

STORM WARRIORS

The Third Tale of Orfeo • by Brian Craig

'MOTHER OF ALL,' whispered Owain Dene, starting into the fast-approaching mass of seething cloud and shadow. **'It is the Storm Hunt, come to claim our souls!'**

'Ride away from the buildings!' cried Herla, forced to shout in order to be heard above the keening wind. **'Go down the hill and into the vale, where there is shelter. Ride with all your might, and pray for the dawn to come – and whatever else you do, never dismount!'**



WHEN A BAND of mysterious elves is shipwrecked on Albion, the delicate peace of the land is shattered. Far from being the innocent travellers they claim, the elves pay allegiance to a more sinister power. Can the young King Herla and the bard Trystan save the kingdom from the whirlwind of darkness that threatens to tear it apart?

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PUBLISHED BY THE BLACKLIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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UK ISBN: 1 84154 259 8

US ISBN: 0 7434 4321 7



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THE TOURNEY-FIELD OF *Caer Plennydd* was a strip of level land which lay between two mountain-slopes. A small stream followed a winding course along it, but left adequate space for the lists which were required for the mounted combat, as well as an open space for the fencing. Platforms had been erected for the court and the most prestigious guests, but there was plenty of space on the slopes where the common people were able to assemble.

The competitors in the long running-race had set off soon after dawn from an appointed place some miles away in the mountains, and the wrestling bouts were stopped as soon as the leaders of the field appeared; the winner came from the distant demesne of the *Aglavins*, but there were plenty who had supported him. Many of the townspeople had been warned by their kinfolk not to oppose him in the wagering, so he received a loud enough cheer to start the day. The wrestling too went to a borderer from the House of *Gyreth*, but the short running-race was won by a local man in the royal service, who was cheered mightily.

The crossbow competition was followed with the keenest interest by all, and the result proved to be close, with two of *Herla's* men-at-arms and one of *Huw Peredur's* men matching shots while the targets were carried back again and again, six paces at a time. In the end, it was one of *Herla's* men who won, though the cheer from the townsfolk was a little muted – understandably, given that *Herla's* guardsmen kept tight discipline within and without the castle walls, and were regarded by many of the common folk as enemies.

Trystan, who had been seated next to *Kerewan* so that he might have the opportunity to carry out his orders, asked the magician what he thought of the crossbow contest.

'It was not a true contest,' opined the elf. 'The crossbow is a powerful weapon, to be sure, but at that range the uncertainty of the mechanism outweighs the Bowman's skill – it was a lucky shot which won, not a skilful one. The *Uranai* are devotees of the artistry of the bow, which is a weapon which permits *kerrmieryon*, and are reluctant to use these wind-up toys.'

Trystan studied the elf carefully, trying to guess how old he might be. Kerewan's eyes were small by elven standards, somewhat sunken and lined around in a fashion which gave the impression that he had passed too many sleepless nights. His complexion was unusually sallow and his face rather angular, both of which features made him less pretty than his companions. He had the pointed ears which so many of his kind sported, and these seemed to protrude all the more because his hair was so sparse. He was certainly not young, and might be very ancient, but Trystan did not know what signs to look for in order to know for sure.

The time had come for the middle-distance running race – which was in part a leaping-race, for the contestants had to go four times around an elliptical course, jumping the stream twice on each circuit. Because it was closed to bondsmen the race had a smaller field than either of the earlier races, but a full dozen franklins had entered along with eight squires and the elf named Jair. Under normal circumstances all eyes would have been on the squires, who would one day be knights of the realm, but on this occasion it was the elf who attracted most attention. He was easy enough to pick out, even for those perched half way up the mountain, because of his height.

Trystan measured Jair's lanky legs with some awe, but privately wondered whether the thin-framed elf would have the stamina to last the course against the wiriest of the franklins. On the first two circuits it seemed that the elf would be a disappointment, for he loped along ten or fifteen yards behind the pace and only gained ground when the runners had to jump the stream, which he did with long-legged grace.

On the third circuit, though, the leaders began to fall away and the real race developed, with the elf lying third to the strongest of the franklins and the eldest of the squires. Half way around the final circuit the squire began a sprint, and for

three or four seconds it appeared that the elf might have to let him go – but as they hurdled the stream for the last time Jair's stag-like leap carried him to the shoulder of his opponent, and from there he ran on ahead very smoothly, pulling further away with every loose-limbed stride.

The crowd cheered, not altogether reluctantly but without any conspicuous excitement – and when the cheering died a murmurous whisper took its place.

'How much more easily could he have won had he not bided his time?' asked Trystan of his companion. 'Thirty paces, do you think, or fifty?'

'Oh no,' said Kerewan lazily, 'he was at full stretch, I assure you.'

Trystan was not convinced, and was perfectly sure that Kerewan had meant to be transparent in his deceitful modesty. The harper dared not say so aloud, but he was privately certain that the elf Bowman would have a harder task against the cream of Plennydd's free foresters, and he looked forward to that contest eagerly.

The targets for the longbow contest were initially placed at a close distance, because there was a vast difference in skill and strength between the best of the competitors and the worst, but at each stage they were moved back a dozen paces instead of six.

The first two rounds disposed of the weaker competitors, though few seemed displeased – those who hit the centre of the target once were well-satisfied. In the third round, only five competitors contrived to put all three of their arrows into the heart of the target; two foresters and two knights. The noblemen were the aging Owain Dene, who had been a considerable champion in earlier days, and Berwyn Aglavin, now reckoned by all save Owain to be his superior.

Trystan knew them both well, and felt for them as they watched the targets being taken back again, biting their lips because they knew that their battle, at least, would be settled now.

The first of the foresters stepped up and placed his first two arrows in the centre circle – but then his unsteady hand failed, and the third could not even make the second ring. The second was a stronger man, and a patient one; taking his time, he

placed all three arrows in the centre, though one came perilously close to the rim.

The elven archer went next, and fired all three bolts into the centre with hardly any delay between shots; what was more, all three went in so close that their shafts were almost touching. Trystan felt his heart sink, and revised his optimistic opinion regarding the probable outcome of the contest.

Sir Berwyn applauded the elf's shots dutifully before taking up his own position. He too put all three shots into the centre, though they were scattered as widely as the forester's – and then he watched with open incredulity as Owain Dene, belying his years, did likewise.

The targets were moved again, and the forester stepped up. At this range, Trystan knew, the difficulty was not so much to hit the centre as to hit the target. The distance was close to the limit of a bowshot, and strength became as important as steadiness; this was where the forester, in his estimation, might pull ahead of the two knights.

The crowd moaned when the man's first shot failed to hit the centre, and groaned when the second one likewise failed – but both were in the next ring, and when the third arrow flew as true as any fired all day Trystan thought that he might have seen the winner of the competition. But then came Athdara, and when Trystan saw the way that the elf drew back his string, with his slender left arm as straight and stiff as a sword-blade, the harper knew that his worst fears were justified. Thin though the arm was, it was all muscle and very powerful. While the elf took careful aim Trystan realized that the extra length of the bow and the draw might extend this weapon's bowshot ten or twenty paces beyond that of the weapons which Owain and Berwyn were using.

The elf's first shot hit the target dead centre. The second and the third followed it, and all three landed in an area the size of a man's palm – not one was near to touching the edge of the circle.

Again Sir Berwyn applauded, and Trystan could see that the knight had accepted defeat. Nevertheless, Berwyn's first shot was as good as any of the elf's, and the crowd cheered mightily. The second and the third, alas, were far less accurate, the third barely hitting the target at all. The forester, obviously

believing that he would have won were it not for the presence of the elf, hung his head in disappointment.

Then up stepped Owain Dene and fired his first arrow, leaping in triumph – and perhaps in surprise – as it matched Berwyn's first. The old man took a long time in lining up his second shot, and Trystan could not have been the only spectator to judge that he had tested his own strength too severely – but again the arrow flew true, and hit the centre.

Berwyn Aglavin bowed to acknowledge that he must now be last, but then clenched his fist to urge Owain on, willing him to match the elf. But Owain's visage was grim and grey by now, and though he struggled hard to line his third shot as brilliantly as he had lined his second, he could not do it. The arrow barely snicked the target before skimming away and falling to earth beyond. Trystan wondered whether he ought to be glad or sad that the target did not need to be moved again, for he was too anxious in his mind to want to know whether Athdara could have repeated his feat yet again.

'You see,' said Kerewan softly, 'what *kerrmieryon* yields.'

'Aye,' said Trystan glumly. 'We are imperfect folk, we humans, in all that we do.' He wished that he could make his own modesty sound more deceitful. Silently, he said: Save us, Moraint, from this humiliation. Remember that the elf is not schooled with a wooden sword – but remember too that he might have tricks the like of which you have never seen!

The final round of the fencing contest was some time coming, for there were many to be eliminated from the competition, but it was clear from the very start that there were only two possible combatants who might win the final bout, and who would certainly make an exciting contest of it if they did not meet before. Normally, the opponents for each round would be decided by lot, but Trystan observed Herla issuing covert instructions to the judges, and was not surprised to see that Moraint and Seremond were kept carefully apart, each disposing of a string of adversaries with casual ease until the matter lay entirely between the two of them.

When the final bout began there was no doubt at all where the sympathies of the crowd lay. They had not shouted too loudly during the running-race, and had been compelled to be silent while the archers took aim, but now they could let

themselves go, and they roared what encouragement they could at Moraint.

The knight had had little opportunity to study his opponent during the early rounds, and he began very patiently and warily, testing the other with well-practiced moves to see what kind of defence he made. Seremond, it seemed, was more patient still, for he was quite content to let Moraint dictate the pace. Once or twice, in riposting, he tried to use his superior reach, but Moraint was well aware of the danger and was quick to elude the probing thrusts.

Twice, it seemed, Moraint almost got through the elf's guard. Trystan stole a glance at Herla, and saw that the king was utterly carried away, sharing every step and feint with his protégé, and wincing with disappointment at a particularly close-run thing.

Moraint steadied himself, as though wondering what to try next – and suddenly found himself the object of a lightning attack as the elf came forward, the wooden blade twirling and thrusting with a speed of which its lumpenness had formerly seemed incapable. Herla was on his feet, and most of his retinue with him, and for a moment it seemed that Moraint could have no answer – but then the youth slipped away from the attack because Seremond had mis-anticipated him, and again the two paused to square up to one another.

This time, it was Moraint who carried the fight forward – perhaps anxious that he should not have to face that incredible attack again. Once more he nearly hit his opponent, and for three or four seconds Seremond was in full and desperate retreat. Now it was the elf who seemed anxious not to have the experience repeated, and he drew back a little further in his address, then leaned carefully forward to take full advantage of his reach. There was a pregnant pause while each, apparently, expected the other to attack – and then both changed tactics simultaneously, coming quickly forward in a blindingly rapid exchange of blows.

Once inside the other's reach, as he quickly was, Moraint might – and perhaps should – have finished it. He knew it, and he tried, but Seremond dodged the vital thrust with what seemed an impossible contortion of his body. For just an instant Trystan was convinced that the elf would fall, but

somehow he did not, and pivoting on his heel he struck the bewildered man a very sharp blow beneath the heart, which instantly knocked the breath from him.

The moves had come so thick and fast that most of the men and women in the crowd did not know immediately who had been hit, and there were cheers beginning as well as howls of anguish; but when Moraint slowly fell to his knees, all knew his fate, and that Seremond had won. The cheers and howls alike changed spontaneously into a great sigh, and Seremond dropped his sword to go to the aid of his gasping opponent, whose face had lost all its colour.

There followed a horrid interval in which it seemed that Moraint might be badly hurt – but when a minute had passed, with the elf and the judges clustering anxiously round, the knight got slowly to his feet – and though he nursed his ribs tenderly, it was obvious that his trouble was not serious.

‘Three out of three,’ murmured Trystan to Kerewan. ‘No doubt you could have made a clean sweep of all the prizes, had I not been so unkind as to limit you.’

‘Improbable,’ said the wizard evenly. ‘We are clever enough when wrestling, but the large hearts which make us such good runners are vulnerable to hurt, and Thoron would never have risked a man against those titans who came through to the final of *that* competition. Then again, the crossbow competition was a virtual lottery, as I argued. Your limitation probably saved us from the ignominy of at least one defeat. But your best and finest competition is yet to come, is it not? We are to see your knights in all their heavy armour, perched atop those unscaly dragons which you are generous enough to call horses, though they dwarf the animals which you used to visit us. There are those among the high elves who have ridden horses – and even pegasi – into battle, but I have heard that these beasts of yours are very different.’

‘The men of Morien have bred warhorses for their size and weight for centuries,’ confessed Trystan. ‘It began long before Agam’s day – and it continued thereafter with even greater pride, for it was the warhorses of Morien which made Agam’s company so very fierce in battle. Even the Bretonnians, it is said, have nothing to match them nowadays, and the mightiest

stallions of the breed are said to be claimed after death by the leaders of the Storm Hunt.'

'What is the Storm Hunt?' asked Kerewan.

'Daemon-kin,' Trystan answered, with a slight shiver. 'The prevailing wind, as you know, blows from the south-west – and though it sometimes blows very violently we reckon it a benevolent wind. Its lashing rain is often unpleasant, but it is what fertilizes the soil of the isles. But sometimes – almost always in winter – there blows across Morien a very different wind, which comes from the north. It is bitterly cold, and when it is stormy it brings dreadful blizzards and weirdly howling winds. Some say that it has its origins in another world, and carries monsters from that other world in its wake. It is also said that it can snatch up animals and men, and take them into a company of undying hunters whose prey is the souls of men. When the north wind blows stormily the men of Morien cleave to their hearths, bolt their doors and shutter their windows lest they be seen by the ghostly huntsmen and taken by them. It is said that those men who love warfare and the hunt too well – who are not necessarily the same men who are bravest and best in the battle – will consent to join the Storm Hunt if the choice is offered, rejoicing in the gift of being undying and content to suffer the awful cold and desolation of it.'

'If that wind blows from the roof of the world,' muttered Kerewan, more to himself than to Trystan, 'it must begin its journey in the Chaos Wastes themselves.'

'So it is believed,' admitted Trystan.

'A wild place,' continued Kerewan, as though still lost in the maze of his own speculations, 'where the unbound energies of a realm which elves call *Urrurrai* leak into this world, bringing change and metamorphosis, danger and opportunity – an irruption which the gods themselves failed to control or counter.' Then, seeing that Trystan was ready with a question, he was quick to add: 'So legend has it, sir bard. The world is overfull of legends, do you not think? If only we had fewer legends and more knowledge, even elves might be better than they are.'

'Perhaps,' said Trystan carefully. 'But there is a kind of wisdom in lore and legend, I think.'

‘If humans were capable of wisdom at all,’ said Kerewan, speaking lightly so as to excuse the insult with wit, ‘no doubt they would find it in lore and legend as well as circles of colour and stone. But “The Truth Against the World” is a good motto, and I fear that legends are more worldly than truthful.’

Trystan knew that the other referred to the three symbolic circles on his tunic and to the stone circles which the druids made to represent and embody their particular powers of divination and magic, and felt that the quotation of his order’s motto was not really intended as a compliment. He did not answer, and must have looked sullen, for Kerewan spoke again. ‘Come now,’ said the elf, ‘do not be gloomy. Your king is to be married – what does it matter if a few of your silly contests are won by elves? I do not mean to hurt you with my words, or to demean your magic. Your druids are artful men, I know.’

‘But there is none among them,’ said Trystan sourly, ‘who could cut stone blocks from a granite headland with the power of his will. There is not a wizard in Morien or all the realms of Albion who could do that – yet it seems that it is but a little thing for an elf wizard.’

‘The *Uranai* have no special word for “wizard”,’ Kerewan told him mildly. ‘All elves are expected to know at least a little of the arts, and to cultivate some power.’ He touched a hand to one of the silver arrowhead symbols that adorned his grey cloak. ‘I have the stoneworking skill, but I have the will of our entire company to use in the cutting – I believe that your bardic magic is not dissimilar, and that when you play your magical music you draw upon the hopes and dreams of your entire nation.’

This was something which Trystan had been told by his teachers, but which he had previously thought to be a metaphor; because of this, he did not know how to answer the elf.

‘I would like to hear you play,’ said Kerewan, to break the silence which ensued. ‘When will I have the chance?’

‘Tonight,’ said Trystan unhappily – though he could not understand why it filled him with apprehension to say it. ‘When all the gifts have been presented.’

'I will look forward to it,' said the elf – who, though he would not claim the title wizard, seemed to Trystan to be a far more powerful person than himself.

The adventure continues in
STORM WARRIORS!

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