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## *A Fair Tourney*

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## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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### Abstract

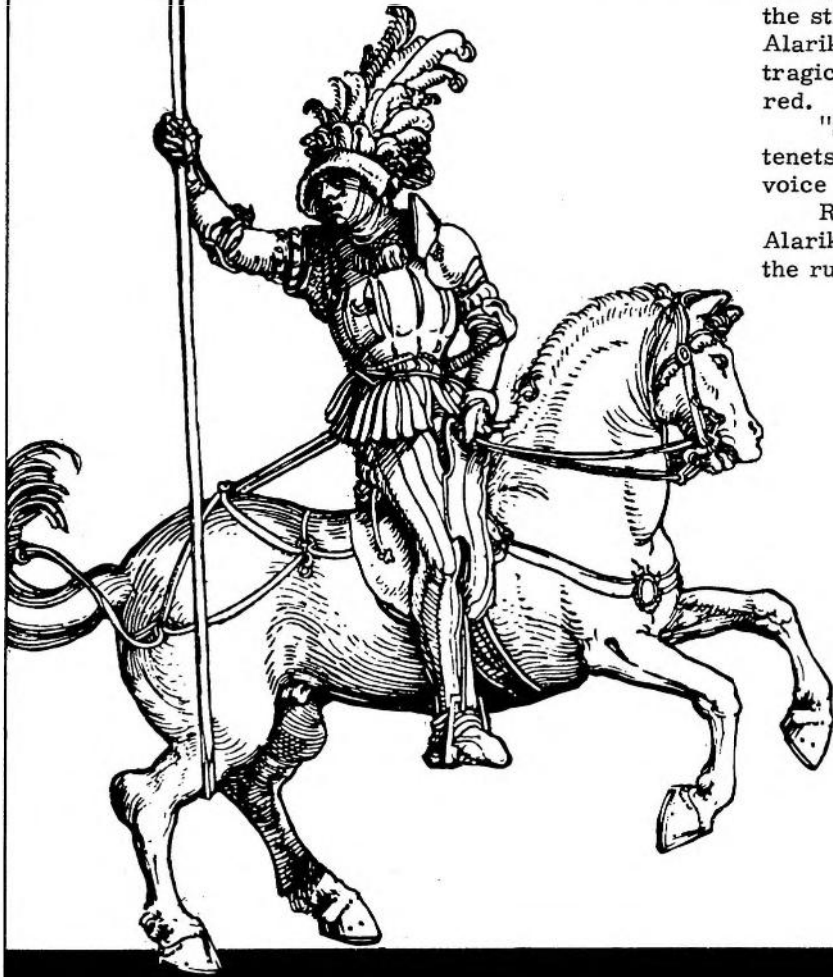
It was his second day in the forest that Sir Alarik met Sir Urens, knight of the keep of Thorn.

### Keywords

Mythellany; Fiction; Mythopoeic; A Fair Tourney; Todd French

# A FAIR TOURNEY

by Todd French



It was his second day in the forest that Sir Alarik met Sir Urens, knight of the keep of Thorn.

The cry had startled Alarik, filling his ears with panic insensible. With a brutal motion he had wheeled his trapper-clad steed around, lance lowered, pennon a-dance. Through the eye-slots of the rust-sheathed, closed helm, the knight had searched the thick foliage warily. When the second cry rang out, it hung on the air like a brackish wind, causing him to wonder if it had not been torn from the throat of some chained, avian demon. Bracing the wooden shaft of the lance against his body, he stared impassively into the gloomy undergrowth.

A few hundred yards away, hardly illuminated by the light that filtered through the coarse, twisted branches, a figure made its way haphazardly out of the wood. Screaming with excitement rather than terror, the figure made its way toward Alarik, who maintained his offensive pose.

The stranger wore a hauberk of mail with a mail cuirrass and simple, closed helm, all uncaparisoned, all badly dented. Patches of loose, iron rings hung from the man's limbs. Tufts of a stained, dirty, quilted arming coat protruded through rents in the armor. Goose grass, leaves, and twigs abounded throughout the mail coat as if the very wood had assaulted him. Wearing neither the protective linen surcoat nor the belt from which a cruciform-hilted blade could dangle, the man was a stark and martial figure.

Raising his mail glove in a supplicating gesture, the stranger knelt before the mounted knight. To Alarik, the man's face was a pair of bright green, tragic eyes and fumbling lips bordered by bristling red.

"Sir," the man gasped, "you are bound by the tenets of fair courtesy. I beg your help!" The man's voice was as tragic and weary as his eyes.

Relaxing his grasp on the shaft of his weapon, Alarik overcame his initial astonishment and steadied the russet-colored war-horse which whinnied softly

and pawed the earth into crescents.

"Who are you?" queried Alarik. "Who are you that seems to have taken the mistral of some forest wight? If you seek for succor in these woods, you are less informed of sense than I when I entered. Poor beasts, shrieking crows, and brigands are not sensible to courtesy, sir. Tell me, what demands fair courtesy here?" Now in a jocular mood, Alarik raised the shaft of his lance into a neutral position. A light breeze lifted the blue falcon pennon aloft and stirred the sister falcons on the beast's trapper and the knight's clean surcoat.

The warrior before Alarik dropped his gauntleted hands and replied in broken tones, "I ask your help because I can no longer defend the ideas I once entertained. So I am doomed." Rising shakily to his feet, the man swayed, caught his balance, and spoke again. "I cannot defend such ideas because of the Knight of the Oak!" The name tumbled from the man's mouth as if it were a mixture of Old Night and slow death.

Frowning, Alarik said, "Truly sir, I do not understand. I would know of you and why this Knight of the Oak hinders you from the code that, fair-mailed as you were once, obviously served."

The stranger bowed his head and after a few moments spoke in a halting, but unemotional tone.

"Urens is my name. Lately of the Keep of Thorn. There had been knights in our family these many years, glad-girded and strong blades, sir. But of late I loved a lady ... a daughter of an earl of these parts ... a lady, and no one was there with fairer tresses and more lovely eyes. But her father would not allow me to bear her favor or let her answer my words until I had broken a lance with a knight of this wood, a hermit of sorts who holds himself in great opinion in the pursuit of arms. I had expected one of the earl's retainers, a great old veteran standing before a bridge, but it was not so. The earl favors the ways of the older faiths. This Knight of the Oak is no real man. He is of some elvish mien and never leaves the shadow of his

pavilion or fights with good metal if he can help it. He draws his strength from the very oaks, accepting a challenge if the challenger will turn recreant if he loses. I faced him and was unhorsed by his sorcery. Now I can bear no good iron around my waist for the strength of the Knight of the Oak shames me."

Alarik considered this. "And you bind yourself to a recreant's might? This Knight of the Oak smacks of druidery."

Urens nodded bitterly. "Aye, sir. He is kinsman to the druid, to the baroow, to a cruel and hard glamor. And I fear it. He rings his garden with the blazons of the fallen. He is the bane of holy knighthood." Pausing, the knight looked up at Alarik and seemed to shrink in on himself.

Alarik smiled. "And this is what you would have me break a lance with? An armed tree sprite?"

Urens of the Keep of Thorn bowed his head once more. "Sirrah, I would. I would regain my honor. I would regain my lady's favor if you would help me. I ask only my sword which he keeps in a wicker basket -- and his helm."

"His helm? You would claim it as your own tourney?" Alarik laughed.

Urens of Thorn hunched over in misery and shrugged. "It is a small boon. I care for ... " The knight's voice trailed off helplessly, "... it is my promise to my lady."

"Though her father has cost you this?"

Urens of Thorn was quiet. Nodding his iron-clad head, Alarik was also silent as he regarded the man in front of him. At length he spoke.

"Yet you admit you have forfeited the right of courtesy."

The knight sighed, one hand moving unconsciously to where his sword belt might have been. The hand clenched, then relaxed.

"It is true, sir knight, you owe me nothing. I have no claim on you," came the weary response.

Tiring of the man's mood, Alarik waved his



hand dismissively, laughing. The single circlet of battered bronze atop the helm quivered in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Very well, Urens of the Keep of Thorn, I will break a lance with this Knight of the Oak. If I am successful, you may claim what crests there are. Do not think ill of me. I am a grim sword by necessity, but I would not leave a brother of our order to the promise of allegiance to the will of a forest sprite. You seem an honest man, Urens, and I would not see a knight bound to Old Night." Alarik's eyes blazed above the eye-slots. "No, I would not."

Sir Urens shivered in spite of himself. "I'll lead the way."

Passing beneath the gnarled, thickset branches, Alarik sat rigidly in his saddle, occasionally correcting the course of the steed with a jerk of the reins when the road took an unexpected curve. Urens strode noisily in front of the mounted knight. He walked with a confident gait now. Sometimes, Alarik would notice the man cursing a cairn by the side of the road or waving a mailed fist at crows roosting high in the trees. He mocked their loud, incessant racket. The abusive cawing accompanied the pair like a portent. It was the only animal chatter Alarik could later remember from the bleak, light-strangled wood.

The crows irritated Alarik; so did Urens' behavior. Through the din, he would call up to Alarik with a jaunty, "Not much further, lord." The man's attitude seemed entirely too optimistic to Alarik. He began to wonder if he should have offered to help the knight. He cursed the rules of errantry idly to himself as they continued. At length, Sir Urens halted and pointed to a twisted archway of limbs on the left.

"That will take you to the clearing. You'll find the black pavilion."

Sir Alarik nodded and clicked his spurs to his horse's sides. From behind him, the man's nervous cry rang in his ears, "And remember your promise!"

Bursting into the clearing, Alarik found himself surrounded by multitudes of mocking demons. No,

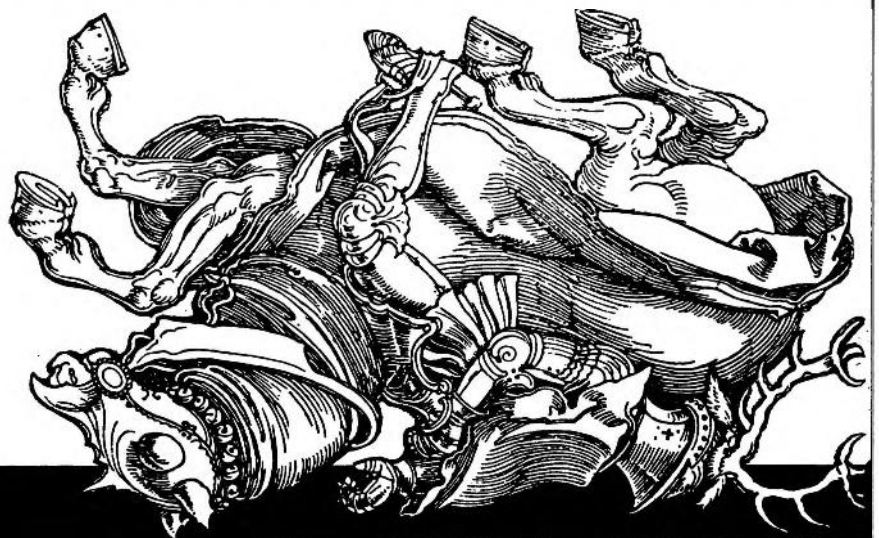
it was a fine illusion. On the trees bordering the small clearing, the blazoned shields of vanquished hosts peeked out of the great boughs and branches where they had been nailed. They surrounded the horseman like a ridiculous and silent chorus of ruin. From the heights, begrimed and weathered faces of chimera, dragon, eagle from gauntlet, rose, shake-fork, bend, and countless other blazons held tyrannical positions on their curling triangles of steel-bound wood. Peering out of his helm, Alarik surveyed the formidable menagerie of heraldic symbols. To

Alarik, it seemed as if a thousand, frozen, laughing maws mocked him, inviting his own triangular shield to join them in dark and silent hilarity.

Disregarding their bleak warning, the knight rode on into the middle of the clearing. At the western end, a single black pavilion jutted upwards like a sentinel-rook. From its peak, a single black banner emblazoned with a silver oak tree snapped in the breeze. A great war horse, clad in a trapper of black samite, nervously pawed the ground before a gloomy entrance. Nearly obscured at one side was an old, wicker basket containing a sword-shaped, leather-bound object.

A movement from within the pavillion riveted Alarik's gaze. Out stepped the Knight of the Oak. The warrior was seven feet tall. He wore a closed helm which appeared to be made of silver; jet-black stag horns crowned it. The hauberk was of the same metal as the helm. A resplendent black surcoat over the mail armor bore the crest of the oak. There were no iron greaves upon his leggings, but greaves like silver. He clenched a fourteen foot lance of oakwood without any pennon. In his left hand he held a round shield of ebony, bearing his crest. A silver-bladed battle ax five feet in length was tucked into a heavy belt at his waist. The Knight of the Oak was an imposing spirit if spirit he was.

Seeking the face, Alarik could only distinguish a thick, black growth of beard which fell beneath



the helm and onto his surcoat like a black waterfall.

"Ho," the Knight of the Oak called in a deep, gruff voice. "Another youngling to face me in a tournament? He is persistent."

Alarik answered haughtily, readying his lance. "I do not come to defend favors, druid! You claim the sword and rank of Urens of Thorn. No brother of our order should be beholding to any armsbearer of Old Night!"

The knight of the Oak threw back his metal-shod head and bellowed rich laughter, pointing his lance at the blade in the wicker basket.

"You would retrieve this for Sir Rabbit? Do you not know that he is a caitiff, poor in arms, and tricks every wandering and likely errant into pursuing his quarrel? You are not the first, sir knight. This Urens has not faced me in two years!"

Shaken, Alarik shouted over the insolent giant's laughter, "You lie!"

The Knight of the Oak chuckled deep in his helm and tossed his antlered crests.

"I do not. The purity of my faith forbids it. Do not mock it. My faith was strong when my kind moved as whole forests through the earth. In those days the harp of the Golden One was the scent of the air and stronger than the bleat from your sword-priests. We did not fear the White One. We did not fear his law; you brought it from your own fear. You loved that White God because you were afraid. You banished us because of your own arrogance, because we did not fit with the terror and dullness your holy men taught. You hate us because you no longer dream, sir knight. You cannot dream, so you drive us into the barrows with your dullness."

Before Alarik could speak, the giant held up a gleaming hand.

"However, I will give you a chance to prove that the tenets of your faith and office are stronger than mine. You may even have this—" pointing contemptuously to Uren's sword, "—if you can unhorse me, lance to lance. But if I am victor, and if you live, you must forsake the metal of your office."

Alarik debated this. To defend a caitiff, if the Knight of the Oak spoke truly, was intolerable; to lose to a servant of pagan Old Night was another, even more distressing matter. A familiar black feeling rose up within him like the fury of wheeling bats.

"Well?" The giant's voice boomed across the clearing.

Alarik licked his lips.

"I agree," he said in a clear, steady tone and began to prepare himself. He chose an approach from the east end of the clearing directly into the sun, something experienced knights usually avoid. With his back to the Black Knight, Alarik pulled off his linen surcoat and tossed it to the ground. Removing the triangular shield from the saddle, he lifted it to fighting position and turned. Alarik allowed himself a bleak smile remembering the cowardly Urens whom he defended, but his will and strategy hardened. He looked up for the challenge.

The early evening sun had left the field half lighted, half in shadow, from the trees at the

other side. Deep in shade near the pavilion, the Knight of the Oak tapped his weapon on the ebony shield, then drove forward laughing, eager for another easy victory.

Alarik spurred his own horse forward, the animal's blue trapper curling back into bright waves.

As the giant rode out of the shadows, he couched the clawed lance, but only ten horse-strides away, Alarik dropped his own lance to the ground and threw his shield aside.

The westering sun, picking out the crucifix engraved on Alarik's breastplate, leapt to meet the giant's charge.

"No!" the Knight of the Oak howled. His lance dropped and his shield shot up too late to parry the light deadly to his kind. A bright bar slid over him. A flash of sparks arose from the giant's helm as he passed.

Alarik watched with fascination as the Knight of the Oak disappeared, appeared again, altering in the shadows beneath the great oaks. The man's outline faded and in his place was a dark shape which writhed and shifted in a funnel of bitter light. Before Alarik, a lithe, malignant shape stared up at him with red-rimmed eyes. It raised its antlered head and bounded into the forest with mighty leaps.

Intending to claim a coward's weapon, Alarik turned and saw he stood alone in an empty clearing. From the twisted arch, Urens shambled forward and screamed with despairing rage, adding his voice to the rapt of the crows. Looking first at the patch of grass where the Pavilion had stood, then at Alarik, he screamed once again with hatred.

Alarik clicked his heels to his horse's sides, and smiling with satisfaction, rode away. ●

#### FROM THE WOMB OF THE WORLD

From the womb of the world whispers a moan  
As the atmosphere shivers, silently slain,  
And the last of the High Elves lingers alone.

Through lead-coffered heavens, rose-clouds blown  
Like derelicts scuttle for fear of the rain --  
From the womb of the world whispers a moan.

And a fire-ball spreading out filagree cones  
On a mountain range, thrumming a legend's refrain  
Where the last of the High Elves lingers alone.

Ashen evergreens, needleless Norns, like bone  
Thrown on cinder-heaps twisting arthritic in pain;  
From the womb of the world whispers a moan.

And brown silicon soil melts glass-down;  
Fertile imaginings struggle in vain,  
And the last of the High Elves lingers alone.

With the last human impulse, the last man alone  
Faults fantasy worlds. He dies, and they wane.  
From the womb of the world whispers a moan,  
And the last of the High Elves lingers . . . is gone.

by Michael Collings