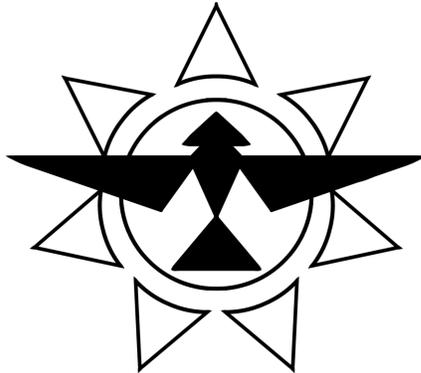


The Court Of The
Hydra King

Book Five of *The Seven Wars*

E. H. Kindred



A Novel Of The Somaðarsath

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9857530-7-8 (Sun Hawk Press)

ISBN-10: 0985753072

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Typeset in: Crimson

Drop Caps in: Preciosa

Display text in: Metamorphous

Phonetic Transcriptions in: Junicode

The Seven Wars Series

The Immortal

Bound By Blood

Through Death Or Through Darkness

The Mirror of Dùmсаро

The Court Of The Hydra King

Time's Shadows

Storms Westward

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Now loud approaching drums,
Victoria! see'st thou in powder-smoke the banners
 torn but flying? the rout of the baffled?
Hearst those shouts of the conquering army?

Ah soul, the sobs of women,
the wounded groaning in agony,
the hiss and crackle of flames, the blacken'd ruins,
 the embers of cities,
The dirge and desolation of mankind.

...

All passionate heart-chants, sorrowful appeals...
Of winds and woods and mighty ocean waves...
as of the far-back days the poets tell, the Paradiso,
the straying thence, the separation long,
 but now the wandering done,
the journey done, the journeyman come home again.

—Walt Whitman

Excerpted from "Proud Music of the Storm"

Chapter One

Anacceptable!" Cazour had roared. "Fool!" he had called him. "Incompetent wretch! Imbecile! Failure! Coward!"

Aldebaran could still hear those words as he stood out on the hardened dust under the vast canopy of stars. His five heads were all inclined skyward, golden frills folded back in humble awe of the heavens as his eyes wandered among them, searching for an answer he could not find.

Two of his heads glanced downward, drawn to a movement behind him, but it was just the guards at the gate. They stood outside the dark fortress, behemoths as he was, with thick bodies, on four clawed feet as they stood guard with five ever-watchful heads. They were watching him from a distance, wary, always expectant.

He was their commander, second in command to the Hydra King, Cazour. Aldebaran knew his station was the highest any non-royal hydra could hold, but every day he wished he had not accepted it. He was a servant to a tyrant, a monster. Every day he endured his king's abuse, and witnessed more still to his subjects. Every five years, Aldebaran was commanded to lead hydras out across the Barron Region with fire, scorching the land of all plant life, save some scraggly brush in the south kept for their own food and for that of the desert deer the Hydras relied on for nourishment. Always, Aldebaran felt sick when he set fire to the land he knew had once been green.

Cazour was the heir of the corrupter of their kind, Adalar, who had killed his father Kratorin, and first burned the Hydras' homeland. It was now the only desert in Etheria, its dusty soil the color of dried blood, an eerie reminder of the murder and brutality which plagued their history. Cazour himself was an embodiment of corruption and cruelty, and it was Aldebaran who was often charged with conducting his vicious schemes.

All his life, Aldebaran had been taught to fight, to kill, to *hate*. The Hydras were taught to loathe green and growing things, and all creatures beyond the ragged mountains surrounding their desert. The rest of Etheria was their enemy, or so they were taught, and yet, Aldebaran could not bring himself to hate them. It was only fear of his king that made him slay them.

"Aldebaran!" came a harsh roar from the castle.

Aldebaran cringed at the sound and turned his eyes back down from the heavens. He could see the flickering fires in the Fairies' camp in the distance, a race who had only recently allied with them and betrayed the rest of Etheria. The hydra turned and trudged back into the stronghold, finding his king standing there, seething, in the courtyard.

Through Death Or Through Darkness

"I don't recall dismissing you," growled Cazour.

"Forgive me, sire. When you left the chamber, I thought—"

"I couldn't bear to look at you anymore. That didn't mean you could leave."

"Forgive me, sire."

"Your failure at Farisdon has cost us the Mirror of Dùmsaro. Without it, our war against the High King shall be all the harder. No doubt the Somadar is already planning his move against us. We can waste no more time and I shall accept no more failure from you."

"What would you have me do, my king?"

Chapter Two

Though the garden was in full bloom and the intoxicating sweetness of a hundred different flowers drifted on the warm breeze, Lask was immune to their charms. He sat across the small table from the king, watching Lavancer poring over the chess board in a futile effort to escape checkmate. The Protector sat in silence, while the sun cast dancing patches of light over his snow-white skin and gave his dark hair a subtle shine like raven feathers. For such a beautiful day, his face was grim, and it was only the imminent end of the game that had caused a momentary hush in the discussion of the Hydras' coming war. Nonetheless, the faint brushstrokes of a smile appeared at the corners of his scarlet eyes when Lavancer made an exasperated noise and flicked over the white marble piece of his king.

"Don't know why I bother anymore," Lavancer muttered, "Don't think I've won in a century."

"I could always humor you," replied Lask, "After all, if my king should ask that I let him win—"

"Never!" Lavancer exclaimed. "Where would be the fun in that? No, one day I shall beat you, and what a day that shall be!"

There was a rustle in the foliage in the distance, and the silver form of the griffin Marjusina appeared on the path through the garden. She carried a small satchel around her neck, and sat back on her haunches to open it when she approached saying,

"Excuse me, my lords, but I've found something that might be of interest."

"Your search was successful?" Lask inquired. He knew the griffin had spent most of the morning in the library with the Archiver Faileas, looking for an answer to Lask's request: find someone who knows how to engage hydras in battle.

"There were a number of stories about people who've gone to battle with hydras," said the griffin, pulling a small book from her satchel, "Arrabella, Nondelis, and the like, but unfortunately for us, all of them are dead." She turned to the page she had marked with a crimson ribbon. "Except for this one."

Through Death Or Through Darkness

Lask looked at the page she had opened, seeing in gold-lettering *Berenjar and the hydras at Therakon*. Skimming over the text below the heading, Lask saw that Berenjar had engaged five hydras at a small village just outside the Barren Region when the creatures had come to prey on the livestock in the fields. He had killed three of the beasts, and sent the other two running wounded; no easy feat for a single man.

“Faileas and I were able to locate him in the kingdom’s records,” Marjusina continued, pulling out a folded paper. “He’s currently living on the Shores of Fangàn, in the village of Advasad.”

“I will send Forge to find him.”