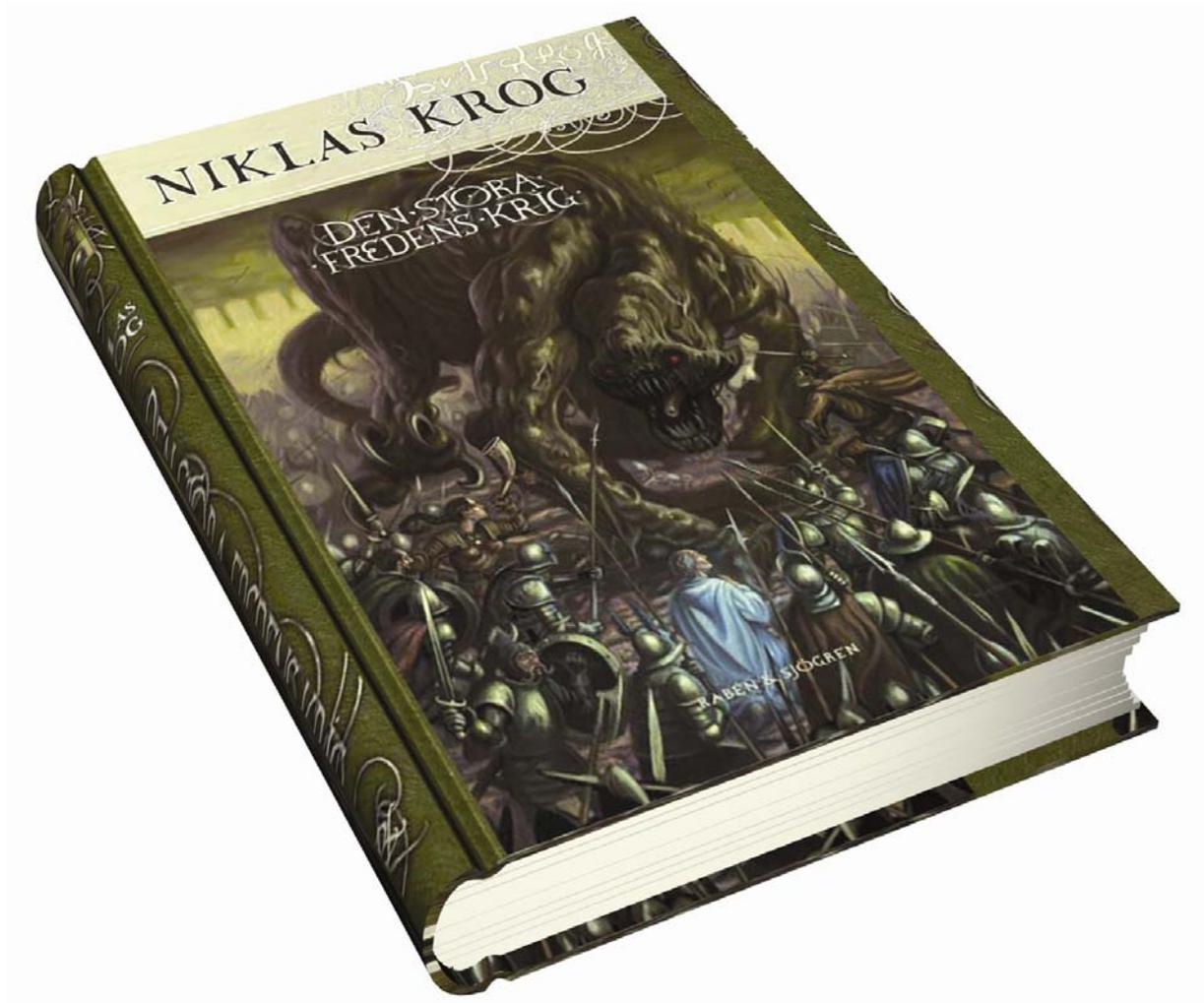


The War of the Great Peace



In *The Heart of a Warrior*, the first part in the Freedom Wars trilogy, the legend is told of The War of the Great Peace, which took place more than a thousand years before the first War of Freedom. This is the unabridged stand-alone story. 366 pages.

Both the original powers are still working at full strength in the land of Unadan. Humankind is not free.

When the country's Urhaan dies, an insignificant quarter-master is appointed his successor. Those who are skilled in magic believe that their new ruler is the first ever to lead the country without being influenced by the original powers. He is the one who will free Unadan from the eternal wars between the powers.

But alone in his chamber, the Urhaan meets a shadow; a shadow that directs his will and must be kept secret from everybody.

At the same time, a threatening darkness is settling on city after city in the realm. An enormous beast has woken from a sleep that has lasted thousands of years in the swamp at the base of the Ochorum Mountains. Through the dark, he is leading an army of terrifying beasts to lay ruin to all the cities of Unadan.

Chapter 20

Dawn on the fifth day after the darkness started moving broke slowly over Kildurk. It was as if night did not want to loosen its grip. When the sun had climbed above the horizon, the city was still covered in the grey darkness of dusk.

The troops had seen the darkness towering above them. I was visiting the city and the fear grew like a hard knot in my breast. I wanted to sit up on the wyvern Grand and fly back to Loriel, but this was no longer possible. It would be disastrous if the troops saw me – their highest commander – leaving the city.

I had come to the city to see what was waiting. Now I would have to stay until the retreat-order was given.

I could not even hide in my room. I had to be out in the streets, showing Unadan's warriors that I could steel myself, just like them.

Alvan Eder had prepared Kildurk's defence from his room in Loriel. I had not been as wise.

I ate breakfast in the dusky light and went out into the street with my three blue-clad lifeguards. I could not even let them realize how frightened I was.

”Borrow a sword from us,” they said. ”And a shield. Let the troops see that you are ready”.

It would have worked with any other Urhaan. But not me.

I shook my head.

”I have never carried either sword or shield, and I have no idea of how to use them. The troops would see that. This is the only thing I know how to carry.”

I held up a fold of my cape. The Urhaan had always worn a black symbol of war, but in Kildurk I had changed this for a cape of glistening white fabric.

”I want everyone to see clearly who I am.”

I followed the street that ran in a crescent inside the city wall, from the northern part of the city’s harbour to the southern. The wall stretched all the way to the banks of the Shanday river. As I passed through the dusk, I found myself wondering whether the slayers were able to swim. But I was convinced that the attack would come straight from the east, from the smouldering ruin of Ocho-Alto. My enemy would not waste time on stratagems until we forced him to.

I had to fight myself to walk calmly. The street was lined with tough men and women in worn suits of armour, with broad swords, battle-dented shields and hardened bodies. Their gazes were stiff and empty, freed from any trace of emotion.

They are frightened, too, I thought.

The troops stiffened as they caught sight of me. Some whispered quietly to those around them, others stared as if I was a mirage, as if I would disappear if they stared long enough.

I realized that my white cape and my cosy world was a joke to them. But I tried not to pretend. I met their eyes as openly as I could, straight across our differences.

And they did not laugh when I had passed. They straightened themselves, looked over their weapons and muttered a few words to fellow warriors.

I wanted to believe that I made a difference, that my presence meant something to them, who were only waiting for the attack to begin. My pounding heart slowed down. I could open my mouth and speak to those I met.

“Where are you from?”

“Luena.”

”You have travelled a long way to get here. I thank you for that. Does the Erivag archipelago provide you with sufficient whalebones for your master carvers?”

”Yes.” The man smiled. “The last few years have been good.”

“When the enemy is vanquished, it will get even better.”

I continued.

The memory of my father and nights beyond count spent at over-full inns helped me. I could talk to everybody about something. The words arrived by themselves. And, through the traders, I knew Unadan like perhaps no other Urhaan before me. Every village had a face, every region its own life.

The calm that spread behind me in the dusk was large and soft, filled with other things than the waiting battle.

When I had reached halfway through the city, the cry echoed:

"They are coming!" The look-out's voice cracked with terror. "Over there! I can see them!" Everything changed.

The calm was torn to pieces by the jaws of an imagined slayer. I fell to my knees and would have fallen over if one of the lifeguards had not grabbed my shoulder.

Around me, the troops hurried up ladders to the crest of the city wall. I remained on my knees.

The slayers had arrived. Now I would die.

But the moments rushed past without any sound of battle. The street was nearly empty when I managed to stand up. Still the same silence. On wobbly legs, I brushed down my cape and threw a glance towards the city wall.

"We'll climb up."

"Is it safe?"

I realized that the lifeguards knew I was terrified.

"Yes."

I grabbed the rungs of the nearest ladder. Up there, a black-haired warrioress threw a scornful glance at me. Then she disappeared in the crowd.

I wondered why I was so frightened and why she was not. I could find no simple explanation. Perhaps there was none.

I climbed up as quickly as I could, with my eyes and thoughts aimed at the rungs before me. The crest of the city wall was full of loaded ballistas and warriors; a crowd steaming with sweat and fright. On the crest, a barrel of oil was hanging. On a flat stone below, firewood was stacked.

"Make room for our Urhaan!" The voice belonged to a woman. "Let him see them with his own eyes!"

I wanted to protest, but I couldn't. Not now. A way opened up to the thick outer wall, with its arrow slits. Outside, the dusk deepened to blackest darkness. A quarter of a mile away, nothing could be seen.

I staggered up to the arrow slit and steadied myself against a large ballista. My gaze was locked onto the secret pits and traps. But none of them had been sprung. Not the slightest movement could be discerned.

The black-haired women appeared beside me.

“Can you see them?”

I wanted to scream: “YES! The slayers are everywhere. They are going to kill us!” But the words got stuck in my fright and then I realized that they did not need saying.

The quarter-mile of open ground outside the wall was empty. There were no slayers.

”No.” I shook my head. ”I can’t see them.”

”Sure?”

Her tone was scornful, but I did not react. She leaned a bit closer.

“Are you suggesting our look-out got it wrong?”

”I can see no slayers.” I turned towards her. “But please point them out to me.”

She was as tall as I, with a sharply defined face, straight nose and slanted, brown eyes. She wore a coat of mail with extra protection on shoulders and arms, but her shoulders were narrower than mine. It was as if all the power in her body had gathered into a single, bone-hard pillar, instead of the excess of body and armour of the large male warriors. She looked dangerous and I was convinced that she was.

A horn hung from her belt. This meant that she belonged to the select officers.

”So you are not afraid?”

Her brown eyes overflowed with scorn.

”No, I am not afraid. I am terrified. That can be no secret to those who saw me when the look-out called.”

The laughter around us bubbled up from surprise and relief.

I continued.

“But I will not leave this place until everybody does.”

“Pretty words.”

The scorn in her eyes had not lessened. It made my cheeks hot. For some reason, it was important that she believed me, that she understood that my terror was real and that I fought against it as well as I could, without hiding it or denying it.

I was afraid, but honest.

She moved away from me. Some ten men came together behind her and I realized that she was the commander, a capable warrior who had earned the trust of the others.

“What is your name?” I asked her.

She did not hear me, or pretended not to hear, and I did not repeat my question. When she turned and started down the ladder, our eyes met across the crowd.

I meant nothing to her. A laughable, white-clad Urhaan without any knowledge of the thing she had complete mastery of. But I accepted that role. I did not try to lie about who I was. I was still honest and I think she understood this.

“Khorog.”

It was no name for a woman, or a man or even an animal. It was a sound. But it suited her.

Khorog.

The last thing I thought of as she disappeared out of sight down the ladder was how badly her dangling plait went with her name.

The warning cries from the look-outs were heard several times during the following hours and fear shredded all my resolutions to be brave. But the slayers were not seen.

The darkness continued to deepen and visibility shrank to less than a quarter of a mile, to a black haze full of imagined movements.

Small groups of wyverns patrolled the airspace, but the darkness made it difficult to see anything. Nobody dared leave the city. Panic bubbled under the surface. We were prisoners within our own wall.

When the day ended, the darkness became even more terrifying. Everybody wanted the battle to begin, that something would happen. Anything.

Yet the enemy tarried.

I think I was looking for Khorog. I wanted her to see that I had not left, that I was challenging my fear and keeping my promise. But I did not find her.

”We must evacuate the city!”

The voice broke through the murk when I was on my third tour of the city.

“We still have time to get away from here!”

An officer strode onto the street in front of me, trembling with anger.

”You will stay until you get orders to go! I suggest that you sleep while you can.”

The silence that followed was full of hesitation. The officer continued:

”There are boats ready in the harbour and we shall not die here. But I can promise one thing. None of you will even get close to the boats with your lives until the order is given. Understood?”

The troops scattered in the murk and I suspected that similar scenes were taking place throughout the city. The darkness was the enemy. It would conquer us without any help from slayers.

I turned towards my lifeguards.

”The wyverns must fly beyond the city wall and drop burning torches on the ground. Make sure this happens at once.”

There were sixteen wyverns in Kildurk. An insignificant force, but sufficient for the task.

One of the lifeguards hastened away and I continued my slow tour along the wall with my senses at full alert.

The brief, nervous conversations around me faltered to a heavy silence. All thoughts circled about that which could not be said out loud.

Several glittering points of light rose above the city.

”What is that?”

The warriors and warrioresses rose to their feet.

”They are wyverns!” Somebody pointed. “Wyverns with torches!”

The Wyverns passed the city wall and continued for some twenty man lengths out over the plain. There they dropped their torches in a long line and returned to collect new ones.

Soon, the plain was dimly lit in a great crescent outside the city wall. The relief was palpable. But the night was long.

At regular intervals, the wyverns departed with new torches. I do not know whether I slept at all. There was no reason. I would not be fighting.

While I continued my tour along the inside of the city wall, I felt the mood of the city almost like a living being around me. Fright, desperation, tiredness – and small rays of hope. Everybody dreaded the trial of strength that was waiting, but an escape route was prepared.

Unadan would not fall even if Kildurk did.

Late at night, when the cold was biting my cheeks and the darkness deeper than ever, I at last caught sight of Khorog. She was standing leaning against a pillar in the shadow of the city wall. The light from a torch shone over half her face and the black plait. Around her on the ground her troop lay. I passed at a distance of a few man lengths and I imagined that her eyes followed me in the murk. But she did not say a word.

Dawn arrived as a feeble hint of light in the east. I realized that the darkness was immediately above us, that it could not get any darker.

The attack would come any moment now.

The wyverns flew out with new torches. The darkness was broken up by small circles of light.

A simple breakfast was served. A few people ate the porridge and the bread with hearty appetite, but most chewed and swallowed from obligation, because they had to. I could not eat anything. My whole being was holding its breath. The wakeful night had left behind an overpowering tiredness, which was now jostling with the insight that I could not take much more, that my insignificant strength was nearing its end. A few breadcrumbs made me feel sick. I crawled to my feet and continued walking.

I exchanged brief words with the people I met along the wall, words filled with unworried confidence. But I was exhausted and panic struck.

A man lying down asked me:

"How much longer?"

"I don't know, my friend."

A dry rustling reached us from a point outside the wall. I stiffened. The next moment, a violent roaring rose through the night. It whirled like a storm wind through streets and alleys before disappearing across the Shanday River.

For a moment after the roar, everything was still. Then panic broke out. The man in front of me jumped up and ran towards the harbour. Troops threw down their weapons and fled. I too would have run if only my legs had obeyed me.

"Control yourselves!" The voice belonged to a large warrior who was one of the highest commanders in Kildurk. "Stop!"

At once, there was doubt in the flight.

"Stay!"

I recognized Khorog's hoarse voice.

"Or die!"

She had her sword drawn and around her were ranged her own troops with their weapons at the ready.

The fleeing men stopped running. Khorog lowered her sword and pointed at me.

"Look at our Urhaan! He is more afraid than most, but he is not fleeing. And for as long as he remains in Kildurk, you will stay too."

I was not sure whether I should be flattered, but she made them listen. Shamed, they hurried back to their weapons.

The large commander stepped in among them.

”The traps have harvested their first victim! Take your places on the crest of the wall and ready yourselves. Soon they’ll be here!”

The troops climbed up the ladders. I and my lifeguards followed. All eyes were stiffly looking into the darkness, towards the army of slayers who were lurking just beyond the light of the torches.

The next roar came from another place, further away. Louder and more violent. It made even the wall we were standing on vibrate.

The will to flee was so strong that I shut my eyes.

”There! There’s one of them!”

The troops around me gulped. The silence was filled with terror and I knew what they were seeing. I had seen a slayer myself in Ordakeen.

“Aim the ballista!”

The voice of the commander was barely audible. I could feel the disjointed movements of the troops around me. The ballista creaked and the men groaned.

”It’s too fast! We haven’t got time...”

With a dry rustling, the roof of one of the secret pits gave way. The men stretched. The ballista squeaked a final time. For a moment, the silence was complete.

The howl that echoed from the pit was a promise of retribution, of punishment beyond anything that could be comprehended.

”It’s coming! Shoot. Shoot!”

The tensed wooden arms of the ballista jerked and hurled its six-foot arrow. The crash was so violent that I opened my eyes.

Some fifteen man lengths outside the nearest arrow slit, a single slayer could be seen. Its body was greeny-black and in the murk it seemed not to have any fixed form. The arrow from the ballista hurried towards it, but I knew that it would not be enough if the arrow hit its target. Nothing could stop such a monster.

The arrow streaked past the slayer and buried itself deep in the far wall of the pit. The disappointment of the troops was painful to hear.

“Reload!”

The roars of slayers were thundering from several places at once in the dark. I realized that the city wall of Kildurk was surrounded by them. Soon, I would die. This was a battle that could not be won. Or escaped from.

The slayer moved towards us with an extraordinary, half-running gait in the dark, using its long arms as supports. Its speed was terrifying.

”Ready!”

But it was too late. The being disappeared into the darkness beneath the wall. I waited for the sound of a crash. Nothing happened. The fear made me belch sourly.

That was when I realized we had forgotten to light the fires under the barrels of oil. There was nothing to pour over the slayers when they reached the wall.

A man heaved himself up into the arrow slit.

”It’s down there! It’s bracing itself! Look out!”

He tumbled backwards and the troops nearby drew back.

“Aim the ballista!” An officer pointed to the arrow slit. “Hurry up!”

Somebody pushed at the ballista. A moment later, the slayer heaved itself up over the crest.

It was like Ordakeen, but worse. This time, there was no wyvern to carry me away.

The slayer’s body was an unshapely murk of greeny-black skin; a tight mesh of veins stretched over unbelievably swelling muscles. It was as if the swamp itself had come to life. The little torchlight there was on the crest seemed to disappear straight into the slayer’s body. It was twice as tall as the human warriors and the weight of the enormous body was paralyzing. Nothing could stop such a creature.

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