

# **The King's Shield**

By Nick Hayden

There is a truth my brothers and sisters hold to, that no creature is without a story, and that all stories flow into the Grand Plot of the World, which we can only glimpse through the threads. Though every creature has a story, it is my pleasure to record those of Vitram Regol, hero of the Western Alliance and First Knight of Tyrene.

Vitram is old now. Unlike others, I do not believe that one's most exciting stories happen in youth, but it is true that this particular story, which is often requested, finds Vitram's hair copper and not white. His armor fit him more precisely then. He had a leopard's sleekness, with hands like vises and eyes flaring with determination. He has become more reverent since; his passion has become more contemplative.

If you will look upon him the day he made a name for himself – the day he earned the title of The King's Shield – you will find those eyes flaring in the reflected light of sunrise. He stands upon the walls of the great castle in Tyra, and he looks out upon the red-tinged city below. It smolders from the recent fires. The army of Derhalia has once again crossed the Steps of the Gods. They broke Fort Nikol to pieces coming down those slopes. They crossed the forests of Tyrene like lightning and set Tyra in flames. Vitram listens for the strange grind of metal and release of steam that marks the enemy's particular technology. For the moment, he hears nothing.

The army is not as large as it might be. Vitram knows that scouts have reported a hundred thousand more crossing the Steps. He stands there a long time; it gives me still the impression of a solitary man against the world.

Whether by premonition or by military intellect, he utters, "They will enter the Castle today."

He turns away. He passes the archers along the wall. He descends into the outer courtyard. Men are saddling bistanks, those great beasts of war, in case of a charge. He passes under a second gate and into the inner courtyard, where common soldiers and Knights of the Dawn talk quietly to one another in huddled groups, armored and armed. Vitram finds his superior, the First Knight.

"They will enter the Castle today, Bendrol."

"Vitram," the First Knight says, placing a hand on his shoulder, "King Bolanka will get us his soldiers. We'll turn them back. We only have to hold them off until reinforcements come. Our walls can resist their siege machines."

"They broke through Fort Nikol."

"Yes, that is how wars begin – an unknown weakness or an unknown strength. We don't know if Fort Nikol had any warning. We do have it. We have more men. It will be a struggle, but don't underestimate the Alliance."

Vitram nods, but his angular face, with its prominent chin, shows plainly his doubt. It is not a common doubt, the kind that keeps a weak man up at night. It is a fierce kind, for it sparks Vitram to action. That he cannot act adds darkness to his doubt.

"I was about to see the king, Vitram. I want you to go in my place. Tell him all you have seen of the enemy's position, and tell him that this is what I plan to do." Bendrol explains his plan. As far as I understand war and military strategy, his plans are wise; but time to time wisdom fails.

Vitram salutes the First Knight and turns away with long, purposeful strides. He enters the castle. The bustle inside rivals the soldiers' preparation

without. Servants scurry in and out the doors with boots and tools and written orders. As he walks down the narrow hallways, he looks forward. The servants know enough to move out of his path. His face is particularly grim; I remember it especially for, a moment later, the expression finds voice.

Quickly, without effort, he spins about and presses a young lady against the wall. "Who are you? Why are you following me?"

You have seen a young lady like this. She is slender, long-haired, pretty. Her timidity produces a self-assurance one can only just make out. Most of all, there is a virginal air about her; to marry her would be to destroy something. Her eyes are wide as she speaks, but her voice is steady. "I wanted to tell you something."

"Tell me now."

"You believe the Derhalian army will break through the castle defenses. You are right. Protect the king. Do not let this castle fall. Let it be battered to pieces, but it must not fall."

Vitram studies her with unreadable eyes. "Are you a traitor?"

"The West is my only loyalty."

"How do you know what I think?"

"I overheard you in the courtyard. You spoke quietly, but anyone might hear even what is whispered, if they know how to listen."

"I did not see you there."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but servants are skilled at being unobtrusive."

Vitram holds her more loosely now. She meets his eyes with calm submission. He places his mouth next to her ear. "How do you know our defenses will not hold?"

"The man with ears listens and discerns what approaches. The man with eyes looks and sees it coming. But ears cannot hear everything, nor eyes see

all. Some things are beyond the senses. My father was a priest. He spoke to the gods, to Sara-Jin, particularly, through prayer. I believe that she sometimes speaks to me. You understand what it means to believe something you cannot prove, don't you, Vitram?"

"You do not know me!"

"Do you wish to be known?" She looks into his eyes with a startling innocence. "Do you wish to be known, Vitram Regol, Knight of the Dawn, third son of Hedbrin Regol, once married, now widowed, never to marry again by unbreakable vow before the altar of Sara-Jin?"

Vitram grips her arm in his fist, and he looks upon her with inscrutable eyes. "No, my lady, I do not wish to be known. A soldier will die because Fate chooses his stone from a thousand others from the bag on her hip, but a general dies because an arrow is specially notched for him. It is a dangerous thing to be known. The king, however, shall have the pleasure of knowing you. Come along."

She follows with the barest resistance as he hurries her through the halls deeper into the castle.

"How do you know me?" Vitram asks in a low voice.

"Do you believe in the gods as long as they do not tell you what you do not want to hear?" the girl asks heatedly. "I will speak only to you. Sara-Jin has chosen you, for what reason, I do not know. You must protect the king with your life."

"Do not tell me my duty, girl! I will gladly die."

"For Tyrene," the girl adds pointedly.

He leads her into the Map Room, where King Elhenrion Tyr studies a diagram of the city. He glances briefly at Vitram before returning to the map when the guards at the door allow his entrance.

“The First Knight sent me in his stead, Your Excellency.”

“Who is the young woman, Vitram? War is at our gate.”

“She claims to speak to Sara-Jin.”

“A spy?”

“I do not know, Your Excellency. She came to me and told me Derhalia will break through our defenses. It is a strange tactic, possible meant to undermine our confidence.” Vitram hesitates before his next words, remembering his own premonition. “It is possible she speaks the truth.”

“A convincing lass, is she? We shall see. Madam, what is your name?”

Her eyes are downcast, her stance humble. “Arwe, Your Majesty.”

“You claim to speak for the Goddess of the West, Arwe?”

Arwe looks up with a bewildered innocence. “No, Your Majesty. No, I don’t claim such blasphemy. I were—I were only scared at all the men outside, you see. I got carried away; your subject’s brothers live outside the walls—I haven’t heard from them yet, whether they’re dead or not. I’m sure they’re dead, Your Majesty, and I was frightened. I’m loyal, I just can’t think, I’m shocked, you understand. I’m as calm as night here before you, but I’ll bawl buckets when I leave, I can’t stop it. I—”

“Send her out.”

Vitram’s noble face burns with shame and anger as he obeys the command under the eye of his king. As he unceremoniously escorts her out, she says softly, for his ears alone, “A man must live, even if his wife dies.” The door closes and she is gone. When Vitram turns, the king meets his eyes with a solemn expression worse than disapproval. In King Tyr’s face Vitram finds a lofty sympathy that claims to understand the reason for his error. Vitram does not try to explain the girl’s duplicity. For either of the men to speak of the incident would be to bring more shame upon Vitram.

Vitram relates the First Knight's message with crisp promptitude.

"It is a good plan," the king says. "I will attire for battle in an hour so that the men might see me. Better yet if there is battle to be had. The First Knight has all authority until my coming. Now, please excuse me."

Vitram returns to the courtyard with long, undeterred strides. The girl has disappeared. He is not halfway to his position when he spots another soldier, a young nobleman who has just earned his sword, running toward him.

"Prilan, what news?"

"The attack has begun." He slows only a little as he speaks. "I've been sent to tell the king. I've never seen soldiers move so fast."

Vitram watches Prilan turn the corner. He is rooted to the spot. He is needed on the wall, on the front lines, on the threshold of death, where arrows drink blood. The promise of battle holds a terrible pleasure for him. I have seen his dark dreams that his wife's death left him. In them he rushes headlong into the enemy, bare-chested, his sword drawn and already wet with blood, slaying nameless men, their swords cleaving him. I have felt what he feels in the dream, an unquenchable passion to experience pain in struggle, to collapse in battle, to know the glory of inevitable defeat. In the dream, it is the sweet taste of salvation that brings peace.

He turns away from the corner, prepared to return to his position. As his head rotates, he catches a momentary glimpse of Arwe, so brief he does not know if it is real or imagined. She is gone as quickly, if she was even there.

He returns to the Map Room at a run, driven by a sensation he cannot explain. The guards, recognizing him and seeing his urgency, allow him quick entrance. Prilan is there at the table, beside the king. He holds the dagger hilt that protrudes from the king's abdomen. At the sound of Vitram's entrance, Prilan releases the handle. He turns and backs away before even looking in

Vitram's direction. His face is a confusion of emotions, with terror, triumph, horror, and heartache all evident simultaneously, as if he wears both the mask of comedy and the mask of tragedy one on top of the other.

"I'm safe," Prilan shouts wildly, tears in his eyes. "They've planned this a long time. They came to some of us—they'll be here at any moment. They were going to kill him anyway, but now.... It's for the best. I want to get married, I want to live—they'll know I welcomed them...."

Vitram is stunned at first by the incomprehensible scene, can only look at his king. The king still breathes, but Vitram seems to sense a dark curtain being closed around them, as if on a darkened stage he and Prilan stood in pools of light like two great forces wrestling for the soul of this man—or like two great nations fighting for the future of the world and separated only by the mountain range where man first sinned.

Vitram moves toward the young soldier with such deliberate, implacable steps that Prilan cowers before him. Many men in Vitram's position react in such situations with rage, but Vitram's character is founded on a stern sense of justice that reverent contemplation has tempered in later years. He grabs Prilan bodily, hurls him into a corner, and calls the guards outside the door.

"Summon a doctor!" he declares, though the guards look only at the king and at the young soldier cowered in the corner. Vitram turns on them. "Now!" he says wrathfully; and Prilan trembles. They obey.

Vitram steps closer to the traitor. "What do you know?" he says in a low, deep voice. Prilan shakes his head and opens his mouth, but nothing comes but a few muttered words that sound like apologies. "What were you told to do?"

Prilan continues to shake his head violently. "Nothing...just, just this. Others..."

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I don’t—he was going to die, I just wanted to—”

Vitram reaches down and lifts the young man by the shirt inside his mail. A man like Vitram, who can control his temper, is like a man who can control the force of raging waters: the wild onslaught of water can devastate, but the waterwheel gives power to whatever project man can dream. The intensity in Vitram’s face communicates this clearly to Prilan.

“They know the way in!” he screams. “I didn’t tell them, I didn’t, but there are others. Everyone isn’t like you, they can’t be, they see how large Derhalia is. We don’t get along, the West will never stay unified, it’ll fall eventually, because we never attack, we only defend, we’ll fall, and no man will die if he can live.”

“This man will die if you don’t look after him,” a new voice interrupts, and Vitram knows before he turns that it is Arwe. She stands above the king and looks down at him with an incomprehensible expression, part pity, part calculation. It is as if she is two separate entities mixed in one.

“Can you help him?” Vitram asks.

She raises her eyes. The virginal beauty in her face mingles with a coldness that her beauty makes more desolate. “Why do you ask if I can help?”

“You speak to the gods.”

“Sara-Jin has spoken to me. Why do you think I can help this man?”

“You told me to protect him. Can’t you—” Vitram shuts his mouth with a snap of disgust. In the days after his wife’s death, he visited the temple daily, sometimes three times a day. His belief in the gods grew with his constant petitions until he believed they stood in every corner, gaping at him, pulling the strings of his life and laughing. In the confusion of the situation, he believes, almost instinctively, for a mere moment that Arwe herself is Sara-



Jin and that she will listen to him and help him save his king as he could not save his wife. And for a moment, he stings at Arwe's silent response, for she is like all those cruel, invisible beings who will not raise a finger to help.

"The battle is inside the walls," she says simply. "This city must not fall. You must not let it fall."

She turns to leave. Vitram still holds Prilan as the traitor closes his eyes and babbles to himself. Vitram hears the faint sounds of battle coming from somewhere in the castle. The channeled rage within him again rises and gives expression: "I will slay many before my eyes close."

Arwe looks over her shoulder, not a trace of the timidity she displayed earlier still present. "Many men will die today. You cannot stop that. But the lives of all men are not equal." She glances down at the gasping body of King Elhenrion Tyr. He follows her gaze, and when he looks up again, she is gone.

Vitram finds Prilan still in his grasp. With off-handed contempt he ties the traitor to one of the pillars that supports the ceiling before kneeling beside the king and gently lifting his head.

"Your Majesty," he says softly, looking toward the door. "The doctor will be here soon."

"Jocsma..." he whispers with effort.

"Your wife is fine, Your Majesty. Don't talk." But as he waits for the doctor, he thinks of the royal apartments. Normally, no enemy soldier would be able to reach them outside of capturing the entire city, but the distant shouts of men and distant clash of weapons remind him pointedly of Arwe's assertion. The enemy could be anywhere.

When the soldiers return with the doctor, they bring the news he already knows, with specifics on where they saw fighting. "They're assaulting the gates, and we're holding them, but they're in the main hallways, too, squads

of them, and we have to watch our backs in the courtyard. The First Knight ordered the king withdrawn into the inner quarters.”

Vitram knows the two soldiers well. They have been in the in the military as long as he, and he trusts their loyalty. More importantly, if either is a Derhalian defector, Prilan would not have been the one to take the swipe at the king.

“Take him. I’m going to the apartments.”

He runs through the corridors, his sword drawn. He is magnificent to observe as he moves without thought, turning corners and climbing stairs three and four at a time. The hand of justice moves him like a celestial agent as he enters the apartments, past doors that should have been guarded. He sweeps into the royal bedchamber, where three men stand over the body of the queen in raucous disarray. Vitram’s sword enters the first before he can react. The second and third fall with little fight. The queen, her mature beauty soiled by blood, lies limply on the bed, her eyes wide in terror and pain. Vitram recoils suddenly, shocked by the anguish of the sight, as indistinct images, mere impressions, of his wife being placed in the hole he had dug rise before him. It had been an accident, a terrible mistake like uncountable others that plague the world senseless. Vitram staggers from the room, down the hall, to the nursery. The princes, five and three, lie rumpled on the floor like ill-used toys.

I can remember all the things I have witnessed with equal clarity. I know that human memories often fade, and I sometimes envy such a failing. But when I look upon Vitram in his aged years, I see him sometimes wake from a dream or pause in the middle of some task, overcome with a remembrance he cannot forget, and I think it is this he sees, unfaded, the slaughter of a woman and her children because they were royalty, because a city will not

fall if the people have hope, and hope is rooted in those things a person believes holds power.

Vitram returns to the bedchamber and lifts the queen's body in his arms. He bears it effortlessly through the halls. There is not a thought in his head, and as often happens when a man is without thoughts, the world itself fades away until only the most vital physical sensations register. He is among men shouting at him and motioning for him before he comes to.

"Hurry!" they cry. Vitram barely understands the word. "Hurry!"

He steps through the great metal door, through a long, narrow hallway, and through another door. He hears the bar being set in place. A squad of men fills the room. They hold their weapons tightly and look from one face to the other in restless silence. In the back, a Knight of the Second Order stands beside the doctor. Vitram can see the feet of his king where the body lies on a table. He approaches with solemn steps, taking no notice of the men who turn his way. The Second Knight, a man named Jolin, stands as Vitram nears and lays the body of the queen beside her husband.

"The princes?" Jolin asks.

"I will return for them."

"You can't leave," the Second Knight says. "The enemy was right behind us. The king lives for now, but he must rest. We cannot let anyone in."

Vitram looks down upon the pained, pale face of the king. He has not forgotten Arwe's admonition, but it seems the tragic proclamation of fate to him. If Sara-Jin did speak with the girl, that goddess is as likely as the rest to laugh at him. The king injured moments after Vitram's absence, the queen and princes slaughtered before he could reach them.... He had no power to keep the king alive or to save his nation.

I can tell by his terrible expression that the dream is before him once again. The faceless, endless hordes of evil men swarm through the castle like locust devouring nation after nation. If a man's hope is rooted in what or whom a man believes has power, Vitram has no hope, for his army is shattered, his gods long ago proved themselves demons, and the words of a girl cannot convince him that he holds any power. And what power he holds he longs to toss into the dark hordes, to flicker brightly before he dies, a star flashing before being consumed by night. He has long believed that such an end was his destiny. He is unable to believe anything better.

"I will go for the princes. They must not be left to be abused by the enemy."

"I will not allow it," the Second Knight says. "You put us all at risk. We will hold out until King Bolanka's forces arrive."

"They will not arrive!" Vitram shouts. "This is the end. I saw it today as I stood on the wall. I will die honorably, protecting the royal family. You have men to protect the king. Let one man go for the princes."

"You will be killed before you take three steps. And even if you are not, we will never be able to open the door for your return without letting the enemy in also. Do you wish to die?"

Vitram does not answer. He only stares at the Second Knight with a face of stone. He does not know how to answer truthfully, and the dream fades from his mind's eye at the question, leaving him uncertain of his own feelings, as if the man with the dream and the man who heard the girl proclaim his destiny are two separate men.

"Well, Knight Regol?" the other asks again, sternly.

Vitram lowers his head. "I apologize. Is there anything I can do?"

Jolin's voice no longer holds an edge. "None of us expected the enemy to enter so quickly. Many are dying on the wall and in the courtyard, and many

are dying throughout the castle. But our place is here, Vitram.” He lowers his voice and leans in toward Vitram. “I have never been in a battle such as this, where all our plans and protections have been destroyed almost without effort. How long the Great Derhalia must have planned. We want to act, but in a battle such as this, it is enough to simply stand. To stand, and when every assault of the enemy has fallen, to be found standing still.” Second Knight Jolin steps away. His face is stern again and tired. “There is nothing to do but wait.”

Vitram nods and finds a spot along the wall where he can sit. Most of the other soldiers are sitting also, but there is little talk except for when one leans over to a friend and speaks softly in his ear, as if afraid to make a noise. Vitram can hear every movement of armor and leather, and the room is filled with the sound of men stretching and repositioning. The doctor stands beside the body of the king, making little, incomprehensible motions, holding up the king's arm or funneling liquid into his mouth, and it is only the doctor's attention that separates the king from his wife, laying beside him, beyond the doctor's help.

Time is a strange thing. I remember sitting, as it were, beside Vitram for those long minutes when every sound seemed the first resounding crash of a battering ram on the outer door. I remember beginning to understand how it must feel to a human as I waited alongside my charge. I felt such a sensation once before, as I sat beside a man now long dead. He waited for his execution in a cell with a small, barred window, and he stared at a starless patch of night as it grew gray with the approaching dawn. When the sun rose, he would be escorted to the headsman. He watched the lightening sky with heavy eyes that longed to close, for he had not slept in many days. And so for minutes he would sleep before jerking away and checking the window,

wondering how much time he had lost. Each minute passed with a slow, deliberate grace, but one by one each fell awake, like sand in an hourglass, slipping away with incredible rapidity. And at any moment he expected to hear the sound of footsteps coming for him and the creak of the door, and every sound seemed to him the last fateful signal of his doom. He experienced a thousand dreadful apprehensions; a thousand times he expected the door to open. In that last hour, he lived a thousand lives. When the door did open, it was without ceremony, a base thing bereft of even its horror.

Vitram lives such a life now as he waits for the final assault. In his mind a thousand outcomes rehearse one by one on the stage of his mind.

Every soldier in the room looks to the door when they hear the first door broken through. They hear the screams of Derhalian men dying as arrows and hot oil descend upon them from the defenses above the long, narrow passage between the two doors.

Vitram looks around the room at his fellow soldiers, men whose blood would mingle with his own when the enemy broke through. He stands with the rest of the men as Second Knight Jolin gives terse orders. "We must protect the king," he says as he positions his men.

"I need to speak with you," Vitram says and approaches the Second Knight. He cannot look at the king. The din outside the door continues unabated like a storm rattling the windows and changing the world into dark, dangerous night.

"Be quick, Vitram," Jolin says tensely. He surveys the soldiers as they obey his commands.

"Let me lay in the king's clothes. As soon as the enemy enters, they will see him lying on the table. Let me be here instead of the king. Do not hold them

desperately. Let them break through, They will receive a nasty surprise. We will throw them into disarray and break from the room. We will lay the king in soldier's armor, as if he were slain from the initial attack. I will draw them away, and the king will live, able for a few men to transport him to safety."

Jolin studies Vitram for a long moment. "There is a glimmer of hope in it," he says heavily. "Go about it quickly." And as Vitram removes his armor and clothing. Jolin gives his orders in quiet tones to his men. The doctor carefully removes the king's clothes.

The door trembles beneath titanic blows as Vitram lays himself in the king's place. In a minute or two, the door will fly off the hinges, bent beyond repair. The violence of the assault is more than even a battering ram can inflict in so little time on such a door; Derhalia has its own methods, which it closely guards. Indeed, with such ferocity does the metal give way that two soldiers are struck by the door and smashed against the wall.

The enemy floods in. Weapons and shouts clash against each other. Each man is alone in a sea of swords, friend and foe alike lost in the rage of battle. Vitram struggles not to move, to moan in the imitation of pain—but it is not an imitation. He, too, is alone with faceless men coming nearer. The terror of death seizes him: it is a blind, screaming, hateful creature of teeth and flesh. It is many; it is active; it is brutal. It is humanity stripped of its humanity. And what he believes in that moment is not in man or priest or nation or history, but in a god he does not know; a god who has the knowledge of life; a god who cannot die, or if he dies, is alive nevertheless; a god who loves life and grants it to men. Anything else is death.

The Derhalian soldiers approach him through the battle, their faces masked by their blank face plates, their swords ready to kill. Without pleasure, without hesitation, without a word, the nearest strikes. Vitram is

quick. His sword pierces the soldier first, and the move saves Vitram. He stands quickly, shouting without words, screaming in triumph he does not understand. He pushes forward recklessly, like a man desiring death, for now, finally, in loving life, he is able to wager it wildly. He calls soldiers to him, crying, "To your king, men! To your king!" And as they come to him, he pushes forward, throwing himself into the hallway, Derhalian men behind him, Derhalian men falling back before him. He breaks through the outer door. "To your king! The battle is not lost. To your king!"

And men come to him, not just Jolin's men, but others, two or three from a corridor or a room, a half-dozen from the stairs, small parties from every direction, and they form around him a growing circle of familiar faces. He recognizes every one; many he knows by name, and seeing them, he is a prince among royalty, a man among men. They fight bitterly in the hallway, the enemy slain at their hands, the enemy slaying. But the enemy turns back and flees toward the courtyard.

Like a rock slowly pushed down a slope, Vitram and his army chase after the Derhalian men, faster and faster. A fierce light transforms each of their faces. It is the savagely noble expression of men who have seized hope and will not release it, whether demons or death rise against them. They enter the courtyard at a run. It is strewn with dead and moaning men; the great, heaving bodies of wounded bistanks; broken doors, shattered wagons, fires and stench. Sadness tempers Vitram's expression as he enters the outer courtyard and his vision widens to encompass all the tragedy of war. His men pull up short, like horses reigned in. At the far end of the battlefield the great doors of the castle are swung open to reveal the hordes of Derhalia. The fleeing men rejoin the larger army and are swallowed into the faceless mass.



“Give the order, your Majesty,” a soldier cries. Vitram looks at the faces; some recognize him and know he is not their king but follow anyway. Some still believe, caught up in the fury of the fight.

“Give the order,” another says. “We are ready.”

The Derhalian army seethes, the vibrations across its length like the sinuous movements of a snake. Vitram hesitates before it and stands in silence. The men, too, grow quiet and wait, watching their enemy seethe and wondering what shall become of them. Vitram stands as he did upon the walls that morning. The sun is behind him, lowering somehow to evening already. Vitram stands again as a man against the world, but he is no longer alone, and there is a fierce courage growing in his face. He is a man who stands against an evil world and does not fear its dark sword.

“Turn away from here,” Vitram proclaims to the enemy. “You will not take this castle till every last man is dead. Turn away while you still can. You do not fight ordinary men. An ordinary man is afraid—he is a coward. But we fight like men who live forever!” He raises his sword and shouts the battle cry of Tyrene. He charges the enemy. The host of men around him shout also and run headlong toward the army that fills their gate. A wild din of boots and screams precede Vitram and his men; to them the world trembles beneath their feet and the enemy trembles before them, moving away as they approach.

I cannot distinguish one man from another in the struggle that follows. Vitram is swallowed by the sea of Derhalian men. My eyes do not leave him as he twists and swings and raises the shield someone has given him, but it seems he is only movement; the arms and legs and weapons around him seem an extension of his body, engaging and disengaging from his person. He reaches the wall of the castle surrounded by friend and foe. “Stand and

hold the gate, men!" he screams. His powerful voice barely carries over the chaos. The Derhalian army crashes against him. "Stand and hold the gate!" Men fall around him. "Stand and hold the gate!" He stumbles in his counterattacks. Blood trickles from a dozen wounds. "Stand and hold the gate!" The enemy pushes forward. Vitram can feel its force like a hammer on an anvil. "Stand!" he cries, dropping to his knees. In his will he stands, but his body is unable to follow. "Stand, men!" He uses his sword to lift himself up; he uses it like a cane. His shield defends him. "Stand!"

He collapses beneath a blow to his shield. He struggles to rise. He can see the legs of his fellow soldiers still fighting, the bodies of friends strewn on the ground. He cannot catch his breath. The sounds of moans and shouts of agony join the clang of sword and shields. "Stand your ground, men!" Vitram says between tears that come unbidden. "We are men who live forever!"

Looking forward still into the endless ranks of the enemy, he does not notice the woman beside him. "Do you wish to live?"

Vitram can see her form but not her face. The cold calculation of her voice reminds him of his last encounter with Arwe. "I do live," he says.

"I will raise you up to destroy this horde," she says, gesturing to the Derhalians. "I will lead you to expel them from this land. They will flee from your sword. You have saved this city, and such an action deserves reward."

"I did not—" he begins. "I have no power." He looks to her. Her face is hidden, as if he views it through unclear water. "Can you raise my wife from the grave?"

"All souls descend to the underworld. Even gods cannot resist the natural order. Look, you are dying. Take my hand, and I shall make your name known through the East and the West."

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But Vitram, after staring at her face for a long time like a man in a stupor, turns slowly away and looks again at the battle before him. He cannot understand what he sees. The Derhalian army seems to retreat from him.

“Don’t you wish to live?” the goddess asks.

“You’re not the one I’m looking for.”

His vision begins to darken. His eyes are heavy and desire to close. But beyond the swords and the shouts he can hear a new sound. It is the trumpet of attack. He hears, almost as in a dream, the shout of men. He hears men shout “The Western Alliance” and “For Burmasha.”

“King Bolanka....” he murmurs. His face lights with a small, exhausted smile.

The strange, white figure of Arwe steps into his field of vision. She grabs him and says imperiously, “I will not let you die. I will use you to save this land. I will heal you, and you will owe me a debt, Vitram Regol.”

He falls into a dark slumber, his body healed by her hands, but his soul has been already healed. He sleeps soundly, and though in future days his life is intertwined with the plans of the goddess, at that moment he lives without her help by a hope she cannot match; and he rests in peace.