



**WARRIORS**  
**Volume Six**

# **LORD Soth**

**Edo van Belkom**



Dear Astinus,

I know it has been your intention for many years to pen a volume chronicling the spectacular rise and fall of Lord Loren Soth of Dargaard Keep. Understandably, work on the literally thousands upon thousands of other volumes in your wondrous library has always kept you from this important task.

That is why I accepted this assignment with both eagerness and trepidation. While I was anxious to show you that your confidence in my abilities was well-founded, I was also unsure about those same abilities and concerned that they might not be up to the challenge of recording a life story so tangled and mysterious as that of Lord Soth's.

The history of the Lord of Dargaard Keep is a fascinating one, full of as much honor, devotion to duty, love, knightly law and discipline, as cruelty, jealousy, greed, falsehood, unbridled lust, infidelity and murder.

Putting it to paper was not an easy task.

For despite how well his exploits are known to the people of Krynn, the details of each are as varied as the number of people who are familiar enough to speak of them.

Before this volume was completed, the life story of Lord Soth—also known to many by such names as Knight of the Black Rose, the Death Knight, or the Death Lord—had been a mixture of legend, fable, myth, spoken histories and long-lost tales.

For example, there are many variations of the story concerning the death of Soth's first wife, Lady Korinne Gladria of Palanthas. (Even in this, something as simple as a name, there have been errors as the woman has sometimes been incorrectly referred to as Lady Gladria of Korinne.) Lady Korinne wed Soth in a magnificent ceremony on the grounds outside Dargaard Keep. But while some histories have reported that she died during childbirth, or merely under "mysterious circumstances," they are all only partly true.

But you, Astinus of Palanthas, Master Historian of Krynn, did not become a master historian by chronicling half-truths and lies, and neither shall I. The reputation and respect you have

*earned in every corner of Krynn has been won by your tireless pursuit of truth in all matters pertaining to its history. It has been my goal to produce a history worthy of that same respect.*

*Whether I have achieved that goal or not, only you are qualified to judge. On my own behalf, I will say only this. While this is as well a researched history of Lord Soth's life as I could pen, I cannot say in all honesty that it is the one true version. For while I worked diligently to confirm each fact found in the various written records scattered throughout Solamnia and across the four corners of Krynn, far too many aspects of the story could only be verified verbally, and even then by—how shall I say?—less than reputable sources.*

*Speaking in more general terms, I found Soth's tale to be an utterly shocking one. Yet, as startling as it is, I suspect that there were even more disturbing elements that, even with the utmost diligence, I was unable to unearth. With much regret, I fear that those parts of Soth's history might be lost to us forever.*

*Nevertheless, I have combined all of the reliable facts concerning Lord Soth's sordid life and gathered them together in a single volume for the very first time. The result is as true a history of the knight's life as is within my ability to produce.*

*I submit it for your approval.*

*Verril Esteros, Second Aesthetic  
Great Library of Astinus of Palanthas  
401 A.C.*



## Prologue

Three moons might well have been in the sky, but only two dared show their faces. Lunitari glowed a dark shade of red while Solinari shone a bright white, leaving the dark moon Nuitari to be hidden by the night.

Lunitari and Solinari hung over the dark rippling waters of the northern sea like a pair of watchful eyes, shining crimson and white light down onto the sleeping port city of Kalaman, and casting spiderlike shadows across its dim, quiet streets.

A dark figure moved swiftly through the shadows. His movements were strong and sure, like those of a nobleman, but his dress was an ill-fitting patchwork of worn and tattered garments, suggesting the man was no more noble than a petty thief or common rogue.

Whatever the man's class, he moved quietly from shadow to shadow, avoiding the light as much as he shunned the open spaces between the scattered homes and shops.

When he reached the open mouth of a darkened alley, he stepped into its blackness and paused for a moment to

catch his breath. As he stood there, he felt for the weapons hidden beneath his cloak, making sure everything was in place. He'd have only one chance to complete his task and he knew failure would not be tolerated.

After he had rested and his breathing had slowed, he ventured deeper into the alley's uncertain darkness.

After a short walk, he came upon the open back door of a popular tavern—The Rose and Thistle. From inside, the faint sound of laughter and song echoed into the alley while flickering firelight blazed through the half-open doorway like rays from the midday sun.

The dark figure stopped and strained to hear the people singing merrily inside, all the while making sure to keep his distance from the warm light emanating from within.

Next to the door, on the side closest to him, one of the tavern's more inebriated patrons—a dwarf—was propped up against the back wall of the establishment, no doubt sleeping off the effects of an over-indulgence of its finest ale. The dwarf was sleeping so peacefully it seemed a shame to wake him, but there was no time for such polite considerations.

Not tonight.

So without further hesitation the shadowy figure reared back and gave the dwarf a hard kick in the upper thigh.

"Ow!" exclaimed the dwarf, then muttered sleepily, "I assure you sir, I had no idea she was the daughter of a—"

So the dwarf was a scoundrel as well as a drunkard! He gave the dwarf another hard kick, this time causing the dwarf's ale-soaked eyes to flutter open. After taking a moment to wipe the last remnants of sleep from his eyes, the dwarf looked up at the dark, hooded figure standing over him. . . . And gasped in fear. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm looking for a young man, a *bard*"—he said the word as if it were a bad thing—"by the name of Argol Birdsong. Is it true that he performs in this tavern on occasion?"

"Now," the dwarf said casually, foolishly thinking he held a position of power over the dark figure standing before him. "Who wants to know?"

The hooded man stepped on the dwarf's foot then, pressing down hard with the heel of his boot. "I'm not interested in, nor do I have the time for dwarven games. Is he here or not?" He turned his boot to emphasize the point.

"Ow!" the dwarf cried, then quickly nodded. "Y-yes, he's here, he's here," he said. "In fact, that's him singing now."

The dark man held his breath for a moment and listened. He could just make out the sound of some ballad coming from inside the tavern. Satisfied, he lifted his boot from the dwarf's foot and fished inside his pouch for some coins.

"Go inside and tell Argol Birdsong there's an old friend waiting for him out in the alley." He dropped a few coins onto the dwarf's lap. "Then remain inside until you've drunk your fill . . . and then some."

The dwarf immediately stopped rubbing his aching foot and picked up the scattered coins. "Yes sir!" he said, jumping to his feet and limping back inside the tavern.

When the dwarf was gone, the dark figure looked up and down the alley then retreated into the safety of the shadows. There, he waited for the singing inside to come to an end. When the tavern was filled with the soft mumble of drunken voices carrying on in contented conversation, he tensed his body and listened for the sound of approaching footsteps.

When the sound came moments later, he drew back his cloak and took hold of the heavy dwarven warhammer that had been hanging from a loop on his belt.

"Hello?" called Argol Birdsong in a melodic voice. "Is someone here?" The bard paused a moment, then smiled broadly. "Aristal, my love? Are you here waiting for me?"

The man in the shadows took a moment to examine the features of the bard. Yes, the singer certainly bore the family resemblance that he had been told to look for. He stepped forward, partway into the light, but his face remained obscured by the folds of his hood.

"Who are you?" asked the bard, his voice no longer so birdlike and perhaps just a little bit frightened.

The stranger ignored the question and asked one of his

own. "Are you Argol Birdsong?"

"Yes, but—"

The man's next word died in his throat as the warhammer suddenly appeared, glinting at the top of its arc for a brief moment before slamming down onto the bard's head.

Once . . .

Twice . . .

Three times . . .

The bard's body slumped forward, then crumpled lifelessly, thudding heavily onto the alley floor.

And then all that could be heard was the rustle of a cloak and the fading click of boots as they hurried out of the alley. Into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The assassin ran quickly through the streets of Kalamán, staying away from the main roads and always remaining close to the protective cover of shadows. After running for several blocks, he slowed his pace and added a slight stumble to his gait to suggest that he'd spent most of the night sampling ale and wine of dubious merit.

When he reached the livery stable housing his horse, he tipped the stableman handsomely and was quickly on his way, riding fast enough to appear as if he were headed somewhere, but not so fast as to appear as if he were running away from something.

Outside of the city's limits, he hastened his horse's pace to a trot and then to a full gallop. He continued riding hard and fast for several minutes until he came upon a sharp bend in the Vingaard River.

The water was as black as the darkest night, even in the middle of the day. It was also deep as a well, as much as a hundred feet or more at its center.

It was the perfect place to make something vanish.

Remaining on his horse, the assassin moved to the edges of the southern river bank and opened his cloak. He

unfastened the blood-stained warhammer from his belt and swung it wildly over his head by the leather thong tied to the end of its handle. After several quick rotations, he let go of the thong, flinging the hammer out over the water. The weapon whistled slightly as it twirled and sliced through the air, then made a faint splash as it broke the water's surface midway between the two banks.

The hammer remained on top of the water for a moment, reflecting a sliver of moonlight as the hammer-head turned for the bottom, and then it was gone.

Without a second glance, he turned from the river, kicked at his horse's ribs and was soon riding hard once more, heading west.

One more stop. One more task, and this night would be over.

As the moons slowly arced overhead, he came upon a small hamlet on the western outskirts of Kalamian called Villand. When he began to recognize the outlines of individual homes and cottages, he dismounted from his now heaving horse and gave it a hard slap on its haunches. The startled horse reared back and leaped forward. After two frantic strides it slowed to a more comfortable pace that would see it return to its home in a day or two.

Now alone in the village, the assassin again moved stealthily through winding streets, clinging to the cover afforded by the rough-hewn buildings and scattered trees. When he was near what felt like the center of the village he took a map from his inside cloak pocket and unfurled it beneath Solinari's generous moonlight.

Several of the bigger homes and shops were detailed on the map and after recognizing two of them, he was better able to orient himself and learn of his position within the village. If he wasn't mistaken, his destination was just four houses down the street on the left.

He clenched the map in his left hand and quietly counted off the houses as he passed.

When he arrived at the small unassuming cottage, he

checked the front door for a sign. It was there. A double loop connected at its center.

He checked the sign with the one scribbled next to the note on the map. It was the same double loop. The sign of Mishakal—a benevolent goddess known as the Healing Hand—had brought him here to this home. Except, unlike Mishakal, the assassin wasn't here to heal.

With the careful and deft hand of a thief, the assassin picked the lock on the door and eased it open, praying that the owner of the house had been particular about keeping his hinges well oiled. Fortunately he had been, and the door swung quietly open and closed. In seconds he was inside, moving about the house in utter silence.

The first room he checked was just off the kitchen. As promised by the notes written on the map in his hand, it was empty. He moved through the larger room in the center of the house and came upon another smaller room. This had to be the bedroom he was looking for.

It was separated from the adjoining room by a simple white sheet hung in the doorway. With a gentle hand, the assassin pulled the sheet aside and stepped into the room.

The window set in the outside wall was bare and moonlight bathed the room with a soft, incandescent glow, as if the light of Mishakal herself were shining down on the room's sole occupant.

He moved closer to the bed for a better look.

There was a half-elven female lying there. She was attractive for a half-elf. In fact, she was attractive by any standard of measure.

As with the bard, there could be no mistaking this woman's identity. She was indeed the one he sought. Her name was Alsin Felgaard, and she was a milkmaid working on one of the many farms that surrounded Villand.

He moved still closer, then recoiled slightly. Even though he knew what to expect, the features of the half-elf's face were strikingly similar to those of Argol Birdsong. In fact, if the creature lying on the bed hadn't been half-elven, he

would have sworn that they were full brother and sister.

The assassin pondered that thought for a moment, then did his best to dismiss it from his mind. His task was not to think, only to do as he'd been told. If he thought about it for too long, his loyalty might waver, and he couldn't afford to have that happen.

If it ever did, he'd be a dead man.

After taking a deep breath to calm himself, he drew back his cloak once more. This time he removed the battle-axe from where it hung on his belt and gripped it firmly in both of his gloved hands.

Slowly, he raised the axe over his head. . . .

And hesitated.

The half-elf was far too young and beautiful a flower to be cut down so early in what would be a long, long life.

He inhaled a ragged breath, his shaking hands causing the battle-axe to tremble. He let a shiver run its course, then closed his eyes and let out a sigh. As he slowly reopened them, he shook his head.

He'd foolishly allowed himself to think again.

He took another breath, this time making sure his mind and body were hardened by resolve to complete his mission, a resolve stronger and colder than any steel could ever be.

This wouldn't be the first time he'd killed, he told himself. Nor would it be the last.

He raised the battle-axe over his head again, and quickly brought it down with a mighty stroke, cutting through the body of the sleeping maiden and splintering the hard wooden boards of the bed she lay upon.

Her eyes opened in horror, but no sound escaped her lips.

If she'd been lucky, she hadn't suffered.

The assassin turned from the ruined and bloodied corpse, and left the house as quietly as he'd entered.

When he stepped outside, the sweat soaking his body cooled like ice upon his skin.

It chilled him.

To the bone.

He silently slipped from shadow to shadow to a spot just outside the village where there was a fresh horse tethered to a tree waiting for him. He mounted it easily and in seconds both horse and rider were off, riding west across the plain toward Dargaard Keep.

He stopped only once during his ride.

When he came upon a small creek, one of the dozens of tributaries feeding the Vingaard River, he brought his horse to a stop at the water's edge. Unlike the waters of the Vingaard River itself, the water here was shallow and slow moving. However, the creek's bottom was quite muddy and the water murky, making it another desirable spot in which to rid himself of the murder weapon.

As he did earlier that night with the warhammer, he tossed the battle-axe into the creek. After it smacked the surface it was almost immediately gone from view.

And now, for the first time that night, he let out a long, deep sigh of something resembling relief.

The deeds had been done.

He remounted and allowed his horse to walk slowly for several minutes as both horse and rider tried to catch their breath. Then, at the call of its rider, the horse suddenly charged forward in a gallop.

After several hours, as the first rays of dawning sunlight just began to creep over the horizon, he came upon a small and simple cottage at the northernmost foot of the Dargaard Mountains. There was light inside the cottage and, judging from the smoke rising out of the chimney, a roaring fire in its hearth.

He pulled back on the reins and the horse gratefully slowed to a walk. He guided the horse into the stable, covered it with a blanket, provided it with small amounts of food and water, and then headed for the cottage.

He knocked three times and waited for someone to answer the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two men sat by the fire in the small wooden cottage, one rocking in his chair, the other still and silent, as if in deep meditation. The cottage was small, perhaps even cramped, but because they were using it for just this one clandestine meeting, it was more than adequate for their purpose.

Although the flickering light of the fire was dim, the physical similarities between the two were obvious. Both were big men, tall and heavy-boned, suggesting they were formidable fighters. Their facial features were almost identical, and judging from the square jaw, the prominent brow and high cheekbones, the only real distinction between the two was the passage of time.

The older man had salt and pepper hair—somewhat thinned up top and around the edges—and a full beard which had been blanched white by years of worry. By contrast the younger man's hair was a thick dark shock hanging down over his shoulders in curls, and his pitch black mustache was stylishly long and tapered. He appeared as yet untouched by life's more weighty burdens.

Beside their ages, the only other difference between the two men could be found in their eyes. The elder's eyes seemed old and tired, the color of dead embers the morning after a fire. In comparison, the younger man's steel-gray eyes were sharp and piercing despite their being set deeply into the dark sockets under his brow. And even though his eyes were slightly obscured in shadow, they still had the appearance of being mysteriously alight from within—some might even say, blazing.

Suddenly the younger of the two sat upright in his chair. As he listened carefully to the sounds of the night outside, he could just make out the hoofbeats of an approaching horse.

Slowly the elder rose from his rocker, moving to the hearth to stoke the fire.

In minutes there came three sharp knocks on the door.

The younger man hurried to the door and opened it. A

man dressed in the guise of a thief stood in the doorway, his body leaning against the jamb for support.

"Well?"

"It is done."

Hearing the words, the younger of the two men, a Knight of the Sword named Loren Soth, breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Well done, Caradoc. You have served me well. Please, come inside now and rest for a while."

The older man, Knight Soth's father, Aynkell Soth, busied himself with the fire to make it appear as if he were unconcerned about the other's arrival.

Caradoc stepped into the cottage and began disrobing, tossing his cloak upon the hearth. It hissed and sizzled as his sweat evaporated from the cloth, then all at once it burst into flames. His shirt and britches followed, the blood of his victims burning in colorful shades of orange and blue.

Without another word, Caradoc began dressing himself in his more comfortable—and familiar—knightly garb. In addition to being a Knight of the Crown, Caradoc was also the younger Soth's steward, or seneschal, serving his master with unwavering loyalty.

Knight Soth returned to his seat and watched his most loyal steward finish getting dressed.

"Any problems?" he asked. "Did anyone see you?"

"There was a drunkard behind the Rose and Thistle, but I never revealed my face to him."

Soth nodded. "And the weapons?"

"A warhammer and a battle-axe, making the deeds appear to be the work of renegade dwarves." A pause. "Both weapons are currently resting beneath some very cold and very dark waters."

"Excellent," Knight Soth said. "You've done well."

Aynkell Soth returned to his rocker and looked up at his son for the first time in hours. "Yes," he said in a voice that was surprisingly devoid of emotion. "Now when you take over rule of Knightlund, you can be certain that no other heir will come forward to lay claim to it."

Knight Soth looked at his father for several seconds before speaking to him in a voice that was dripping with contempt. "It seems to me that as a bard and a milkmaid, neither of the two products of your affairs would have been of the type inclined to claim it."

"Perhaps not," said Aynkell Soth. "But if they had known of their lineage, known of their birthright, then perhaps . . ."

"It's of little consequence now," Caradoc said flatly. "They are both dead."

"Yes," said Aynkell, nodding. "Thank you."

"For what?" asked Caradoc, doing nothing to stop his voice from rising in anger. He was loyal to Knight Soth, not to the knight's father, who was nothing more than a second-rate clerk and first-rate philanderer. "For the murder of your own flesh and blood, the half-kin of my master?"

If the elder Soth was surprised by the young man's impertinence, he did not show it. "Why? For the removal of the black marks upon my soul," Aynkell answered, his voice still strong, still confident.

"The black marks might have been removed from your soul," said Knight Soth, "but they are not gone. They have merely been transferred. The black marks that were once upon your soul, are now upon mine. The full weight of my father's sins are now mine alone to bear. What a lovely gift to receive scant months before my wedding day."

Soth knew that the evil deeds were necessary to assure his ascension to the lordship of Dargaard Keep—and he would let nothing interfere with that—but he resented the fact that his father had made such murders necessary.

The sarcasm in young Soth's words was too much for the elder Soth to bear. He turned away from his son in order to avoid having to look him in the face.

"You might not have been a Knight of Solamnia," said Knight Soth. "But you were familiar enough with the Oath and the Measure to have at least tried to live by its code."

"I was never suited to become a knight, nor to live like one," Aynkell said, his voice sad and apologetic. His face

appeared to have aged over the last few minutes with the realization that his son would likely never forgive him his past indiscretions.

"A poor excuse."

"Perhaps, but it is the only one I have."

Soth shook his head and sighed. "You may attend the wedding and take your place of honor upon the high table. But it is only at Korinne's request that you will be there."

Aynkell nodded.

"I want as little to do with you as possible."

Aynkell stood motionless and impassive.

"Come, Caradoc," said Knight Soth. "Light is dawning and we must return to the keep before we become conspicuous by our absence."

"I'll ready the horses," said Caradoc, now fully dressed and looking every inch a Knight of the Crown. He left the cottage, giving Soth the chance to spend a final few minutes alone with his father.

Knight Soth turned to face the older man.

"Good-bye, father," he said, knowing that the words were much more than just a casual farewell.

The elder Soth looked at his son for a long time and the disgrace he felt slowly disappeared. A cynical, almost mocking, smile appeared on his face.

"Don't be so quick to condemn me, my son," Aynkell said. "You are of my flesh and of my blood. You always will be. There's too much of me in you for you to be so critical of my life."

For a moment Knight Soth was speechless.

In the intervening silence, Aynkell began to laugh.

The knight's face darkened in a scowl as he turned abruptly away from his father and stormed out of the cottage.

As he joined Caradoc and began his homeward ride, the young knight could still hear his father's mocking laughter ringing in his ears . . .

Haunting him for many, many miles.