



A HERO'S Justice

The
Ergoth Trilogy
volume three

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Avalanche on Level Ground



General Lord Relfas, mounted on a massive roan gelding, watched six streams of dust rise into the warm morning air. Widely spaced in an arc from north to south, the six dust streams were converging on his position. His aide, Lord Fracolo, spoke the obvious: "Scouts returning, sir!"

Relfas didn't bother to reply. Fracolo might be a Rider of the Great Horde, but he could make no claim to nobility, while Relfas was of the wealthy house of Dirinmor. Instead, Relfas turned to stare at the view behind him. It was a sight to stir the blood, and one he never tired of.

Fifty thousand mounted warriors were drawn up in perfectly ordered ranks, iron armor gleaming and crimson cloaks spotless. The First Fifty of the Great Horde of Ergoth filled the bottomland of the Solvin River, as far as the eye could see to the north, south, and west. So named because they were the first to be summoned in time of war, the First Fifty comprised the cream of Emperor Ackal V's fighting men. None was younger than twenty, nor older than thirty. Relfas, at forty years of age, was the oldest among them.

Horde standards rose proudly among the shining host. Each flag bore the symbol of the fighting men behind it. There were thunderbolts, stars, skulls, axes, and a veritable menagerie of animals: dragons, panthers, bulls, bears, and serpents.

Directly behind Relfas was the greatest standard of all,

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the arms of the House of Ackal. The crimson banner emblazoned with a golden sun over a pair of crossed sabers had a proud history. First carried by the empire's founder, Ackal the Great, this emblem had journeyed into the far corners of the land, always returning in triumph. Those enemies who survived their contest with Ergoth said the banner's color came from the blood of the untold thousands slain by the Great Horde.

To be here, leading such an army into battle, was the dream of every Rider of the Great Horde. Even before his days as a shilder, training with blunted weapons, Relfas had never doubted he would attain this pinnacle. Such accomplishments were nothing more than his due.

The scouts arrived, hauling their foam-flecked horses to a stop amidst clouds of thick yellow plains dust. The first man to reach Relfas was a Rider from the Stone Shield Horde, a contingent well known for its elegance and dash. Since all the scouts were covered with yellow grime, this particular Stone Shielder hardly lived up to that reputation just now.

"My lord!" he cried. "I beg to report the enemy has withdrawn!"

"More than a league beyond the riverbend!" added a second scout, arriving hard on the heels of the first.

"So, the lizards are running," Relfas said, a smug smile on his handsome, red-bearded face.

He had brought the army here in a rush to contest the invaders' crossing of the Solvin River, some twenty leagues east-northeast of the city of Caergoth. The news that the enemy had fallen back, even before his men could engage them, only confirmed what Relfas had long believed. The invader host might terrify peasants and nomad barbarians, but it stood no chance against the trained hordes of Ergoth.

Raising his voice he declared, "We will pursue!"

His subordinate warlords, gathered behind him, exchanged looks. Hojan of Hobor, who knew the Eastern Hundred well, urged caution. "We should not rush blindly into a fray," he said. "There are other scouts still out. We should wait and hear from them."

"Other scouts? What other scouts?" asked Relfas.

"He means the nomads, my lord," said the Stone Shield rider, lip curling in disdain. "Curs! They take our coin, ride out, and don't return!"

"The ones I hire do," Hojan replied.

Relfas had no interest whatsoever in nomads, scouts or no.

"The first law of war, as set down by Ackal the Great, is to pursue a fleeing enemy until they are utterly destroyed," he said. "Is that not so, Lord Hojan?"

Hojan grunted an affirmative, but added there was no proof the enemy was fleeing. They might simply be leaving the flatlands around the river, to take advantage of the better position provided by the Solvin Hills.

Relfas shook his head. "You give them too much credit. They're little better than beasts."

The casual dismissal left Hojan and several other warlords staring.

"My lord, in olden times the *arkudenala* nearly overran Silvanost!" Lord Dukant said.

The name, bestowed on the invaders by displaced nomads, meant "sons of dragons." The *arkudenala* had landed on the empire's north coast seven years earlier and begun driving inland, slaughtering all who opposed them. Peasant refugees, driven before the invaders like the bow wave of a great ship, made for the presumed safety of the empire's southern cities, bringing with them confusing tales of their inhuman attackers. However, it soon became clear these *arkudenala* were not some new, draconic evil, but *bakali*, a reptilian race once thought cleansed from the world.

"Elves are not Riders of the Great Horde," Relfas stated. "What overran them, *we* shall destroy! The order is: pursue the retreating foe!"

Most of the warlords, fired with pride and eager for battle, saluted their general and rejoined their respective hordes. Hojan and a handful of skeptics departed with more deliberation.

Lord Relfas's command echoed through the lines. Drawing their sabers in one long thunderclap of iron on iron, the Riders roared, "Ergoth! Ergoth!"

Fifty thousand horsemen trotted out of the bend of the Solvin, advancing straight ahead. On either wing, Riders fanned out, opening the interval between them and breaking into a canter.

The river bottom, lush with newly leafed willows and a rampant tangle of blooming vines, gave way in less than a league to grassy land that rose in a series of low, step-like ridges. The sod was trampled and torn in a swath five leagues wide. The sheer breadth of the trail caused the Ergothian advance to falter.

“How many lizard-men are there?” asked Lord Fracolo, staring at the scarred ground.

“What does it matter?” Relfas snapped. He rose in the stirrups, lifted his saber high, and shouted, “Whether they be ten thousand or a hundred thousand, the lizards are showing us their backs and we shall sweep the land clear of them!”

He ordered the pace increased to a gallop. Most of the First Fifty surged forward, supremely confident of their own invincibility.

Before Relfas joined them, Lord Hojan steered his mount next to the general’s and spoke quickly. He reminded his leader of another time-honored precept handed down by Ackal the Great: when the enemy’s strength is unknown, hold men in reserve.

Although he did not share his warlord’s caution, Relfas ordered Hojan to proceed. Then the general galloped away.

Several warlords had held back when the rest increased their pace. At Hojan’s command, these formed up around his own Golden Helm Horde. Six hordes in all, the reserve continued to move forward, but at a walking pace.

Far ahead, the Riders galloping in the forefront of the charge reached the lowest step of the hills without catching sight of the enemy. They’d covered a thousand paces, and their mounts were winded. They slowed, and the formation became confused as faster riders trod on their heels. Still, the throng of mounted men continued their forward motion, beginning the climb up the first slope.

At that instant, a shrill screeching filled the steamy summer air. The Ergothians reined up, unable to trace or

identify the bizarre sound. From the army's edges, solitary riders broke off and rode swiftly away. They were clad not in iron armor, but buckskin or homespun. These were nomads, hired as scouts by the Ergothians, and they alone recognized this sound, knew exactly what it meant.

All along the rim of the ridge ahead, dark figures appeared. With the late morning sun in their eyes, the Ergothians could make out no details, only bulky, shapeless silhouettes, but the clatter of arms was unmistakable. Horns of warning bleated along the imperial line.

Relfas saw his men hesitate. Warriors of the Great Horde feared no mortal foe, but a charge up a steep incline at an entrenched enemy such as this was not a thing to be taken lightly. Relfas took personal command of the vanguard and roared the order to charge. Weary horses panted and gasped, fighting their way up the slope already torn up by the enemy's passage.

Atop the ridge loomed a wall of green and dull metal. Spears swung down from the front ranks of the bakali host. Behind them billhooks and poleaxes cleaved the air in menacing circles. The enemy himself was not quite visible, only the seemingly impenetrable phalanx of shields and protruding spears.

Standing in his stirrups and whipping his saber around his head, Relfas led his men into the first clash. He was promptly unhorsed when his mount reared to avoid the spiny greeting the bakali had prepared. The animal toppled, and Relfas tumbled ignominiously down the slope. Around him, smarter horsemen kept low over their mounts' necks and struck at the spearpoints with their sabers.

While the front ranks jabbed at each other, the second rank of bakali waded in with hooks and axes. With these they snagged unwary riders, dragging them onto the waiting spears of other bakali.

For most of the Ergothians, this was the first time they'd seen the enemy. It was a sight not easily forgotten.

Standing two paces tall, the bakali were roughly human-shaped, with narrow, protruding chests and heavily muscled arms and legs. Brow ridges and upper lips lined with yellow

horns lent them a beaked, almost bird-like appearance. Eyes were either yellow or pale green, with black, diamond-shaped pupils. Ears the bakali had not; only a hole on each side of the head. Likewise, the nose was nothing more than a small bump, with two slit nostrils, above a lipless gash.

Hands and feet were enormous, and sported four thick fingers or toes, all far longer than any human's and tipped with yellow talons. For battle, the bakali draped themselves in loose coats of tiny iron rings, which were secured by leather belts around their narrow waists. Weapons were oversized and crude, made for hacking and slashing, and horribly effective against soft-skinned enemies.

Perhaps even more unforgettable to the Ergothians than the first sight of their inhuman enemy was the smell. Acrid and fetid at the same time, the bakali gave off the stench of a viper's den. The odor hung over the enemy host like an invisible fog, stinging the eyes and clogging throats.

Lord Relfas, unhurt by his embarrassing fall, had remounted and returned to the fray. He and the vanguard continued their attempts to come to grips with the enemy, while the main body of Riders maneuvered around the struggle and fell upon the bakali flank. The lizard-men turned left to face this onslaught. Before the sun reached its zenith, three-quarters of Relfas's army was furiously engaged. Only the reserve—Hojan and the other more prudent warlords—remained out of action, awaiting orders to join the fray.

By sheer weight of numbers, the imperial army forced its way onto the lowest hill. There, they beheld the bakali host in its totality for the first time. Relfas reckoned the number to be forty or fifty thousand strong, about the same strength as his own army.

The creatures were proving to be unexpectedly tenacious. As their front line was hacked apart, the lizard-men stood back to back and fought on, selling their lives dearly. Ergothians who'd considered them little more than animals were shocked to see the bakali resist charge after charge. Great quantities of their dark, purplish red blood flowed, mixing with the scarlet gore of men and horses. Still, the bakali did not give up.

With the vanguard attacking head-on, and the main body assaulting their flank, the bakali were forced back to the base of the next hill. Hard-pressed, the lizards did not try to retreat up the slope, but remained where they were, fighting furiously. Relfas sent word to his main force to withdraw just enough to gain room for a full-fledged charge. Such a strike on the flank would, he was certain, roll up the bakali line like a rotten carpet.

As the Riders formed up for the charge, a chorus of intense, metallic screeching rose over the battlefield for a second time. Relfas, enjoying a brief lull in the action around him, gave a shout.

"They're begging for mercy!" he exulted.

His feeling of triumph was short-lived. On the ridge behind and above the hard-pressed bakali a whole new host of the creatures sprang up. These lizards had been lying concealed in the tall grass. In the space of two heartbeats, the enemy force had doubled in strength.

Relfas stared at the new foe in frozen shock, but only for a moment. Boldness, not timidity, won battles and brought glory. Ignoring the chatter of his subordinates, he ordered the charge.

The tired Ergothians surged forward. The fresh wave of bakali ran down the hill to reinforce their comrades, then the entire bakali line began to push forward. Charging Riders ran straight onto a wall of lethal spearpoints. Their comrades, blinded by fury and foolhardy courage, came on. Line after line of horsemen threw themselves against the resurgent lizard-men. Line after line perished. The bard Ay-limar, writing of one of Ackal Ergot's battles centuries before, had likened a similarly futile charge to wax soldiers flinging themselves against a red-hot anvil. For Relfas's men, it was like being fed into a horrendous threshing machine. The whirling blades, wielded with terrifying skill by the bakali, tore them to pieces.

Continuing their slow, implacable advance, the bakali line pushed the Ergothians off the lower hilltop, retaking the ground Relfas had earlier won at such cost.

At last acknowledging the danger, Relfas summoned the

reserves. They did not come. Instead, a Rider arrived, bearing dire news from Lord Hojan.

The enemy was behind Relfas.

Facing west, his back to Relfas's position, Hojan battled a new army of bakali that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Although a smaller contingent, perhaps twenty thousand lizards, it far outnumbered the six hordes under Hojan's command. The first tendrils of despair chilled Relfas's proud heart.

"Rally! Rally to me!" he cried, parched voice cracking.

The mass of confused Riders around him slowly dissolved. Some men rode hard to join Hojan. Some remained with their commander. Others—more than a few—did something thought inconceivable for Riders of the Great Horde. They fled. Wanting nothing more than to put distance between themselves and the remorseless inhuman killing machine they faced, they rode away.

His army disintegrating, the bakali before him still advancing, Relfas had only one goal left: survival. The lizard-men were far stronger and more numerous than anyone had guessed. His Majesty Ackal V must be told. Therefore, the imperial army would fall back to the city of Caergoth and replenish its ranks there.

He gave the order, then realized no one was left to relay it to the warlords. He was standing alone. The bakali line was eight paces away, and coming toward him fast. Bent-kneed, the creatures ran with a strange hopping motion that set their ring-armor coats jingling.

Lord Relfas yanked the roan's big head about and drove his spurs hard into the animal's sides. The battle of Solvin Hills was lost. His duty now was to warn the empire that this threat was far, far graver than anyone had imagined.



Hojan's ranks swelled as warriors from the rest of the army sought refuge with him. With eight thousand men, he organized a fighting retreat northward, away from the bakali's westward line of advance.

Although the Ergothians were defeated and disorganized, the bakali did not press their advantage. Instead, a league from the battlefield, the lizard-men gave up the pursuit and returned to the main body of their army.

From a distance, Hojan watched as the departing enemy was joined by even more bakali. These newcomers were not warriors. Unarmed, they were burdened by baggage, or dragging heavy sledges. A veritable river of scaly lizard-men flowed through the Solvin valley.

This wasn't an army on the move. It was a nation.

Once the tide had passed on, Hojan sent scouts back to the battlefield. They found it picked clean. Every broken sword, every fractured spearshaft had been taken away. Far more disturbing was the fact that the slain—men and horses alike—were all gone. What the bakali wanted with them no one dared contemplate.