

The Death of Azharadian

Of the death of the great Aerdí general Azharadian, it is recorded by Terenbrand in his "History of the Aeredi" that he succumbed to an affliction of the breathing and lungs whilst on campaign against the Suel tribes of Onnwal in the autumn of the fifty ninth year before the coronation of Nasran Cranden as the first Overking of the Great Kingdom.

Amongst his men at the time there was told a tale which is still recounted among the common folk of Onnwal this day:

In the last days of the campaign in Onnwal, the general fell ill with a sickness of the lungs. Though it troubled him greatly, never did he shirk his duty nor abrogate his responsibility, instead leading his men onwards as he always had, astride his great white stallion, Altarin. Despite this, Azharadian grew steadily weaker, as the disease spread within his chest.

Now the army of Aerdí had driven the hosts of the native Suel from the coastal plains as a brush sweeps ashes from a hearthstone. In desperation the chieftains of the Suel gathered the last remnants of their strength in the hills of the Headlands for one last cast of the die, to break the strength of the Aerdí 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.

On the morn of the battle, the general lay gravely ill in his tent. Nonetheless, he asked that his captains 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 and 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?"

The Death of Azharadian

Thus chastened, the captains brought the general's armour, and though weakened by his sickness, he donned it without aid and girthed at his hip his great sword Bardinar (or in the Common - Blade of Victory), forged by the smiths of Rel Astra. His faithful mount, Altarin was brought 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, and 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 call 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 all those who would doubt."

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 this, he rode alone into the morning to meet the black horseman, who waited for him still upon the hilltop.

The black rider neither stirred nor gave any sign that he marked Azharadian's approach. He was clad all in black mail darker than a moonless midnight, 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

The Death of Azharadian

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 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 which those two holes in the world encompassed.

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 king and my god 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 frozen, empty north to the torrid, sweltering south. For three score years and ten

The Death of Azharadian

I have led armies of men in battle and in war and 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 my self and the essence of what I have been to submit now to you without dignity, without struggle. Therefore, sir, I shall not kneel."

With these words Azharadian drew forth Bardinar for the last time, and the great blade shone 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 blazed 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 Bardenir in reply. Then he lowered the blade and spurred forward to meet his fate. Bardinar met the ebon blade with a ring which resounded across the plain. 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 below, 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 breast plate 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

The Death of Azharadian

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 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 unsheathed 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.

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