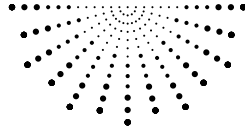


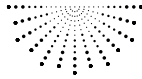
L.A.E.

(SAMPLE CHAPTER)



PETER J ALDIN





Erik Hodegaal slid his blade from the gut of the bare-chested soldier and watched the little man's life depart on a cloud of breath. Sucking cold night air into his own lungs, he sank to his knees beside his Captain, the man the half-naked warrior had just felled. In the light of the torches burning above the village tavern's door, he could see by the bubbles of blood forming across the man's lips that he wasn't long for this world.

Meshelan's eyes opened briefly, fixed on his. A wet breath, then: "Get the horses. Get to Ochstedt. Tell ..." Coughing. A shorter, wetter breath. "... March Warden ...". And Meshelan was gone. Just another flaccid, stinking corpse.

Erik rocked back on his heels and hollered at the nearby village tavern door for Uli to wake up and come out of there.

There was no response.

"Uli!" he bellowed one last time, before rising and turning away. The ox-brained bastard could live or die on his own. It was Uli sneaking into the Ollajen village for beer and wenches

that had brought Erik and Meshelan into this street in the first place. They'd come here intending to drag his sorry arse back to camp just as the mass of barely-dressed men entered the street, swinging their rusty blades and makeshift clubs.

From elsewhere in the town came the ruckus of continuing battle, the clatter and clang of weapons, the rattle of hard-soled boots in flight, the shrieks of the terrified, the shrieks of the wounded.

Erik poked sticky fingers in his mouth and managed to whistle for his horse—three shrill notes—then spat out the taste of the strange soldiers' blood.

"Captain," he whispered. "Travel well to Ammendor's bright fields."

He snapped off a salute, retrieved his sword and flicked gore from the blade. And caught a new sound in the air nearby, there and gone in a moment, something like the brief crackle of a kindling twig tossed onto a fire.

*Magick.*

Sure enough, the gray-skinned men were fading, dissipating into something like smoke.

*What in the black hell?* he thought, gasping and backing away from them.

The clatter of hooves on cobble announced the arrival of Oakheart at the far end of the village high street, a black hulk in the sporadic torchlight. He strode to meet her as she trotted his way.

This village high street was similar to the high streets of a thousand other villages and towns: an inn, a bevy of trader stores, and flat mud-brick houses with red-tiled roofs and drain-lanes between them. These drains were narrow enough for a child to pass through—the gray-skinned men were so slight-of-

stature, and their appearance had been so sudden, that he wondered if they'd used one of the narrow lanes to creep up on him and Meshelan.

As he and Oakheart turned toward the direction she'd come from, the splash of bare foot in puddle snapped his attention toward the closest drain. Within it, shadows shifted upon shadows.

Hand on the grip of his sword, he demanded, "Who's there?" In Kardelian first and then in Ollajen. A child squeaked. Another one whimpered.

*Godspit!*

"Stay in there," he told them, sticking with Ollajen. "Stay until adults come for you."

*If adults come for you.*

Oakheart snorted.

"Yes, keep moving," he told her and she did as asked. Erik fought off the thoughts that assailed him, the vicious name-calling from his conscience that labeled him *scum* and *coward* and *heartless pig*.

No! He was not leaving those children to their fate because he was any of those things! He was leaving because Meshelan wanted news of this attack to reach General Durrian and fast.

"I *have* to run," he grated through clenched teeth.

Other horses were screaming, the gut-twisting noise coming from his unit's camp a half-mile beyond the northern outskirts of town. He nudged Oakheart into a gallop as they exited the street. The only meeting of weapons he could hear was coming from the southern end of the town, and that meant the small compliment of Ollajen infantry who'd been guarding the highway approach. The baying of a great animal sounded from out in the fields toward the camp and the horses screamed

again. What could make a sound like that? What could set a group of seasoned battle horses shrieking like chickens with a fox in their midst?

He reined Oakheart in where a line of poles poked from the weeds along the side of the road out of town. Thick as his forearm, the poles were as high as he was tall, sharpened at the top to dissuade the birds from landing on them. Leaning out, he tugged at one, relieved when it jerked free easily. Sturdy wood; it would make a decent lance. He set Oakheart sprinting into the fields in the direction of his camp.

Halfway to it and out to his left, a smudge of shadow darkened the space between copses of trees. He blinked and squinted, but saw nothing more. Imagination, he hoped. Or someone else's fleeing panicked warhorse. If that smudge had been the creature who'd howled, the thing was as big as Oakheart.

A ring of low fires marked the boundary of the camp. Even from a hundred paces away, he could see the ground within the firelight was thick with carnage, a field of meat like some giant butcher's table. Men. Horses. Some were intact. Some lay in pieces. Between the closest two fires stood two creatures, man-sized but hunched. They chanted loudly, and one had propped its foot on a human body. Not gray men. These were the creatures he'd long heard of, and they were in his camp.

Erik spurred Oakheart on, her great hooves kicking up great clods of earth as she thundered forward. The two Trell turned to face them, chants dying inside their wide, lizard-toothed mouths. His makeshift lance slammed into the nearest one's chest. It was if he'd hit a tree trunk, the impact ripping the pole from his grip, jarring him from his saddle, dumping him on his back in the grass.

Erik rolled onto hands and knees and collected his wits. His target was down, pole jutting from its chest as it shuddered and kicked. The other Trel had been tumbled into a boundary fire, cast aside by Oakheart as she swept on through. Thick robes aflame it rolled and squealed and Erik had to hack multiple times with his sword before it lay still.

Oakheart was circling back around the outside of the camp and toward him. His attention moved to the horses they'd left reined up here, a pack horse and distance horse for each man. The bodies of every one lay broken and torn, innards exposed and steaming, filling the atmosphere with the familiar battle stench of rent bowels and spilled blood. Flattened tents flapped and snapped in the breeze.

One warhorse—he thought it might be Karlu's—was down and weeping in pain, one thigh shredded. The other destriers were missing. Men lay dead and torn. Erik entered the camp, striding to the closest body, praying to the gods whoever it was still lived.

Karlu. Stone dead. The left side of his skull had been staved in.

An object glowed in the moonlight beyond him. No, not in the moonlight: it lay in the shadow of a tent and gave off its own deep blue luminescence. Erik staggered to it, picked it up. A lace of bones or rocks or petrified wood, smooth to the touch, rattling. And, yes, glowing softly.

And where was the beast that slew them all, that thing, that—

The huff of breath and squelch of foot upon wet soil was his only warning of the attack. Warning enough to make him tuck his head and roll away.

He dropped the object, and got both hands on his sword.

Rising onto the balls of his feet, he faced a third Trell, barreling toward him on stumpy, powerful legs. Erik backed up as it came, bracing. He heard something else thundering his way, felt the footfalls through the ground, expected the great predator to come charging from the darkness behind the Trell, expected the Trell to pull a weapon and strike at him. But the Trell shifted direction to scoop up the object he'd dropped. It turned from him and was bracing to sprint away when something huge and dark burst from the gloom beyond the boundary fires. Erik threw himself from the massive creature's path.

When he untangled himself and rose again, the Trell was down with a good portion of its skull missing. And Uli's black warhorse wheeled around a flattened tent and toward him, reining in. Uli shook gore from his battle-axe.

*Of all the people to survive ...*

"Meshelan's dead," Erik told him, staring up.

Uli spat at the Trell he'd slain, staring at Karlu's body behind Erik. "Everyone's dead except for us. Godspit and demonguts." He swayed in the saddle, breathing as hard as his horse.

Erik located the artifact, the string of bones or stones, and rattled it at the Trell that Uli had slain. "It wanted this. More than it wanted to kill me. It was running away with it."

"What is it, some magick habdad?" Uli leaned forward, squinted, then gave up on it. Firelight caught the spittle in his brown beard. Spittle and probably beer. "A pox on such things. Leave it and saddle up. More of these fish-eyed arseholes are gathering at the far end of town with some kind of giant hound."

*Hound. A hound did this?*

Erik whistled to Oakheart, but he told Uli, "This is a gods-



damned lost cause. We have to get this thing to the March Offices at Ochstedt.”

Uli’s great horse wheeled a full circle, as impatient for battle as its rider. “What the hells for?”

“For the reason we were sent down here in the first place. For information. For the Royal Mages to examine.”

“Mages.” Another spit.

“Uli, we’ve seen what we’ve seen. Two days back: a camp of gutted and chewed up Ollajen infantry. And now the creatures themselves, the invaders. We go home and report and give the March Warden this.”

“It’s a necklace. A bunch of polished rocks. General Durri-an’s mistresses have plenty of those.”

Climbing into Oakheart’s saddle, Erik said, “Meshelan ordered me back to Ochstedt.”

That sobered Uli a little. As he settled, his horse did too. “Hells.”

Erik stowed the artifact. “If the Trell come after this—or there’s more of them between here and the border—I’ll need you.”

“First I’ve heard you admit that.” Then he stiffened and reached for the axe he’d sheathed on his back.

From back in the village came the baying of a giant dog.

Erik hissed, “Oh, godspit.”

Uli shifted his horse close enough to backhand Erik’s shoulder. “You wanted to get out of here, didn’t you?”

Erik turned Oakheart toward the road out of town. “Indeed. Let’s go do what our Captain told us to do.”



THE MOON HAD SET by the time the two men reached the Deheyn River. Along the far bank, over on the Kardalan side, lantern-posts stretched as far as Erik could see in each direction, set thirty or forty paces apart. The waterway was wide here, spread thin across its bed of rocks and grit, shallow enough to ford with the horses. Watch towers rose beyond the line of lanterns, one-hundred-fifty paces between each of them, dark within to enable their archers to keep their night vision.

Erik's shoulder ached from lancing the Trel chancer and he rolled it backwards and forwards to keep it from gumming up. The predawn air nipped at the exposed skin of his face and hands.

Before he knew it, Uli's destrier had slipped past him, splashing out into the river.

"Idiot!" Erik barked.

Uli's reply was a loud snarl of impatience.

"You want an arrow through your thick skull? Signal!"

"*You* signal!"

"Meshelan gave *you* the lantern this mission. Are you still drunk?"

Uli's horse drew up short, kicking up water. Oakheart and Erik entered the water as Uli rummaged in a saddlebag.

"Not like they'll mistake us for goatlovers," the axe-man mumbled as he sought his flint.

Keeping well back from Uli and out of arrow's reach, Erik replied, "Ollajens don't use horses, sure. But Kardelian smugglers do."

More grumbled cursing from Uli as he fumbled the flint to the small oil reserve. When it flared to life, he sat there a few heartbeats longer, blinking into the modest flame.

"You don't remember the signal, do you?" Erik said.

“Damn you,” Uli muttered. “Come up here and do it then.”

Erik eased forward and took the lantern. Using the shutter, he aimed a burst of four short flashes at the watch tower directly across from them, followed by two long. Then he blew out the flame and hung the thing from his saddle where it wouldn't touch and burn Oakheart. The tower returned an answering series of short and long flashes.

Erik took a breath to say, “We're in,” but Uli was already moving.

“That one, I remember,” the big man grumbled.

Erik squeezed Oakheart with his thighs and reached forward to pat her neck. “Welcome home, girl.” His chest constricted with grief and he added in a thicker voice, “Just wish there was more of us returning.”

