

# **Statement of Sir Jorik Baker of Bluewater Hills, Order of The Blessed Shield of Halend**

## **Part One**

On the fourth day of Newbud of this year, the tenth of the third century of the Fourth Era, the chapter-house at Second Mill received a missive from the main chapel-house of our Order instructing our abbot to assemble a squad of a Pledged Knight, Ordained Priests, and Lay Brethren. The purpose of this squad was to investigate a recently-discovered temple that had been confirmed to be dedicated to Armena, Goddess of Spiders. My abbot, of course, immediately questioned the use of the word 'investigate' instead of 'excise,' given the past history of the Goddess of Spiders; a further missive informed us that Halend Himself had instructed the Commander of the Order that this was to be a peaceful investigation.

After much prayer and reflection (which of course also confirmed the will of Halend), it was decided that I, Sir Jorik Baker, would lead the squad to the temple. As per tradition, I picked an old priest and a young one for the clerical side of things, and men-at-arms without young children for the rest of the squad. After some debate, it was decided to avoid bringing a siege train, but the abbot instructed the rest of the Order to run assembly and live-fire drills on the chapter-house's equipment anyway. Missing this was a disappointment to the squad, but we offered it up to Halend and proceeded on our mission.

The travel to Armena's Temple was not remarkable. In the forests outside West Gramercy we came across an adventuring party that was assaulting a bandit hideout, and of course assisted in the destruction of the bandits. In West Gramercy itself we encountered a potentially tragic situation where a benighted heathen from the Far Lands had been falsely accused of a capital crime; fortunately, the city fathers had wisely waited for a Pledged

Knight to come through before executing the sentence. Tracking down the actual criminal added two days to the journey, but Justice is Justice.

The Temple of Armena is located in a relatively isolated valley in the Emperor's Mountains; like most temples of its type it lies in the center of an agricultural community. It was here that we first began to understand the peculiarities of this investigation. Superficially, the landscape looked like that of any other enclave of the Dark Gods; which is to say, cramped, uncomfortable, and lacking in civilization. But a closer look revealed that the various farms and settlements were actually being *improved*, as time and labor permitted. In some places the local fanes to Armena were even being partially dismantled for building materials, often assisted by the priests and priestesses themselves.

The squad made no attempt at concealment and was not challenged or even treated hostilely by either the local priests or cultists, although it was clear that the latter at least were extremely frightened of us. As per our usual practice in areas deemed Clean, all weapons except hunting bows were kept sheathed or secured at all times. This practice prevented several potential problems while going to the Temple itself; while I cannot condemn a Lay Brother for, say, instantly reacting to hearing the words of the Storm Chant of Armena being uttered, it does remain true that in that case the Chant was being uttered by a small child, as part of her lessons.

As to our time at the Temple itself... I wish to say now, for the record and on my honor as a Pledged Knight of Halend: neither I, nor the two Ordained Priests, nor the married Lay Brethren, forswore our Oaths of constancy. Nor is it fair to say that the Cult of Armena actively attempted to make us break our oaths. I **do** regret to say that, no matter what other changes the Goddess of Spiders has made to her cult and her purpose, she has permitted her clergy to continue to dress as scandalously as they had before. I readily grant that Armena's priestesses no longer feel *obligated* to wear almost no clothing inside their fanes, but many still apparently feel

free to revel in a nigh-unclothed state. Still, mindful of my instructions, I merely reminded the Lay Brethren about Halend's notoriously strong feelings about adultery and my own rigorous ideas of penance for committing it. This produced an acceptable outcome.

The hospitality offered us by the Cult was otherwise sincere, if awkward. I can happily report that the Cult of Armena no longer makes a blasphemous sacrament out of destroying food as a show of power; likewise, the cult has apparently freed all of its slaves. In fact, I did not either see or Sense a single collar, cage, or needle-coffin during our investigation. In general, the miasma of evil that typically resides in a Dark Fane was remarkably absent in Armena's Temple. By this I do not mean that there was never a miasma, but that one existed in the past and had since been thoroughly Cleansed. I would soon learn who was the agent of that Cleansing...

(Part 2 to follow)

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