the shield...and going for the other sword."

"You make a statue for Cormyn, and what do you know? He's making a burlap sack for you. Man, I love the spirit of giving."

Announcements

THERE SHALL BE A CONCLAVE OF WIZARDS ON THE FIFTH AND SIXTH NIGHTS OF THE 9TH LUNAR CYCLE -- THAT OF THE SERPANT.

The Love Torn: Baron Valoric Treehawk has been spotted purchasing several gifts for two of our loveliest women in Therendry. It seems that the Good Baron cannot decide between the beautiful snowskinned Dame Pai Zhi and the enchanting dancer Lily. He appears torn between the intriguing knowledge that Dame Zhi must know (can you imagine what she has read and I learned about the arts of Love) and the entrancing hypnotic movement of Lily who is a connoisseur of pleasure. However, he continues to wear the favor of Count d'Genovia's daughter. Whatever shall the Baron do? Not to mention, these two ladies know each other and I, myself, saw them talking quietly on a couple of occasions this past gather. Maybe they have their own plans for the Baron. I would certainly not play with these two women's affections. Ladies, you may feel free to contact me if either or you decide to stop entertaining Baron Valoric's careless clumsy overtures. Both of you are enticing beyond belief and all I can see what he sees in your beauty) A word of caution to Baron Valoric from S.D. (and I know something about the ladies) emotions in women are strong and Lily is very protected by some people I would not want to anger (especially her brother, Adrian) and Dame Zhi would not think twice about putting you on the floor shall you harm her, if Malcolm or her brother didn't beat her to it. Women scorned, Baron, can do a lot of damage and make devious calculating enemies when you hurt their feelings. Women will wait to take their revenge. They will wait for the time you are at your weakest. They are smart that way. We men are not so smart as they. Sorry readers, anyway, stay tuned and keep your eyes open. Letters and updates may be sent to S.D. through the editor of course.

*** From the Editor: There are comments in this article of a potentially criminal nature. Please be advised that the comments are paid announcements and are not being printed by the staff with the intention of committing a crime. Any and all information or questions should be sent to me at rhyce@juno.com.*

Let it be known from this day forth that the lifemating between Mirage Sandchaser and Liam Andreus is officially no more. Mirage is free to choose another mate if she so desires.

So declared by
Pyroxia Fyrestorm
Ambassador from Therendry and Blackstone to Myrr

Dark Dangers Threaten Evendarr's Borders

By Holly Castleton, Editor-in-Chief, Raven's Herald

Each year, when the season in Ravenholt is too hot for gathers and newsworthy events seem to lessen, I take my annual vacation to far-off lands. This year, I'd heard King Mykel himself was touring the lower reaches of Evendarr, and there were rumors of a King's Tourney. I figured it was time to head south to see the sights, foolishly thinking I'd actually get away and relax. I was soon to discover that great change was afoot in the kingdom.

When I set out towards Evendarr City, I could not have known where the winds would take me. As I soon discovered, the King's Tournament, the first in many years, which was dubbed the "First Avalonian Tourney," was to be held in a newly built keep on the southwestern border of the Kingdom. After getting careful directions and numerous warnings about the dangers of travel should we stray from our path, I cautiously set off. Had anyone warned me that the lands just miles beyond those I was to travel were commonly known as "The Dreadlands" for their rough and ravaged reaches, I might have opted for sunny Niman as a choice vacation spot, instead.

The trip began fairly tamely as I, and the caravan of Evendarrians with whom I joined up, moved southward. We all enjoyed the gradual changes to the landscape. We passed from the rich but coifed landscape of Evendarr City, down into lovely Kitheria, then skirted through the wilds of Tyrangel - the current kingdom politics of which are a story unto themselves - and finally crossed into the Sutherlands, where we were hospitably treated by all we encountered (many of whom were also traveling to the King's gather). The string of wagons headed to the Tourney grew longer with each passing day. As we reached the southwestern most reaches of the Sutherlands, however, the terrain grew progressively more rocky and wild, and we began to leave some of the lush greenery of Sutherlands' summer behind - these lands were the most untamed in Evendarr - yet still beautiful in their own, harsh way.

We soon discovered through chatter and gossip with fellow travelers that the new keep was one of necessity

and protection for the kingdom, protecting our borders from those of the Dreadlands. Those who had traveled through them already described rocky outcroppings reaching upward amidst rough, gritty patches of harshly barren earth. Few trees there grew straight and strong - no sign of healthy pine or oak - naught but brier and thorns among the scree. Some questioned, could His Majesty truly desire these lands for his own?

Why not leave them be? For the Dreadlands, as it happens, are not without their own native peoples, and they are not entirely friendly to the races of man as we know them. In the center of these deadened, near-lifeless lands is a city, if one can call it that, of a reptilian race who call themselves the "Ka'hiss." The name, when spoken as they do, slithers off the tongue - the forked, serpentine tongue. They are of a military force that, by all reports, makes the Sessai seem tame and harmless as a hobbling child.

Hearing fragments of these horrors as we traveled made many of us nervous - several wagonloads even chose to turn back. But I, my plagued reporter's sense heightened, foolishly moved onward.

We arrived at the Keep as sun set on Thursday eve, just prior to the gather. All appeared calm and organized, though there was the usual air of controlled chaotic mayhem that precedes any tournament. Through the night, many other caravans came in from all directions, though few came directly or even indirectly through the Dreadlands if they could help it.

When all were finally gathered before His Majesty for the official commencement of the gather, the mood was upbeat and cheerful. Camaraderie was already forming between soon-to-be-combatants, as each tried to weigh their competitors prior to the events. As the ceremonies began, our great and noble King, Mykel Endarr II, himself, was struck with what appeared to all in attendance to be an agonizing pain, and many of his nearest men-at-arms and vassals appeared inflicted with similar agony. After some confusion, a muddled sort of explanation began to

circulate among us: His Majesty and several others had felt a great tremor in the lands themselves - they knew it to be some vile evil affecting Tyrra. The moments of pain seemed to briefly ease, until King Mykel complained that a ring he wore, which he had had for many years, was growing hot upon his hand. No sooner had he realized this than we all saw a vast something, something we could none of us identify, seem to materialize - some say from the Ring, others from King Mykel himself. To me, it appeared as if he raised his hand to reach out, and in doing so, summoned it forth! But that was my vision upon reflection - in the meantime, this strange creature was attacking all it could reach, until it was battled down by the many brave wizards and warriors in attendance.

Once order was restored and the injured healed, and it was determined that King Mykel and his Princes were as well as could be expected, we were left to our own devices for the night - none could sleep, for the excitement had awakened us all quite thoroughly - and it was then that the story of the twelve Rings of Evendarr began to be bandied about. It seems that these twelve rings had at one time, been held by twelve Protectors of Evendarr, and that some believe even now that the spirits of those twelve are encapsulated within the rings to watch over Evendarr in times of need. With further research, I was able to determine that the original twelve included many famous names among the Founding Five Families, including Ambrose Huntington, Lady V'Ktara Solonari, whose ring represents Justice, Brother Laramis Hartwell, whose ring represents Compassion, Guildmaster Jarridar Coriolis (Truth), Gurndra Hammerstane (Strength), Shandra MacGregor (Honesty), Lord Arigi Nandemyr (Diplomacy), Magda Ivanova Ajonisa (Wisdom), Dame Commander Allandra Vandoros (also, possibly, Justice), Lord Powell Huntington (Sacrifice), and Earl Haarlan Thunderblade, representing Valor. As I have as yet been unable to determine the story behind the last appearance of these great noble spirits, the Herald will pay well for any who can provide further insights into the rings.

(continued on page 10...)

Rumor Has It...

- **Storm** is gearing his elves up for war against the humans of the Duchy, once again.
- **Count Genovia** has been increasingly accused of necromancy. No one knows just how old he is, but it is said that when he needs to be he can be exceedingly spry and powerful.
- Richland warships are just off the Midland coast. Marines in **Count Genovia's** livery have been seen in landing craft.
- **Count Davy of Lochwood** has fallen into a deep depression. The reason his Herald now handles all his correspondence is that he refuses to do so for himself.
- The nobles of Therendry have only excused **Sir Liam** temporarily so that he has enough slack to hang himself.
- **Baron Simeon Silvercord** has no court – only paid mercenaries, and independents willing to wear his colors to help him win the competition.
- Some wizards say that the sheer numbers of Hordlings being summoned has caused serious harm to the veil between the planes.
- **Anferny Cantalina**, Squire of Lyonesse, will soon be knighted despite being unable to read.
- **Count Davy of Lochwood** and **Squire Parthynia Domamore** are secretly engaged to be wed.
- The Conclave of Wizards is made of three orders.
- There is a fourth order that no one is talking about.
- The Black Dragon known as **Belladonna** can appear in several different forms – each with a different temperament.
- The Saurian Republic is being rebuilt. Lizard man slaves have been seen inland of Sword Lake searching for supplies.
- The Saurians once had enormous stockpiles of components and ancient permanent items within their underwater city. If they are **really** dead, then their wealth should be free for the taking.
- The reward for the return of **Count Genovia's** daughter **Isabella**, captured by **Velwerzin** the Drae Liche recently made human, and **Bazil**, the swamp giant, is astronomical. A Baronial title and estates are only the start.
- Therendry is considering attacking the Quentari forces within its borders.
- Someone is already organizing goblin tribes.
- **Morvidicus** is ruling a small keep near the ruins of Blade within the swamps once claimed by **Xantorax**.
- Impoverished orphans and unwanted children for over-large families have been being recruited by mysterious mendicants which claim to be offering an education and a chance for a better life.
- Farmers digging in the fields of Calais have found evidence of ancient buildings and cities for as long as anyone can remember. Who cares who used to live here, they say – we're the ones who have to plant crops or perish.
- No one has ever seen a "real" Dragon.
- Pages removed from old tomes and in odd scripts have been found all over of late. It's a safe bet that **Dame Pai** and **Baron Silvercord** will pay top coin for them.
- Human Counts **Davy of Lochwood** and **Cosimo de Genovia** have given refuge and funding to the Purists.
- **Xantorax** provided all the Summon Hordling scrolls that so many villains have been using to augment their forces of late -- for a price, of course.
- A sinkhole 20 feet wide has recently opened on a freehold in Havencrest. Owner **Jean d'Orville** has said he's not so worried about the hole as the tracks leading out of it... And the many more leading in.

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Prince Alejandro Defeats Lich-King; Creates the Guildmistress Parthynia Home for Wayward Girls

In a display of both martial prowess and general magnanimity, Prince Alejandro Sparras of Ni'Wrad defeated the Lich-King Michael de la Mare in magical combat, and has converted the evil necromancer's Keep into a Home for Orphaned Young Women.

"I feel truly honored to have the honor to build this orphanage in honor of the brave and brilliant Guildmistress Parthynia," the Prince is quoted to have said in mumbled common, "Plus, it is always good to give back to the community."

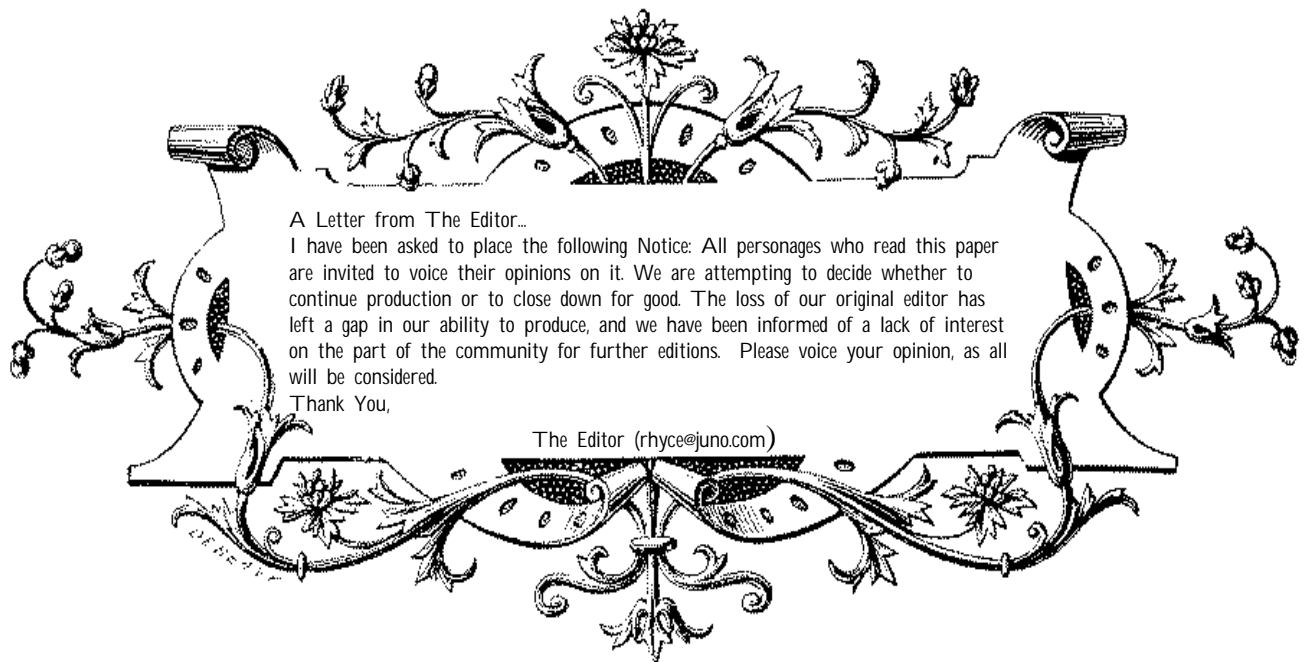
The Community in question, close to the island of Ni'Wrad, had been living with the terror of the Lich-King for many years.

Said a commoner who wishes to remain nameless, "...and the constant zombies and rats and zombie rats and...hold on, you mean that obnoxious foreigner? Yeah, he killed that necromancer alright, and then wouldn't stop talking about himself. Sometimes I think the torture at the hands of Chaos elementals was better than listening to that drivel. I mean, how can he just go on and on about how wonderful he thinks he is and..."

Said on Headmistress Drumbull of the new Parthynia Home for Wayward Girls, "We really do appreciate receiving this keep, extra-planar beings and all, but would have preferred if Prince Alejandro hadn't provided statuary of himself in all of the large rooms. Or at least, hadn't paired it with his portrait. Or shall we say 'portraits.' It's really just a bit unsettling."

The Prince's current tour schedule includes eradication of a large warband of trolls and ettins wreaking havoc in southern Calais, serving as master of ceremonies at a wedding in Avendale, defeating a chromatic dragon threatening to eat the town of Vindale, giving motivational speeches to the town of graduating class at the Royal Academy of Celestial Arts, and establishing the Parthynia Shelter for Displaced Refugees, Children and Puppies. All correspondence for His Highness should be sent through his barrister.

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What's Been Heard and Said...

There is a full Quentari Military dispatchment in the forests near Blade, according to the local chapter of KTA and Sons. They claim to have crossed the border of Quentari, seeking buyers for their fine wines and cheeses, but were unable to explain why none had been sold.

The Nobles of Therendry are desperate for information about the Mind Players active in Calais.

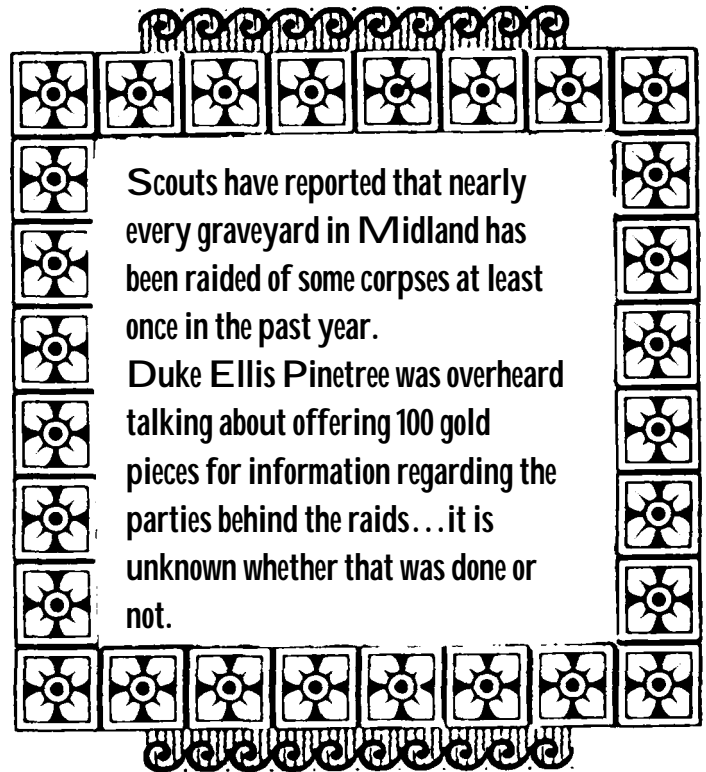
Townfolk from the area of Calais have reported that Duke Ellis Pinetree financed his victory in the War of the Crown with high interest loans from the House of Genovia. The villain bought his title, and one for every niece and nephew he has. There are no substantiating documents to back up their claim at this time.

Ancient sects of Earth magic are being revived. Have you heard that someone in Calais found and then lost some pages from the Book of Hesiod? Perhaps that is the document currently being sought on the fae tree.

The following was overheard: The Dark sects have a head start. Our reporters were unable to clarify the point, so any information may be forwarded to the Editor. Parties doing so will be paid.

P. Roman and L. Frey reported seeing Xantorax bow before Belladonna. They also claim that Xantorax has been known to lie when it suits him, despite what he says.

Tir ei has reported that Therendry is considering annexing the Dark Elven holdings below the surface.



Are You Honorable?

Take the following quiz to find out!

- 1) Concerning the truth, you:
 - a) Always tell the truth.
 - b) Lie only when it averts trouble.
 - c) Never lie to family.
 - d) Never lie, regardless of circumstance.
- 2) You receive a reward (title, treasure, etc.) you do not feel you deserve. Do you:
 - a) accept it before they reconsider and brag to all your friends.
 - b) accept it.
 - c) accept it, but vow to be worthy of it in the future.
 - d) refuse it.
- 3) You have given your sworn word to someone who is not honorable. Do you:
 - a) break it when it's convenient to do so.
 - b) keep it until they do something wrong, and then break it.
 - c) keep it until it starts to cause problems for you, and then break it.
 - d) keep it.
- 4) You witness a crime. Do you:
 - a) blackmail the criminal in return for your silence.
 - b) ignore the situation.
 - c) investigate the matter.
 - d) inform the appropriate authority.
- 5) An honor code (or the Code of Chivalry):
 - a) is useful for other people to have.
 - b) is more like suggestions, than actual rules.
 - c) is a useful guide, but not always practical to follow.
 - d) should guide all your actions.
- 6) You are given a choice between betraying a comrade or dying. Do you:
 - a) take the deal and abandon your comrade.
 - b) take the deal, but only to buy time for a rescue.
 - c) attempt to escape the situation.
 - d) refuse the deal.
- 7) Cheating is:
 - a) a useful skill you use whenever you can.
 - b) something to use on those who aren't family or friends.
 - c) allowed only when dealing with an enemy.
 - d) abhorrent.
- 8) You've made a promise to someone, but keeping it turns out to be more difficult than you originally thought. Do you:
 - a) break it.
 - b) inform the person that you can no longer keep it.
 - c) find someone else to take it over.
 - d) keep it.
- 9) Your liege orders you to take an action that you consider dishonorable. Do you:
 - a) obey gleefully.
 - b) obey.
 - c) contrive circumstances so that you are unable to obey.
 - d) respectfully inform him that you cannot obey.
- 10) Your parents are:
 - a) hobblings.
 - b) gypsies.
 - c) gorse.
 - d) dark elves.

Scoring:

Give yourself 1 point for every a answer, 2 points for b, 3 points for c, and 4 for points d.

10-15: Scoundrel. If you're not careful, you'll stab yourself in the back. You're an equal opportunity swindler, and no one is safe from you.

16-25: Knave. You take the wrong way more often than not, but it's often for a good cause. Or at least something you consider worthwhile.

26-35: Sometimes the best course of action isn't always the right one. You strive to do your best in an imperfect world and are loyal to your friends.

36-40: Paragon. You do the honorable thing, even when it is costly to yourself.

Dark Dangers Threaten Evendarr's Borders...*Continued from page 5...*

What is clear is that later in the gather, many brave adventurers were able to recover several, if not all, of these rings, which had apparently been lost through the ages. The adventurers presented them to the Nobles of Evendarr who were in attendance, and were thanked and honored for their dedication to the Crown. While I was unable to obtain the names of all the heroic men and women who fought so valiantly for these invaluable artifacts (so much else was going on that I could not be all places at once - should we discover the names of them, we shall publish them in future Raven's Herald issues), I did hear of one particularly valorous woman, one Nikita Darkstrider, who gave of her own spirit to be placed in a ring which had lost its own. In order to do this, she had to pass into Death's domain, and travel into the Heroes' Graveyard. We would be honored to publish her obituary, should one be made available to us. She was able to get word back out to the gentry of impending dangers of which she was made aware within the graveyard. She spoke of an evil being known only as Emeraldyne, whom some swear is and Emerald Dragon incarnate, who sits amidst the ruins of the Dreadlands and plans his next conquest. Goodwoman Darkstrider determined that Emeraldyne, enraged at the thought of a concordance among the kingdoms, had already begun moving troops in the form of the Ka'hiss and other vile creatures, towards the Keep and beyond. In addition to these mighty serpentine foes, whom none in my party had (thankfully) yet seen, there were reported to be numerous underlings with a modicum of power each, as granted them by this Emeraldyne,

who in turn control smaller troops on his behalf.

We soon found out that Nikita's hard-won information was correct, as a disturbing assortment of Tyrra's most repugnant creatures began concerted attacks upon us. We found ourselves up against corrupted (even for them) Sessuar, an undead horde led by a monstrosity I cannot begin to describe, and even twisted, warped Fae creatures, all of whom seemed somehow under the ultimate control of Emeraldyne. While they all attacked from different directions, their intent was clear - our absolute and utter annihilation. Our brave band of nobles and adventurers fought long and hard against more than 400 soldiers who slithered, rifted, rose from the earth, and otherwise found their way towards us. In the end, the Armies of the Mark and our brave adventurers were able to cause the enemy to retreat, but for how long is unclear.

In speaking with some of the more militarily minded men and women of the field after the battle was done, I got the impression that they believed these attacks were the concerted efforts of only a few, possibly as few as three, of Emeraldyne's lieutenants. Some wondered aloud as to whether the Keep could hold against a more concerted attack. I, myself, have lived through Greystone's Sessuar War and have lived to breathe another day in vicious Brood attacks, but those were long, drawn out devastation - this was a ferocious flurry of devastation, and I find myself near paralyzed with fear just thinking of it again.

It is my understanding that King Mykel has sent some of his most lithe and secretive scouts southward in an attempt to move beyond the Dreadlands - there were once lands

to the south known as Marshaven, which began as an outpost of His Majesty's troops who were scouting for lands for eventual settlement. It is unclear what has happened to those troops, and there are whispers that Emeraldyne's warriors may have done them in. A more recent expedition of His Majesty's men set out early this year with several nobles of the realm, to try a more diplomatic mission. They were expected to return for the gather, but had not appeared by the end of the tournament, to the concern of all.

Amidst all this chaos and destruction, His Majesty, of course, insisted that the Tournament continue, for he refused to allow his (now sworn) enemies to destroy the honor and integrity of the day. Several of Ravenholt's finest citizens won a hard fought victory against numerous teams of contestants from other duchies, and have been duly given titles as Honorary King's Knights. (See related article, this issue).

The Accords of Avalon were also brought forth and discussed at this, the first of several planned meetings on the topic. I was unable to sit in on the meetings as I was busy covering both the attacks and the tournaments - had I known it would be more than a simple King's Tourney, I'd have brought more Herald staff to help out! We will, of course, pay handsomely for any details concerning the ongoing development of the Accords, as they will affect our lands and our people, as well as our relations with our neighbors on all sides. Never let it be said that our Kingdom is a dull one - I, for one, have returned from my ersatz vacation weary and war-torn, and very much in need...of a vacation.

