

The Last King of Arthedain

By Emma DeLoughory
Grade 10, International School of Beaverton

"There is a ship on the horizon," the man of the Lossoth said, gazing out across the blinding snow.

"So there is," the man said. He was tired, pale, and gaunt with hunger and despair.

"Is this the one you have waited for?"

"It bears the sign of Cirdan the Shipwright," the man said. "I wait for Earnil."

The Lossoth tsked. "The Shipwright makes fine boats for elves of the south, But for men of the north? It will be broken like twigs in an avalanche."

"I must take it," the man said. "I have nothing left."

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"Wainriders," Arvedui said.

"Yes, sire," the shaking soldier of Gondor replied.

"They fear *wainriders*."

"They slew King Ondoher and his sons, sire."

"And Pelendur the steward summarily refused me the throne," Arvedui said bitterly. "Despite that I am of the line of Elendil, and my wife was Ondoher's daughter."

"That is the truth, sire."

"We live in constant fear of Angmar! The Witch-King is plotting some new devilry daily, and *you* fear wainriders!"

"They cause great trouble, sire."

"Get out of my sight," Arvedui hissed. "Get out! Run back to Gondor and tell Earnil that if he can't send troops with any greater speed, Arthedain will fall like Cardolan and Rhudaur! And then the great realm of Arnor will be nothing but dust ruled by the wraith king himself!"

The soldier hurried away as another rushed in. This one was clad in the armor of Arthedain, battered and bloody though it was.

"What news?" Arvedui asked. Nothing good, he thought. It is never good news these days.

"They come, my king!" the soldier gasped. "The Witch-King's army has arrived!"

"What? Now?"

"Yes! Even now they are breaking through the gates!"

"Impossible! How did they catch us unaware?"

"Sorcery, my king! A great mist sprang up and covered their army! The Witch-King and the nazgul are killing our men by the dozens! You must flee!"

"Firiel!" Arvedui cried, leaping off his throne and running to his wife's chambers. She was sitting there, relaxed as could be, their newborn son on her lap.

"What is it?" she asked, eyes widening in horror at the look on Arvedui's face.

"We must leave! Take Aranarth and get out of here! The Witch-King has arrived!"

"What? So soon! But we thought we had until spring!"

"No snow deters the wraith king!" Arvedui cried. "Fornost had fallen, run for your life!"

"And of you?" Firiel asked, wrapping the infant Aranarth in a blanket.

"I shall go to the Bay of Forochel and there await Earnil's army."

"But if Gondor's army does not come? What then?"

"We shall all perish," Arvedui said grimly. "But take heart. Earnil will come."

“What of the palantiri?” Firiel asked. “They are heirlooms of the Elder Days.”

“I shall take them with me,” Arvedui said. “They are precious, but you and Aranarth are more precious by far.”

“I will find you there, by the Bay of Forochel,” Firiel promised. There was shouting outside the palace now. The clash of arms could be heard.

“I will see you there,” Arvedui said. “Farewell, my queen. In you and our son live the last hope for fallen Arnor.”

Taking the palatiri of Annuminas and Amon Sul, or Weathertop as it was now called, Arvedui fled the palace with what remained of his guard, hoping to draw the enemy’s attention towards himself rather than his queen.

Cackling orcs followed. Grim, silent nazgul urged their horses after the king. Arrows flew, striking down the brave men of Arthedain.

Reaching a secret exit out of Fornost, which was rapidly burning to the ground, Arvedui counted the soldiers he had left. Only twelve. Such a small number. What had he started out with? Thirty, maybe? So few left now.

“Follow me!” Arvedui shouted, running into the woods outside Fornost. He didn’t stop, nor did he look back until they were leagues away.

“Alas for Arthedain,” a soldier said, looking on the smoking ruins of the great capital.

“Alas for *Arnor*,” Arvedui said. “Now all three kingdoms have fallen. The Witch-King has triumphed.”

“Not so long as *you* live, my king,” a soldier said.

“Is that a nazgul?” one man asked. A black shape was riding up the hill towards.

“The Witch-King himself!” another yelled.

“Run!” Arvedui ordered.

The nazgul let out a demonic shriek and drew its sword. The horse could not have been a mere horse. It was the wind in the guise of a horse. Before the men knew it, the nazgul was among them, cutting them down left and right.

“You cannot fight it!” Arvedui shouted. “Run for your lives! Into the forest! It cannot follow you there!”

But fear and madness had consumed the soldier. When Arvedui reached the forest he found he was left with only one soldier, an old veteran of many long wars.

“There is an abandoned dward-hold near here, sire,” he said. “We can wait out the attack there.”

“Lead the way,” Arvedui said.

All night long, the orcs and nazgul wandered the lands of the Arthedain. In the distance, a nazgul would shriek, and closer, far closer, orcs would snuffle and grumble. It was a night of terror for Arvedui. Had Firiel escaped? Was she alive? And Aranarth? What of him? Did Arvedui’s son live?

There was no dawn the next day. Gray clouds covered the land, blotting out any warmth or light.

“Where are you going, sire?” the soldier asked.

“The Bay of Forechel,” Arvedui said. “Earnil will come there. He *must*.”

“I do not know the way, sire.”

“I do.”

On the fifth day of their journey, Arvedui was ambushed by a small band of orcs. There, the last soldier of Arthedain lost his life in defense of his king. And so Arvedui had come to the Lossoth of Forochel alone, hungry, and with nothing but the two palantire and the ring of Barahir. Heirlooms of a fallen house.

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"You trust elves?" the Lossoth asked.

"Yes," Arvedui said. "I trust them."

"With your life?"

"If I must."

The Lossoth shrugged. "That ship will not hold in the ice."

"What does it matter? There is nothing left. Arnor crumbled when it was divided into three kingdoms. Now with the fall of Arthedain it has been destroyed. It shall never rise again. The line of Isildur will perish."

"This Firiël," the Lossoth said. "If she comes looking for you, what shall I do?"

"Give her this," Arvedui said, taking off the ring of Barahir. Two serpents with emerald eyes, one devouring the other, and one crowned with golden flowers. "It is an heirloom of my house. One of five from elves to men. Perhaps this ship is another."

"Or it may be a curse."

"Then I shall die," Arvedui said. "I am as Malbeth the Seer prophesied; the last king of Arthedain."

"And of the Heir of Isildur, who shall summon the Dead of whom he also prophesied?" the Lossoth asked.

"I am not he," Arvedui said. He walked towards the ship, which had docked at the pier.

The Lossoth stood along, watching as the ship slowly drifted towards the entrance of the bay, towards the great sea beyond. In the middle of the bay it struck an ice floe. The thin elfin wood shattered against the mighty ice. The ship went down within minutes. There were no cries for help. No screams of sailors. It had been magic, the Lossoth realized. A boat guided by magic. No one had been on it save Arvedui. And he was the only one who perished.

There was nothing he could do. As the mast of the ship sunk beneath the ice, any hope of rescuing Arvedui vanished. The Lossoth could not have reached the middle of the Bay in time in his small kayak. He would have been dashed to pieces against the ice floes that had claimed Arvedui.

Months later, as the Lossoth was skinning a walrus, a woman so pale and thin as to be a wraith wandered across the snow, staggering slightly, and with a child in her arms.

Standing up to help her, the Lossoth instead caught the woman as she fell, fainting from exhaustion.

"Arvedui?" she whispered when she awoke.

"No," the Lossoth said.

"Where is he?"

"The elves went a ship. It hit an ice floe and he drowned."

The woman closed her eyes and wept. Her child looked around, eyes wide.

"Are you Firiël?" the Lossoth asked.

"Yes," the woman whispered.

How far the Dunedain of Arnor have fallen, the Lossoth thought as he looked on the wasted wraith of a woman. "He left this for you," the Lossoth said, handing her the ring of Barahir.

"Arvedui, lost," Firiël whispered. "And the palantiri lost, too."

"The line of Isildur has been broken," the Lossoth said. "It seems Malbeth was wrong. There shall never be an Heir of Isildur."

"No," Firiël said, looking at her son. "The Seer may yet be proven right. For my son, Aranrath, is Arvedui's son, too. He shall be the first Chieftain of the Dunedain, what little of our people are left. Mayhap one day he or one of his descendants shall walk the Paths of the Dead and fulfill the prophecy. Mayhap he shall even sit on the throne of Arnor renewed." With that, she closed her eyes and died.

"This is a sad day for the Dunedain," the Lossoth said. "These lands are barren wasteland. I cannot support a child. Yet, shall I leave him to die? No. For Malbeth was one of my people; a Lossoth

like myself. And he was a great seer. What he said must come true. Therefore, I shall raise this son of Arvedui, last king of Arthedain." The Lossoth smiled. "May his descendents sit upon the throne of Arnor renewed."