

The Death of Azharadian

By the time the eyes of the kings of Aerdy turned at last to the rich ore seams of the Headlands and the fertile vales of the Dragonshead beyond, Azharadian the Great had already borne the banner of the Golden Sun for two score years and ten. No general was so wise or cunning in the arts of war as he and no leader so commanded the loyalty and love of the men he led. It was said that he saw the future that he could look into the souls of his foes and know the secrets of their hearts, uncovering their fears as easily as their stratagems. Under his hand, the Sun of Aerdy had never seen defeat and its radiance had spread from the shores of the Solnor to the white peaks of the Yatils and from the mires and medes of Sunndi to the frigid Barrens where Telchur walks. Where lesser men might have lent an ear to the whisper of hubris, that deadliest of venoms to the great, Azharadian never once wavered in his loyalty to his realm and to his king.

Thus when that king called upon him to take up the war banner once more, this time against the Onnwi of the Dragonshead, though he was grey with age and the weight of his years bore heavily upon his shoulders, Azharadian answered without hesitation. Bidding his wife and daughters and their children farewell, he marched forth from Rel Astra at the head of a host of ten thousand, knowing that he would see neither them nor his beloved city again in this life.

Azharadian first marched for the broad green fields of Ahlissa and setting his pavilion there, received embassies from the Dwurking of the Iron Hills. Meeting face to face, the general and the king found much worthy of respect in the other and swore a pact of brotherhood - a rare honour, bestowed on few by the Highborn of the Dwur. Together they pledged allegiance to a common cause against the Suel. For the most part, the Onnwi were a wicked people; the cruel and debased blood of the Suel ran true in the veins and they revelled in the torment of others. When they beheld the banners of Aerdy drawing nigh to their marches, they sent the war flag through their kingdom and mustered a host to hold the passes though the Headlands to their heartlands. Now Azharadian knew full well that to assail them in these narrows was folly.

"No glory comes from slaughter", he used to say. "And no victory from striking an enemy who awaits the blow."

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Therefore he set upon a cunning course of action. Sending companies of his vanguard forward with the Dwur, he sought to enspell the Onnwi in the way the fakirs of the Bakluni lands bind cobras and vipers with the music of a flute. Holding them ever at the guard with feints, raids and skirmishes, Azharadian locked their eyes eastwards, while in secret he prepared the stroke that would prove to be their undoing. Upon the shores of Relmor, the general ordered that a great fleet be built enough to carry his hosts across the sea to strike the heartlands of the Onnwi from the west.

All that winter his men laboured and when once Procan's wrath had been spent the following spring, the mighty fleet set forth their masts like the trees of a forest, their banners like a blazoned sky overhead. With Gearnat the Navigator's unwavering hand upon the rudder, Azharadian and his host passed swift and sure over the waves, and came in time to the shores of Onnwal.

Now some few of the Onnwi had not forsaken the paths of honour and virtue. One such man was Jherlo. He had refused to send the men of his household east against so noble a people as the Aerdi. For his troubles, he had been banished from the court of the Onnwi king to his lands in the far western tip of the Dragonshead, where the cliffs glower out over the narrows of the sea. Looking out from his tower in wonder, he saw the forested masts of the Aerdi as they drew nigh the shore. Going directly down to the strand of Obelton, he lit a great beacon to guide the Aerdi to a safe landing among the reefs and shoals.

First to alight upon Onnwal's shore was Azharadian. As he did, Jherlo fell to his knees and begged forgiveness for the wickedness of his people, asking that even if he himself should perish that the Aerdi might in their mercy spare his wife and daughters who had wrought no ill upon any man. The general, taking up his axe Bardinar, knighted the man as he knelt in the name of his god, his liege and his life - Heironeous the Invincible, the King of Aerdy and the Golden Sun - and bade him rise as a friend of Aerdy and a man of virtue.

Now the host of Aerdy swept up from the shores and found the Onnwi unready for a stroke from that quarter. Too late the Suel rushed their companies from the hills to face the onslaught and the Aerdi drove them from the plains as a broom sweeps ashes from a hearthstone. In

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desperation the chieftains of the Onnwi gathered the last remnants of their strength in a narrow vale in the hills for one last cast of the die, to break the strength of the Aerdī or to sell their lives dearly if they should not prevail. Azharadian thus faced a desperate foe with nothing to lose, and knew that only battle, hard fought and costly would suffice for the banner of the Golden Sun to win dominion over the land.

Yet even as the strength of his hosts grew, his own strength ebbed. The general fell ill with a sickness of the lungs. Though it troubled him greatly, he never once shirked his duty nor relinquished his command. Instead he led his men onwards as he always had, astride his great white stallion Altarin. Despite this, or because of it perhaps, Azharadian grew steadily weaker, as the disease spread within his chest. His own faith in the Invincible One and the ministrations prayers of the priests of his retinue were to no avail.

Upon the morn of the battle, the general lay gravely ill in his tent. Nonetheless, he asked that his Captains, the Sires of the Great Houses that rule Onnwal to this day, carry his bed where he might see the field of battle and decry the disposition of the enemy. Dutifully, the captains carried their general to the brow of a low hill overlooking the vale where the Suel were drawing up their battle lines. From this vantage he surveyed the field.

As he looked, upon a hill close by, Azharadian spied a lone horseman clad in black sitting astride a mount the colour of polished onyx and the rays of the rising sun touched them not. Even as the general watched, the rider raised his sword towards him in salute. At this, Azharadian ordered for his arms and armour be brought to him and that Altarin be saddled that he might ride forth. His Captains objected, saying that he was surely too ill to ride, but the general replied:

"You do not question me when I would marshal my hosts, why then do you question me when I would marshal myself?"

Thus chastened, the Captains brought the general's armour, and though weakened by his sickness, he donned it without aid and took up his great twin-headed axe Bardinar (or in the Common - Glaive of Victory), forged by the smiths of Rel Astra and blessed by the Invincible One himself, or so t'was said. His faithful mount, Altarin was brought

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to him, and slowly and painfully he mounted and sat tall and proud once more, his armour shining in the morning sun.

When his men saw their general, they cheered for they thought him well once more. They stood to attention in serried ranks, unfurled their banners and as one saluted their beloved commander. It is said that tears came to the eyes of the old general then, and he spoke to them in a loud, clear voice which belied the sickness in his chest:

"You have followed me to foreign lands and far reaches. You have marched and fought, bled and died, with neither complaint nor question, nor ever giving cause for complaint or question against you. Am I not the most fortunate man to have lived for Heironeous to have given me such an army of men to command? My tears now are because the Oerth shall never see our like again.

"Now once more this morn we face battle. It will be hard and it will be bitter, but you are soldiers of Aerdy and there is no better breed of warrior alive on the Oerth. Therefore, go forth today and prove the truth of my words to those who would doubt them."

At this the Host of Aerdy cheered with a single voice and marched forth singing into battle.

Then Azharadian called his Captains to him and gave to them his commands for the dispositions of the host and for the order of battle for the coming fray. Having done all this, he rode alone into the morning to meet the black horseman, who waited for him yet upon the hilltop.

The black rider neither stirred nor gave any sign that he marked Azharadian's approach. He was clad all in mail that was darker than a moonless midnight and which seemed to swallow the bright morning light. Upon his head he wore a tall helm which covered his face. At his side was sheathed a great sword forged from steel the colour of ebon.

When he drew close Azharadian spoke.

"Pray show me your face, sir - that I might know you truly."

Without a word the black horseman opened the helm and the general looked upon his face. Grim and gaunt it was, without expression - a face that had known neither joy nor sorrow, love nor loss, hatred nor pity - only duty. No colour touched it, no glow of living blood, for it was the colour of sun-bleached bone. The eyes were strangest of all - for they were but a pair of black orbs, having neither white nor colour. As

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Azharadian looked into them, he thought that if mortal man could behold eternity, then it would appear such as these eyes did - fathomless depths wherein all the world and all who walked and breathed beneath the sun, moons and stars would be swallowed. All life, all love, all hope, all pain, all suffering and all sorrow would find an end in the night eternal that those two holes in the world encompassed.¹

Then Azharadian spoke once more, "Well met, sir. For by your face, I know you and though I have long awaited you, I cannot say that I am glad to finally meet you."

"Few are, save those who would seek Me," replied the horseman in a deep voice like a winter wind amongst gravestones. "Yet all must kneel before Me in the end!"

"Your pardon sir, but I kneel before my god and my king alone and you are neither - I say to you I shall not kneel."

"All must kneel!"

"Once more I must beg your pardon, sir, when I say that I will not."

"You would defy My will?"

"I would!"

"It is futile, for I may not be vanquished. My Edict is law. My will shall be done, as surely as Pelor rises in the east and sets in the west, as surely as winter follows summer, as surely as night follows day. Would you seek to oppose the setting of the sun or the falling of the leaves or the ebb and flow of Procan's tides? Opposing Me is no less fruitless than opposing these, for it is to oppose the natural order of Creation. Many have tried and many shall yet try, but I tell you this - all shall fail ere the End."

"For a third time I must beg your indulgence, sir, for I mean you no disrespect. I am a soldier and I am a man, willful and proud. All my life I have striven against my foes and against the foes of my king and my country and opposed them on battle's field. I have carried the banners of my people from the eastern ocean to the distant west, from the empty north to the torrid and sweltering south. For two score years and ten I have led armies of men in battle and in war. In all those years I have never known the taste of defeat. And though I know that I cannot win this final battle, it would be a mockery of my life and a denial of the

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essence of what I have been to submit to you now, without dignity, without struggle. Therefore, sir, I shall not kneel."

With these words Azharadian drew forth Bardinar for the last time, and the great axe blazed in the morning light, such that upon the field of battle below it seemed that a star had fallen onto the Oerth from Celestian's Field. The Suel quailed and cried out in fear at this strange omen, but the Aerdi raised their voices once more in song, for they knew that their general watched over them yet.

Yet even as Bardinar burned forth, the black horseman unsheathed his ebon blade and it seemed to the general that the morning sun was diminished and grew dim and distant. For a moment the two adversaries were still and each looked into the eyes of the other. Azharadian saw the certainty of his own death in those bottomless eyes. His foe saw no trace of fear, only proud and resolute defiance. At this the black horseman raised his sword to salute the general, for it was rare that he found a mortal man who did not dread him. Azharadian raised Bardinar reply.

Then lowering the axe, he spurred forward to meet his fate. Bardinar met the ebon blade with a ring, which resounded across the plain below. Stroke for stroke, the general matched the horseman for a time, and his heart sang with the joy of battle. Even as the armies met and clashed in the vale, the duel continued on the hilltop above.

Yet, though he fought gallantly, Azharadian was but flesh and blood, old in years and weakened with sickness besides, while his foe was tireless and unfaltering. So it was that in the end, the ebon blade slipped beneath the general's guard, passed through his breastplate and found his heart.

Thus mortally wounded, Azharadian spoke his last, "Well struck sir, and so I am ended. Yet, I am not sorry, for the battle is won!"

With that he spoke no more and was still.

The Captains of Aerdy led their hosts as their general had commanded and they fell with strength where the Suel line was weakest and it shattered like a dry, brittle twig before their onset. Those of the Suel who stood were left dead on the field, and those that fled were hunted down like beasts by the relentless Aerdi pursuit.

The battle won, the Captains sought out Azharadian, that they might bring him tidings of the victory and they decried him still upon the

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hill top astride his faithful Altarin. Yet when they approached, he marked them not and gave no reply to their greeting. Rather he seemed to stare down upon the field, a faint smile upon his lips, Bardinar gripped tight in his hand. Only when one was bold enough to touch his hand and found it cold, did they realise their general was dead, for he bore no mark or hurt upon him.

Though they bore Azharadian's body back to Rel Astra where his tomb yet lies, his Captains, the Fathers of Onnwal raised a great pillar of basalt ten yards high upon the crown of the hill where the general met his end. In the heart of the pillar they interred Bardinar, or so it is said, and there the blade remains yet to this day. Some say Azharadian will return someday when the need of the children of the Aerdí is greatest, to claim the glaive and raise the Golden Sun once more to its former glory. If so, say others, then surely that day must soon be at hand.

So passed Azharadian the Great, soldier, general, conqueror, unvanquished even in death.

1. Though this tale is universally called the Reaper and the General in the lands of Onnwal, the description of "the Reaper" given here in no way resembles any known depiction of Nerul. Rather it harks back to representations of the "Ebon Knight", a shadowy figure found in the ancient tales of the Oeridians from their original homelands on the distant plains of the west that predate the great migrations. The Ebon Knight was supposed to gather the great heroes of the Oerids into a heroic afterlife when their time upon the Oerthi was spent.

