

Niels Bernhardt

The Warlock of Hymal

Book II: The Fall of Hocatin

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Der Hexer von Hymal

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Cover: Sven Ballenthin Translation: Edwin Miles Published by Null Papier Verlag, Deutschland Copyright © 2015 by Null Papier Verlag 1st Edition, ISBN 978-3-95418-656-3



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Back to Hymal, back to the orcs! And everything ends in disaster again, of course. Could Danuwil really be dead? At least Nikko is able to free a prisoner from the orcs' clutches. But who is he?

Back home again, everything is even worse. Khondharr marches against Hocatin, and the people of the landgraviate have no choice but to flee. But where can anyone feel safe in a world filled with danger? Besides, Nikko still has a very specific goal of his own, and he can't let himself be distracted from it ...



Chapter 1: A Castle Full of Questions

eaten quickly and set off very early, following the course of the river along the western shore for many unbroken hours. They had spoken little, although Nikko had more questions going through his head than the nobleman could possibly answer. The biggest question of all was what it really meant to suddenly discover that he was a sorcerer. But he was aware that they were walking through enemy territory, and his already grim view of Hymal had only been made grimmer by Danuwil's assertion that wargriders meant the presence of a larger number of orcs. For that reason, the young sorcerer preferred to remain quietly in the background, rather than distract the experienced nobleman. Danuwil had now taken the lead in their expedition, and had stopped at many points along the riverbank to survey the eastern shore and the plain stretching away behind it through his telescope.

The sun was high overhead, and the two companions had settled onto the grass beside the river to eat.

"The castle is almost due east, I'd say," Danuwil said, raising the telescope to his eye once again. He turned slowly southward. "But

the river flows to the southeast for a few more hours, then turns to the south. From here, we might be able to make it to the castle by nightfall," he murmured, putting the telescope away. "A long way across an exposed plain, with practically no cover at all."

"But we can't follow the river forever," said Nikko, although he was in no hurry to cross the sheltering stream himself. "You said yourself that it goes south."

"That's true. But the point where the river turns south also looks like the closest point to the hill. It would mean less time on the plain, perhaps many hours less. If we make it to the bend in the river today, then we can try the flatlands tomorrow. Then we might be able to make it to the castle by midday."

"And we could be back on this side again by nightfall," thought Nikko out loud. Then, seeing the look of disapproval on the nobleman's face, he said, "Just in case we don't find anything there."

"Fair enough," said Danuwil. "Who knows what we'll find there? It would be better to be back on this side of the river before dark. All right, we'll follow the river as far as we can today. First thing tomorrow morning, we cross the plain."

They made good progress through the afternoon and reached the bend in the river early in the evening. From there, the waterway flowed sedately southward as far as the eye could see, but they were clearly closer to the castle, which was perhaps only a three-hour march from that point.

Danuwil peered through his telescope again, as if wanting to exploit the last light of day to get a final look at their surroundings. "No

lights," he murmured, the telescope pointed toward the castle. "I don't like that at all."

"Abandoned?" Nikko asked, secretly wondering whether their perilous venture would be worth it only to find an abandoned castle.

"Could be, but I don't know," the nobleman replied, then added, "That's what we're here to find out. But don't worry," he added encouragingly. "The castle is still a long way off. We probably wouldn't be able to make out the weak light of, say, a torch from here. Get some sleep. I'll take the first watch."

It was deep in the night when Danuwil shook Nikko gently to wake him, whispering to the heavy-eyed lad to be quiet. Nikko needed a few seconds to orient himself because he had been sleeping surprisingly soundly.

"Quiet," Danuwil whispered. "I think there are orcs moving across the river. The wind is at our backs, so they shouldn't pick up our scent, so no thoughtless noises, now. We don't want to give ourselves away."

Nikko was too stunned for a moment to be afraid. The first thing he had to do was wake up properly.

"If they come too close to the shore, or if the wind turns, then wake me up quietly," Danuwil whispered. "I'm going to get some sleep. Otherwise, wake me just before dawn."

The lad was still not fully awake and did not say anything in response to Danuwil's news. When he had finally recovered his senses, the nobleman was already slumbering peacefully beneath his blanket.

It was a grim night, with not a star in the sky. Nikko could barely see his hand before his face. The darkness made the noises coming from the other side of the river even eerier. The lad could almost believe that he heard the rasping language of the orcs, barked orders, grunting responses. With both hands clenched tightly around the magic wand, he could not stop himself from trembling in the sinister blackness. How could he get caught up in a mess like this again? Wasn't it only recently that he had sworn never again to set foot in Hymal?

He had no idea how long he sat like that. Perhaps only a few minutes, perhaps hours. But a bloodcurdling howl suddenly ripped through his body and jolted him violently out of his trance! He shook his head to clear his mind, and pricked up his ears. He heard another howl, this one from much further away. Almost paralyzed with fear, the lad wondered whether he ought to wake the experienced nobleman.

"A wargrider," he heard Danuwil suddenly whisper. "Sounds close to the shore. We need to move further back from the water. Quietly!"

The first howl must have woken Danuwil, Nikko realized, and he followed the nobleman as he crept slowly away from the riverbank. It was some minutes before Danuwil stopped again, when they had moved a good distance back from the river.

"The wind is still on our side," Danuwil said in a low voice. "But those damned wargs have a better nose than an orc. We can count ourselves lucky if the wind doesn't give us away tonight."

"You don't think we were spotted?" Nikko asked, a miserable quivering in his voice revealing his terror.

"No," the nobleman replied. "They may not like water, but once they scent prey, there's no holding them."

"Then they weren't searching for us?"

"No, I don't think so," Danuwil said, trying to sound reassuring. "A patrol along the river, I'd say. Perhaps a scouting party. Don't worry. Try to get to sleep, Nikko. It's still an hour or two until dawn. I'll finish your watch."

The nobleman woke Nikko perhaps an hour after dawn. To the north and east, where their route would take them, the sky was heavily overcast. To the west, however, the sun managed to find a gap in the clouds, dowsing the flatlands in that direction in a more inviting light.

They are quickly and in silence, and Nikko could not stop thinking about the events of the previous night. Then they made their way back down to the river, where Danuwil took out his telescope and scrutinized the plain on the other side.

"The riverbank looks clear," he said. "But I can't be sure about the plain. The grass is too high, and I'm sure there are a lot of hollows. Orcs might have concealed themselves there. I can't make out any kind of flag on the castle. I have to say, it doesn't look good."

"Then why take the risk?" Nikko blurted before he could think his words over. The question must have sounded like an indictment.

"Master Nikko," the nobleman replied in an almost fatherly tone, "we are on a mission. Do you really think that reporting an abandoned—no, a most likely abandoned—castle would be enough to satisfy his Serene Highness? But I'll grant that you're right, at least as far as you are concerned. You, like me, are in the service of his Serene

Highness, but as one capable of magic, you would face no punishment. You would be too valuable for that ... and too dangerous. I, on the other hand, could not show my face in public again, not in Hocatin, nor even in Zundaj, which would be far worse."

After a short pause, he went on, "I have to find answers, Nikko. My path leads to that wretched castle, but I cannot force you to follow me there. Nor would I want to."

Nikko did not have to think for long before deciding to go with the nobleman. It was not only the grim prospect of having to wander for days, alone, through Hymal. It was also that he did not want to let Danuwil down. At some level, he had grown used to the companionship of the odd character, and here in Hymal, his experience was enormously useful. More useful than in the mountains, Nikko thought, and could not suppress a smirk at the recollection.

"Without me and my wand, you wouldn't stand a chance," he joked.

"Let's hope you won't have to use it," Danuwil replied coolly, his eyes fixed on the distant castle.

They had crossed the shallow river and been on the march for some hours, wading through waist-high grasses that swayed with the wind like waves on the water. The ground was pocked with hollows overgrown with grass, and these slowed them down considerably. The sky was almost entirely overcast, with barely a sunbeam finding its way through and only a dim light illuminating the broad plain.

Around midday, they approached the bare hill from the southwest, the ruins of a small, gray-stone castle at its summit, its best days long past. Everything was quiet, and the old walls, from down below, looked lifeless. The crumbling masonry appeared unmanned, and the partially collapsed keep carried no flag.

"We should look for the road that leads from the pass to the castle on the northeast side," Danuwil said. Although the castle gate was directly above them and clearly unguarded, the hillside was extremely steep.

It took them a quarter of an hour to find the road up, and they followed first toward the north then eastward around the castle walls, which were overgrown with moss and grass, until they were finally able to approach the crumbling gate from the southeast. In the dilapidated stonework, small bushes and patches of ivy inexorably spread their roots.

Slowly, cautiously, Nikko and Danuwil crossed the lowered drawbridge, one rusted chain of which had been severed and now hung slack from its opening above the arch. The gate itself looked like it had been destroyed by brute force and now stood wide open, but there was nothing welcoming about it.

"A grand reception," Danuwil quipped. "Still, better than orcs around the walls."

"Are you sure no orcs are here?" Nikko asked nervously.

"Almost certain," the nobleman answered. "If orcs held the castle, then it would be barricaded during the day, or they'd at least set a guard. Besides, the beasts are nomadic. I don't think they have any sense for the protection offered by a castle. But it is not unlikely that they overran the place. I would say they have since moved on."

"Do you think we'll find any signs here? Anything to say what happened?" Nikko was still afraid that a horde of wild orcs would attack them any minute.

"No," said Danuwil. "But we have to try regardless." Slowly, his longsword at the ready in his right hand, he stepped through the archway. With his left hand, he signaled to Nikko to stay behind, and only waved him inside when he was standing in the center of the bailey.

"Dried blood," the nobleman said. There was resignation in his voice. "Everywhere. Do you see it?"

"Yes," said Nikko with disgust. "But where are all the bodies? A lot of men must have been killed here, right?"

"What do you think orcs eat?" said Danuwil and he laughed cynically.

The courtyard was a picture of devastation. The castle looked like it had been a ruin for a very long time, but all around was splintered wood, shattered pitchers and torn cloth. And dried blood, everywhere.

"The expedition was here," said Danuwil as he inspected some of the wreckage more closely. "You can still see the insignia of Hocatin or the crest of the guild on some of the scraps of cloth."

Nikko had noticed that, too. But they found no more signs among the rubble, nor any usable items. The cursed orcs had destroyed everything and thoroughly plundered the place.

"We'd do better to get out of here," Nikko warned. "Searching the whole castle will take hours or even days. I'd like to be back over the river before sunset."

"I know what you mean," Danuwil answered gently. "But the castle is probably safer. I doubt very much that the orcs will return. Unless they catch our scent, that is."