

# THE LAST OF THE EAGLE RIDERS PART 3

By Adam Janus

**D**abbing blood from a gash in his forehead, suffered from his collision with the now dead eagle, Agnariel Timbor looked down into the slight depression at the pathetic human, and briefly admired the man's tenacity. Scorched from dragon fire and bleeding from at least a dozen injuries, the warrior from Ravenholt still stood, ready to battle to the last.

"Take him alive," ordered the frost elf king. "I will enjoy torturing this one at my leisure."

As he spoke, the human's head snapped up and their gazes locked briefly. Agnariel could see the fiery determination in the man's eyes as he suddenly charged his frost elf attackers. The cornered prey had turned on the predator.

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Even though he didn't understand what was said, the imperious, pompous tone in the frost elf's voice set something off in Bron's head.

Growling incoherently like a feral animal, his vision waving in a red haze, the human laid into the surprised elven elite. Wielding his sword with both hands, the berserking human cut through foes like a lumberjack hewing through saplings.

He fought with the desperation of the damned, with the strength of someone who had nothing to lose. Dead elves piled up around him as he dodged and weaved through their defenses, taking many hits but refusing to relent.

With every deadly stroke of his blade, Bron thought of a lost loved one, his wife, his son and his parents, all the good people of Ravenholt who lost their lives this day. All the while he kept Agnariel Timbor in his sights, the source of his ire and cause of his pain.

As the frost elves continued to fall from the human's ferocious attack, a red robed sorcerer appeared on the hill and began to mouth the words of a spell. The mage's high-pitched crooning became a rhythmic wailing that sent chills down Bron's spine. Axmen retreated, gratefully, as he continued his peculiar incantation, leaving the savage, blood-covered human alone amongst their dead.

Knowing he was doomed if the sorcerer finished his spell, Bron desperately shouted a challenge to the frost elf king in the common tongue spoken throughout the continent of Ta-Teharun. "You need foul sorcery to bring me down, frost elf pig? Is that pretty sword at your side just decoration?" Bron bellowed up the hill. "Is there none among you who can face me in honorable combat, or has all the honor been inbred out of your vile race?"

Bron saw anger flash across Agnariel's face and spat up the hill, punctuating the insult.

Holding his hand up, stopping the sorcerer's incantation, Agnariel responded in broken

common. “I am not bound by hollow, baseless codes of honor embraced by the lesser races. We follow no moral creed. Honor and morality is a weakness possessed by the Illunar elves, that weakness is the only reason you humans have been allowed to thrive and overpopulate this earth. That same weakness allowed my ancestor, Sarel Timbor, to ride forth from Thantwilanoria in exile. Thantwilanoria will feel the consequences of their weakness, as you and yours have felt them today.

“Sounds like a lot of fancy excuses thrown around by a cowardly fop of a false king!” Bron responded. “Human kings earn their thrones in most cases, through the strength of their sword arms, not some questionable blood claim. You are a cowardly dog, and your victory will be short lived.”

Some of the assembled soldiers were visibly angered by the insults directed at their king and their lineage, but Agnariel also noted a large number of thinly veiled smiles. The paranoid king had to wonder if there was already a plan to usurp his throne.

“Allow me to part this filthy human’s head from his body Agnar!” This from Tagnariel, who spoke loud enough for most of the onlooking elves to hear, subtly showing up his cousin once again.

Now, Agnariel would have to accept the human’s challenge. Some among them already looked to Tagnariel as the stronger of the two, and the king’s refusal after his cousin’s acceptance would be political suicide. It would seal Agnariel’s fate, thus paving the way for a coup.

Glaring at his cousin, Agnariel drew his sword while making a mental note to get rid of his rival as soon as possible. “I accept your challenge human,” he said and smiled as cheers erupted from his bloodthirsty soldiers.

Roughly shoving Tagnariel out of his way, the king gracefully slipped his white, fox fur cloak from his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground, revealing the signature ice blue armor and chain mail of the Timborian elves.

“Hold my cloak, *Tag*.”

Now it was Tagnariel’s turn to be embarrassed as he subserviently bent to retrieve his older cousin’s discarded garment.

Bron shrugged off his own scorched, eagle feather cloak and spun his sword on its wrist thong as he watched his opponent saunter down the hill.

The elf moved with catlike grace and speed, also spinning his sword, while pulling a broad, curved black blade from his belt. The edge was crusted with a noxious green substance which could only be poison.

Bron circled to his right, stepping over frost elf corpses, taunting his adversary as he moved. “It would seem your rule is more fragile than you think, eh, pig?” Bron grinned wolfishly at his own humor. “Political climate a bit stormy?”

Agnariel answered the taunts with steel, attacking with magically enhanced speed, so fast that Bron barely had time to parry the overhead slash aimed at his head. As their two blades met with a ringing clash, the elf swept his knife in front of him from left to right. Bron used his greater bulk and strength to push the elf back, feeling the poisoned blade cut through his leather vest, but not reaching the skin.

Anxious to keep the elf on the defensive, Bron launched an offensive flurry, slashing and

hacking, back and forth, up and down, while keeping his feet moving, trying to gain the higher ground.

But Agnariel was skilled, he expertly parried and dodged, giving ground but not retreating, all the while keeping his poisoned blade poised to strike, waiting for an opening in the human's ferocious assault.

Determined to wear the elf down, or shatter his sword, Bron continued to batter his smaller opponent until the elf went down on one knee, holding his sword up before him in a desperate attempt at defense.

Seeing his opening, Bron stepped in and swept his sword low, aiming below Agnariel's upraised weapon, only to feel his blade cut through nothing but air. It had been a ruse.

The elf leaned back and brought his sword down on Bron's blade, pinning the tip to the ground, while crossing his left hand over, cutting deep into the bicep of the human's right arm.

Bron felt the blade tear through his flesh and muscle, cutting tendons and ligaments, rendering his sword arm useless. His sword fell from his limp grasp to dangle from its wrist thong. He could feel the poison coursing its way through his blood stream, at first tingling, then burning. His legs suddenly felt weak and drawing breath became difficult as his chest began to constrict. He took a couple of staggering steps backward before falling to his knees.

Sheathing his sword and dusting himself off, Agnariel watched as the poison took effect. Almost as if strolling through a rose garden, the frost elf approached the dying human. Bending over and grasping his hair with his right hand, he placed the bloodied blade of his knife to Bron's neck. Leaning in close he whispered.

"After I kill you, I will have my necromancers reanimate your filthy, lice-ridden corpse, then I will rip your spirit to shreds and hunt down your soul and deliver it to Zareesha myself, to be tormented for eternity in hell."

Hatred burned in Bron's eyes as he slowly slid his left hand up his thigh and met the frost elf's gaze. "I'm not dead yet, pig," he growled. With Herculean effort he brought his left arm up.

Protruding from between his pointer and middle finger was a short, sharp push-knife, carried by all eagle warriors, primarily used to cut away the saddle straps in a hurry if need be. The blade punched through fine chain link, into Agnariel's abdomen, between his belt and breast plate.

Bron twisted the blade, searching for the elf's vitals as the first arrow hit him in the chest. He fell back as Agnariel sought to hold in his bowels, a look of shock on his pale blue face.

Through a blurry haze, Bron saw Tagnariel Timbor's arm fall as another arrow hit him in the shoulder. He fell to his back, reaching to the sky with his left hand.

In his delirium, he thought he saw the ghostly image of an eagle before everything went black, and Bron Straker, last of the eagle warriors of Ravenholt, breathed his last shuddering breath.

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Far to the south of Ravenholt, under the protective boughs of the great pines bordering Ravens' valley and the outskirts of the Graode Mountains, Argemon the blind seer stood facing the burning city of Ravenholt.

His aged, milky white eyes turned to the sky as if seeing. At his side was a woman with a cowl pulled over her chestnut brown hair, covering her pretty face. Her captivatingly dark eyes

were moist and red around the rims as if she had been crying. In her arms she nestled a child, a boy no more than a year old, contentedly sleeping in his mother's safe arms.

"He will never know his father," commented the woman softly.

Argemon reached out and stroked the boy's dark hair, guiding his gentle hand as if he could see. "He will know of him Shianna," the old man responded as he turned away from the valley and directed his sightless eyes toward the sleeping child. "They will sing songs of your father's heroics, Grom, son of Bron."

Argemon put his hands on Shianna's shoulders. "You saw that the dragons were widening their circles over the valley, searching for survivors. If not for your husband's heroics, we and our precious cargo would never have made it out of the valley. It's almost as if he knew," the old man finished softly, as if talking to himself.

"That does not make it any less painful, Father," Shianna responded, turning toward the woods and the rest of the refugees from Ravenholt, elders, woman and children mostly.

They walked in silence for a little while, before reaching their despondent comrades and their cargo. Argemon leaned over and whispered in his daughter's ear.

"You need to be strong now Shianna, not only for Grom but for them," he said, nodding toward the hundred or so escapees from Ravenholt. He paused before continuing. "And for the unborn daughter you now carry in your womb."

Shianna snapped her head around, eyes wide with surprise from the revelation. "Are you sure, Father?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes my dear. Now, let's get started. We have a long day and perilous journey before us." The old man then started walking down the trail that led through the wooded foothills of the Graode Mountains, sweeping his gnarled staff before him.

Most of the refugees were unaware that buried beneath the dried food, medical supplies and water skins of the small, mule-pulled supply wagon, packed with warm furs and hay, were fifteen unhatched eagle eggs.

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