

Niels Bernhardt

#### The Warlock of Hymal

# Book III: Journey to the South

Niels Bernhardt

Der Hexer von Hymal

## Book III: Journey to the South

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Three companions, three motivations, one goal: Zundaj, capital of the realm. But things already start to go wrong in Terys. But the journey onward turns into a nightmare, with Nikko's companions revealing unexpected sides.

The capital only reluctantly welcomes their arrival. But won't the Order, at least, be well disposed toward Nikko? Or is a very bad surprise waiting for him?



#### Chapter 1: The Long River

he unstable raft had been on the river for several days, meandering southward to the ocean at Terys, and Nikko was already looking forward to their arrival. Heavily wooded forests came down to the water's edge on both sides, preventing anyone on the river from seeing very far into the dominions of the grand duchy of Thordám. There was no sign of civilization at all, and the slow downriver passage had become tedious.

In recent days, Nikko had spoken little with either Fydal or Danuwil. He was still in shock at the brutality displayed by the young prince when he so mercilessly turned the traitors over to the gallows at the Iron Citadel. But exactly why he was so upset was not very clear to the young sorcerer. The treacherous villains had done nothing to deserve leniency, after all, but that didn't stop Nikko from being disappointed, in some obscure way, with the landgrave's son, who otherwise seemed so cheerful and straightforward. Before that day, he had never shown any sign of such cold-blooded brutality. Fydal apparently sensed Nikko's unease, and seemed to be doing his best to avoid him, perhaps out of shame, or was it merely disapproval? Was Fydal angry at Nikko because he was silently rebuking the prince for the death of the renegades? In contrast to Nikko, Danuwil did his best to keep up their masquerade. The two younger men were officially traveling as his attendants, and the pompous nobleman seemed to be making the most of his role as the leader of their little troupe. He mixed little with his "varlets," especially when the boatmen were close by-and if he did, it was to reprimand them harshly, to which the prince responded with a dark look and a shake of his head. But Fydal, too, continued to play his role ... at least for now, as Nikko sometimes feared.

So the young sorcerer had a lot of time to think as the monotonous forests lining the riverbanks drifted past day after day, almost hypnotically. And he had a lot to think about. It could not have been more than two months since he had left his home village with Thorodos. Everything had started with the ominous letter that the trader Fodaj had brought with him from Hocatin. All the adventure, all the horror, all the misery. Still, Nikko regretted none of it. When it came down to it, he'd been yearning for a long time for some way to escape the farm in the mountains that he hated so much.

And in those two months, the goatherd from the mountains had become the traveling companion of an honest-to-goodness prince, and perhaps even of the next Landgrave of Hocatin. Nikko had saved the life of the old landgrave's son, and had been his loyal follower ever since. And as it turned out, Nikko also had an unsuspected talent for sorcery. It was a talent he was constantly reminded of by the magic wand he carried with him, whenever he took it out and looked at it, and felt again his gratitude for how it had saved him on several occasions from the terrible orcs of Hymal. Now, he could only wonder where the path of sorcery might still lead.

He had come far in these few weeks, he realized, not without satisfaction. He had longed so much to put his desolate village life behind him once and for all. But that didn't stop him now from missing the family that had only ever annoyed him when he lived with them. He even missed the spiteful words of his foul-tempered brother Gimu a little, although it was only now, on this river so far from his home, that he started to feel the loss. But he took some small and distant consolation in the thought that perhaps a few drops of the cloudy water that he was dabbling at with his fingers had originated in the mountains of his home and found their way down here, flowing down the stream and out of the valley, into Hocatin's large lake and out again before tumbling over the majestic cascades below the Iron Citadel.

A sudden thumping and creaking jerked Nikko roughly out of his thoughts! This could not be good. A few crates of their cargo splashed into the river where the raft had just broken in two in the middle, both halves of the vessel suddenly bucking frighteningly. Nikko was momentarily paralyzed with fear and did his desperate best to hold on. He couldn't swim!

"Shit!" he heard one of the raftmen curse loudly. "Hold tight!"

A moment later, the raft had calmed itself again, and several tree trunks floating free between the two halves made it clear that the ropes holding them together had given way. Nikko, still pale with shock, was on the front half with one of the raftmen, with the rest of the group just behind them on the other half.

"Oh, wonderful," moaned the raftman with Nikko as he poled their half of the raft toward the closest shore, where he lashed it tightly to a tree. The men on the back half of the raft did the same.

"What sort of shoddy vessel have you got us on here!?" complained Danuwil loudly. "Are you out of your minds?" The raftmen said nothing, but the looks on their faces shut the nobleman up again quickly enough. They were already fed up with their blue-blooded passenger in any case. Although they were just commoners, they were also members of a powerful guild, and had little to fear from low-ranking nobles like Danuwil. That, at least, was how Fydal had explained it to Nikko during one of their few short conversations.

"It will take a while before we're ready to leave again," one of the raftmen said.

"And we have to fish the blasted crates out of the river," another added.

"It's just a few crates. Leave them in the water," Danuwil protested. He was clearly not very enthusiastic about the delay.

"Oh, that's a good idea," laughed one of the crew. "And you'll cover our lost wages?"

"Certainly not," the nobleman said. "Come, varlets, let's make ourselves at home on dry land."

But the riverbank offered little opportunity to make themselves at home. Knotted roots and old tree stumps jutted from the muddy ground, and just getting ashore became an adventure.

"Damned filth!" Danuwil caviled, almost knee-deep in the mire. "Let's find somewhere further from the bank."

It took them a little while, but the three were soon able to find a clearing that was comfortable enough, though it was some minutes away from the river. They lit a crackling campfire on the dry ground there, hoping to get their boots dry while the raftmen were busy repairing their vessel and recovering the crates of ore.

Nikko could tell from Fydal's look that he was enjoying playing the part of Danuwil's varlet less and less. Danuwil, for his part, was still reveling in his role. Not content with ordering Nikko and Fydal to set up their little camp, the nobleman even ordered them back to the raft to make themselves useful there. Luckily, however, the raftmen had turned down their offer to help ... luckily, because the prince was very close to losing his composure.

Now, Danuwil inspected his longsword in the gleam of the fire. "The blade needs oiling," he said casually. He pushed the weapon back into its sheath and tossed it toward his "varlets," who were sitting close together. The prince was faster than Nikko and caught the sword in the air, no doubt a reflex. To Nikko's surprise, however, Fydal stood up, and without another word, strode off toward the raft where the oil was stowed in their baggage. *This can't go on much longer*, Nikko thought. Couldn't the nobleman see that he was overstepping his mark?

It was quite a long time before Fydal reappeared. In a voice ready for confrontation, he said, "The weapons have to be oiled!" Then he threw the baffled nobleman two sheathed longswords at the same time. Danuwil was only able to catch one of them, and the other hit his left hand painfully. You get what you earn, thought Nikko with a smile.

Fydal was once again wearing his magnificent uniform. But how did he don his armor by himself? Nikko wondered. Or had the raftmen helped him? Either way, their little ruse was over. Fydal was once again Major Fydal, Prince of Hocatin.

"Of course, your Highness," Danuwil said instantly and with a pained smile. He seemed finally to have got the message.

The young prince was like a new man now that he could once again be himself. He'd spent the previous days doing his best to avoid the young sorcerer, but now Nikko could hardly escape his attentions. It seemed that the prince was neither angry with his young friend, nor sorry for the deaths of the traitors. No, it had merely been extremely embarrassing for him to play the role of Danuwil's varlet.

"It is so good to get back in the right clothes," Fydal said with relief, and he grinned broadly at Nikko. But when it came to Danuwil, Fydal seemed intent on punishing the nobleman with disdain, and Danuwil bore the prince's retribution meekly and with downcast eyes.

"The men will be busy with the raft until tomorrow," the prince declared. "So now that our charade is over, we've finally got some time to talk."

"How much longer are we going to be on the river?" Nikko asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the embarrassing situation with Danuwil.

"We're still about a week from Terys," Fydal said. "From there it's maybe four more to Zundaj."

"On horseback we'd make it in two," Danuwil chimed in. He seemed somewhat more confident than he had just a few minutes earlier, and he was certainly aware that his experience on the roads of the kingdom would be useful to the young prince on their journey. No doubt Fydal would soon have forgiven him for his humiliations.

For Nikko, the thought of spending two weeks on a horse was far from a pleasant prospect. No, even the boring, rickety raft would be better than that. "We might even be able to join forces with a caravan," Danuwil went on. "It might mean traveling a little slower, but it would definitely be the safest way to travel."

"Safest? Why?" Nikko suddenly felt uneasy. "Is it going to be dangerous?"

"That would interest me, too," Fydal added. "I was under the impression that the grand duke maintained peace and order in his lands."

Danuwil laughed. "Compared to the other parts of the realm, Thordám is most certainly more secure. But one should always be ready for highwaymen and bands of orcs on the major trade routes. Nothing we can't handle, I imagine, but the journey would still be safest as part of a caravan."

"But I have no interest in trudging along with a caravan," Fydal complained. "If protection is truly needed, then I'll hire a few mercenaries in Terys. But the grand duke may even grant us an escort."

"So you'll be wanting to request an audience at the court in Terys?"

"Request?"

"Forgive me, Highness," said Danuwil backpedaling uncertainly. "The grand duke will always receive the son of a landgrave, of course."

Fydal accepted Danuwil's correction with a condescending smile and too much satisfaction for Nikko's liking; he was slowly getting annoyed at their little game.

"Then why the whole masquerade?" he finally asked. He had never understood the need for the hide-and-seek approach. "Well," Fydal began slowly, "if I travel under the colors of Hocatin, I'm supposed to ... let's say, 'request' safe passage from the grand duke. Of course, that also depends on whether or not I even have permission to enter the grand duchy as the representative of the landgraviate. That's really just a formality, in fact, but it could be seen as disrespectful—or even presumptuous—if the representative of a ruling house enters the lands of another ruler without an invitation. And if he's traveling with troops, it would even be assumed that his intentions were aggressive."

"Then won't you be in trouble with the grand duke?" asked Nikko, worried.

"Hard to say," the prince said awkwardly. "I don't know his royal highness personally, so I can't really judge how he'll react. But the situation we're in will probably excuse the breach of etiquette."

"Then wouldn't it be even stranger if you entered his lands as a fake varlet?" the young sorcerer asked, shaking his head.

"You're very likely right," Fydal agreed. "I suppose I should really have put more thought into requesting an audience in Terys ... it will also be seen as presumptuous if we go wandering through foreign lands without doing the local ruler the courtesy of appearing at his court." The prince thought for a moment, then said, "I admit I hadn't really thought the whole thing through. But it seemed important to get out of the Iron Citadel without too much fuss, considering how seriously we'd been betrayed."

"That's true," said Danuwil, backing Fydal up, but probably also because the entire masquerade had been his idea from the start. "We could not be certain that we had really caught all the traitors. At least