

## **The Reign of King McCormick**

**(part two)**

### **New Merchants**

With his victory over the band of brigands decided, King McCormick believed it was time to open the Myth Wood to trade from other realms. A caravan of merchants passing through Valhalla gained news of this and agreed that the Myth Wood might be the new opportunity they were looking for.

To guard their goods they hired the soldiers Wild and Starian Darklight. The mercenary NettleBite and the rogue Swarlyee were added as well. With goods and guards the merchants Bill the mapmaker and Raven the mystic set forth into the wood.

As word of new merchants arriving past through the Wood, King McCormick sent Grimner to block the southern path to Kings Rest. A recent storm had blown many trees down and the road was impassable for a caravan. The King also rounded up his King's men and a few mercenaries to make sure the caravan was not waylaid by Brigands.

To the great surprise of the King the Brigands Riven and Vigo, had laid an ambush for him at the southern road. As the Caravan met up with the King, the Brigands sprang the trap. Vigo, with the paid aid of Shaun Sean and Balin, attacked from the front to cover their surprise from behind. Before the King or his men could even react Riven, who had been hidden in shadows, dispatched four of them from behind. In short order the King and his men were removed from the Wood for a time. This left the Caravan at the mercy of the Brigands.

In what would come to be seen as the first signs of organization and forward planning amongst the Brigands, they decided to escort the Caravan to King's Rest unmolested, for a small price of course.

It was in this way that the Mapmaker and the Mystic finally arrived in King's Rest. Wild and Starian swore themselves to the King as soon as they arrived. Swarlyee was welcomed by his fellow Brigands as well. NettleBite entered the Guild hall to place his contract on the board.

### **Changing Strategies**

With the lines drawn again, the two sides went to war. Blackstaff made good account of himself and soon the Brigands learned to fear his hungry blade. Though Wild and Starian were new to the Wood, they showed great loyalty and skill in protecting the King. They settled into Gray Arrow, its strong walls providing the defense they needed to hold back the Brigand hordes.

The Brigands however had learned from their last defeat. They hired many

Mercenaries and used their knowledge of the Wood to great advantage. Changing up their strategy they began to use more siege tactics. This allowed them to breach walls.

The King moved his men from Gray Arrow to High Guard and once again the siege tactics of the Brigands came into affect. The Western wall gave way to the Brigands onslaught and as they poured in the slaughtered all that they found inside. However they chose not to hold the Keep, instead returning to the freedom of the trails and forest.

In the battle the advantage that the Mercenaries brought to the battle was the deciding factor. The side that could hire the most had the advantage of skilled warriors. Time and again Shaun Sean, Balin, NettleBite and Calinos put themselves in the front and bought the time or ground that was needed for their employers to win a victory.

### **Aftermath, Lack of funds**

After much blood shed and battle the day went to the Brigands. Though the King had his men, they were in disarray. Another truth was emerging from the battle. It looked as if the King was bankrupt. He was unable to pay for Mercenaries, and in truth was unable to pay his own men.

It came to light that in the may battles the King had fought against the Brigands, one of them had manage to steal his money purse. There was at that point a lowly Brigand who was now as rich as a King.

As the fighting was going on both Calinos and Riven completed errands for the Gayderf the smith and Grimner Graybeard. Thanks to their efforts Gayderf the smith regained his Dwarven anvil of enchanting from the troublesome Gnomes. For Grimner's part he now had both his contract as well as armor returned to him. With these items restored to him, he could finally go back to fighting instead of just guarding the Guild hall.

### **Tax Collection**

A short time of peace fell over the Wood. King's Rest saw an increase in trade and activity. All the people of the wood seemed to pass through King's Rest to see what new items were available. The new map store had fair business, as did the tavern of course. The biggest draw was Waylander's Hope smithy. With Gayderf's Dwarven Anvil restored to him, he ran a special on enchanting weapons. Everyone and their neighbor wanted a weapon that could cut through armor. The Guild Hall too had activity. With many proven Mercenaries to hire, and the newer arrivals to choose from as well.

The King with very little money to work with decided to forgo paying his men. His hope was to hire a mercenary or two to boost his ranks. To his great dismay, he could not compete with the other employers. Even the newest mercenary, Darrell, went for a price the King could not afford. To make matters worse some of the mercenaries had taking a disliking to the King and his men, and would not be hired by them.

The Myth Wood seemed to feel the King's frustration. For a storm was fast approaching. It promised hurricane winds and flash flooding. Still the King knew he had to act, before a full revolt could arise. He decided to send his most trusted men through the Wood to collect taxes from his people. With the Taxes collected he would be able to pay his men, as well as hire the much needed Mercenaries.

He put Blackstaff, now known as the Brigand's Bane, in charge of collection with Starian as his support. He sent them on their way with hopes of salvaging his rule. While Blackstaff and Starian prepared to depart, Wild decided to improve the odds of peaceful tax collection by walking around King's Rest killing any unsuspecting Brigands he could, before they realized what he was up to. The King then decided to take Wild as his honor guard and returned to High Guard to await his Royal dues.

Blackstaff Brigand's Bane retrieved the taxes from the towns people of King's Rest. Then with winds picking up and sheets of rain falling from the heavens he headed for the lands around Gray Arrow. With just this small effort he had collected four hundred rupees, he was sure his King's fortunes would change. Yet to ensure it, he traveled on to the most dangerous part of the Wood, Forest Ward. It's distance from King's Rest and High Guard had long made it a haven for Brigands, and Rogues. His hope was that the weather would keep the malcontents in there hideout, instead of on the road.

### **Shadowed Contracts**

As the King's men moved through the forest a shadowy deal was brokered in the Guild Hall. A mysterious contract with a large sum of rupees attached to it was left for Grimner to find. The contract was in two parts, one part was for Grimner himself. He was overjoyed at the thought of joining in the action again. To his dismay it charged him with guarding Gray Arrow, and letting none enter with out giving the password "Hail to the King." With no great joy in his heart for guard duty was very dull, but a full purse at his side he traveled to Gray Arrow.

The other part of the contract was for Shaun Sean and Balin. When they saw what was asked of them, they were mystified and intrigued. The money was good and if they pulled off what was asked of them they would become legends in the Wood.

Grimner stood in the poring rain, guarding the entrance to Gray Arrow. Boredom and solitude his only companions. Many travelers past by but none challenged him. So when Shaun Sean the Silent Blade materialized out of the misty curtain of rain, Grimner was overjoyed at the thought of matching blades with the growing legend.

"Hail to the King!" Shaun said with a wicked smirk. Disappointment gave way quickly for Grimner when he noticed that Shaun Sean was not alone. Yet it was not Balin with him as Grimner had thought at first. Grimner stepped out of the way as the password had been given.

"Where is Balin then?" Grimner inquired.

“Should be back from visiting Eire shortly.” Shaun deadpanned. So Balin had not survived the mission. Still the contract had been completed, for a Mercenary that was all that mattered. Grimner tried to look at the new arrival but found it difficult. He noticed the Soulbands around the captives wrists. With those on the captive appeared as nothing more than a human sized white light.

“Who is the guest?” Curiosity had always been one of Grimner’s faults.

Shaun Sean was all business. “None of your concern. Your part of the contract ain’t up yet. Your to guard the gate, so get to guarding.”

“True enough, back to the rain and solitude for Old Grimner.” Shaun for his part locked the “guest” up in Gray Arrow’s old but quite serviceable dungeon.

The “guest” did not have long to wait. Out of the rain came the password again. “Hail to the King!” With that a cloaked figure dexterously side stepped past Grimner and into Gray Arrow proper. The mysterious figure traveled to the dungeon and disappeared from Grimner’s site. As the rain crashed down on the keep Grimner could hear talking from the dungeon but could not make out specifics. Shaun Sean came out and joined him at the gate.

After what felt like an eternity but could not have been much time at all Grimner was astonished to see King McCormick himself step out from the dungeon. He turned to the shadowy figure behind him. “It will be as we agreed. I will keep my end of this bargain, but see that you keep yours as well.” With that the King left Gray Arrow with out a glance at Shaun Sean, or Grimner.

“Is my contract complete?” Grimner asked the Shadowed figure.

“Not quit yet” Riven the Shadow Stalker replied as he lowered the hood of his cloak. “You must guard these walls a bit longer. Shaun Sean, come with me, we have a chest of money to retrieve.” With that the two left Gray Arrow. Grimner once again settled in with the rain and solitude.

### **The power of a Demon**

Dark forces arrived in the Myth Wood on the gusts of the powerful storm that pounded the Wood. On this day a new Demon Succubus was birthed in the darkest corner of the Myth Wood. Her name was Lilith. With no memory of her former life, she roamed the Wood looking for purpose. She found the fighting between the humans quite amusing, but ultimately pointless.

She noticed two humans traveling the road ways with a chest carried between them. A third human dressed the same as the first two joined them. He had troubling news for them, but still they carried on with their mission. Wherever they stopped people gave them beautiful jewels. This intrigued Lilith. She quietly followed them and noticed a sizable group of armed men at a large fortified building. They did not seem happy as

the two men with the chest approached. As battle was joined Lilith could tell that the chest bearers were quite out numbered. She also discovered that she was growing hungry.

The hungrier she got the less she was able to control herself. It was then that she saw Llew Silverhand. All of her being became focused directly on him. To the onlookers it appeared as if a black ball of energy left Lilith's body and enveloped Llew's. Then a black transparent tether seemed to form between the two. Llew's eyes glazed over in ecstasy and Lilith's eyes glowed brilliantly with power.

As Lilith consumed Llew's soul she fell into a blood frenzy. She entered Forest Ward and began killing anyone in front of her. After she had killed the Brigands and their mercenary's she intended to stop. But the King's men lead by Blackstaff were horrified by her consuming of a soul, so they attacked. Starian and Wild died almost at the same time Lilith moved so fast. Blackstaff lasted longer trading many blows with the Demon. Too his revulsion and dismay, Blackstaff realized that the Demon could not be killed by conventional means. Lilith took his life as well.

Having no use for the pretty jewels, Lilith left them where they lie. Filled with the euphoria of devouring a soul Lilith traveled to the west, her thrall close by.

Riven and Shaun Sean had heard the sounds of battle to the east. Riven and Vigo had agreed that Forest Ward would be the best place to relieve the King's men of the taxes. Vigo had traveled there with the rest of the brigands and there hired Mercenaries in advance of Riven. So Riven was quite surprised to come across his fellow brigand Llew in the company of a beautiful young woman.

Shaun Sean had fought a demon before and survived, if barely. He knew what was in front of him, and how to stop her. With out a thought the Silent Blade ran forward and severed the tether between Llew and Lilith, by sending Llew to Eire's garden. Riven quickly realized what Lilith was, and without a soul to power her, he was able to quickly end her physical form, with three feet of steel to through her chest.

### **Tax collection, Collected**

When Blackstaff, Starian, and Wild found themselves back in the Wood. They headed to Forest Ward. They found the collections chest close to where they had met their untimely end. All the taxes were still there. Continuing their mission they collected the taxes from Forest Ward and prepared to set out. With all the lands of the Myth Wood now fully taxed they only needed to safely return the chest to High Guard. On the way there they meet up with the King as he returned from Eire's garden.

While traveling the southern road to King's Rest, the King and his men, Blackstaff, Starian, and Wild met up with the full force of the Brigand's of Myth Wood. Vigo the Carpathian, Riven Shadow Stalker, Llew Silverhand, Tirza, and Swarlyee blocked the way to King's Rest. These odds were not good, but still the King's Men had overcome worse.

It was then that Riven's final move was revealed. Shaun Sean, Balin Grumpkinsbane, NettleBite, and Darrell were all under contract to him. With the money he had stolen from the King in an earlier encounter he had been able to not only buy several mercenaries, but also pay to have Gayderf the smith enchant their weapons, so the armor of the King's men was meaningless. Bloody butchery ensued.

The rain fell on Grimner and he didn't even mind anymore. Gray Arrow had been a magnificent castle at one point, but that was been a long time ago. Grimner was starting to feel much like the castle. Old and useless. Then out of the rain he once again heard the password.

"Hail to the King" Then Riven appeared, with Swarlyee, Llew, and Darrell. Between them they carried an overflowing chest of tax rupees. "Your contract is complete Grimner GrayBeard. But if you like I will hire you once again to help protect my treasure?" As he spoke, NettleBite, and Balin entered the Keep.

"Thank you sir, but Grimner has seen to much of this keep and besides you seem to have many with you that can protect your treasure." With that Grimner returned to the Guild Hall, where it was warm and dry.

### **All the King's Men**

As His Royal Highness Dirk McCormick returned again to the Myth Wood, he found himself in dire straits. Not only was he practically penniless, but now his tax money was in the hands of the Brigands. His men were starting to grumble about not being paid and the people of the wood were losing faith in him.

The Succubus Lilith had regained her body, and found that she was a bit angered with the Brigand who had killed her. Not one to hold a grudge for long she believed it was best to find him and return the favor. She noticed the King on the road ahead of her and decided to make him an offer he should not refuse.

Her offer was simple. the King would sacrifice a soul to her. With a fresh soul she would once again be invulnerable to the weapons of man. She would then go and kill all the Brigands and Mercenaries for the King. He could have his pretty stones back and she could feast on the souls of the Myth Wood.

Starian saw the wisdom in this and urged his King make the deal. "This oh great King is the only way we will overcome such great numbers. We must make this alliance with the Demon."

Blackstaff however could only see the Evil of the it all. "My King, I can have no part in such an evil deed." He begged the King not to tarnish his soul in this way. They would find another way to defeat the Brigands, one where man was not made a slave to a Demon.

Lilith grew impatient with their bickering. She focused on the King, and soon her

dark energy enveloped him. The King's eyes glazed over in elation, and Lilith began devouring the soul of a King.

Blackstaff screamed in anguish, and ran his blade through the King, before McCormick hit the ground Blackstaff whirled around the corpse to bury his blade in the Demon's vile heart. Starian seeing the crazed look in Blackstaff's eyes fled the scene.

"I will never again swear loyalty to one who is corruptible, I no longer follow the laws of corrupt men." With that Blackstaff tore his Lord's symbol from his armor and wandered into the wilderness.

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Starian found himself outside Gray Arrow. The sounds of merry making could be heard from outside. He was hungry and had still not been paid for his services. He could not see why he should continue to throw his life at the walls of a keep so well defended, and with no backup.

"You there, what do you want? You where the sign of the King, do you plan to try and reclaim his rupees by yourself?" The voice was not cruel or unkind, mostly amused.

"I have no wish to fight you for his taxes...just for my wages." After he said it he realized how sad it sounded, even to himself. This is what he had been reduced to.

"Well your in luck. You see I'm in need of some soldiers, and I have the money to pay them." Starian recognized the speaker now. It was Riven Shadow Stalker.

"I'm sorry sir. I can only follow a King, or a Lord. That is the Soldiers code that I am bound to."

"Your in luck then again... As part of your King's release agreement, I am now Lord Riven of Gray Arrow. Welcome to my Keep."

It was in this way that Starian Darklight quit the service of King McCormick and joined Lord Riven of Gray Arrow.

### **Blaze of Glory**

After wondering the Wood for a time Blackstaff found himself filled with anger and loathing. Anger at the weakness of man, and loathing for the Brigands who preyed on the weak. He traveled to Gray Arrow. He could see the large numbers of fighting men manning the walls. The sounds of merry making crashed into his ears like screaming children in a fire. He drew his blade and charged the keep.

The men of Gray Arrow still speak of the charge of Blackstaff the Mad. They put

him down sure enough, sending him back to Eire to grow a bit in her garden. Yet before they did, he sent two merchants, two Brigands and a Mercenary ahead of him to let her know he was on his way.

### **True to his Word**

When the fighting had ended. Riven meet with King McCormick under a flag of truce. There he paid the King half of the tax money for the title of Lord, control of Gray Arrow and the lands surrounding it. Then he paid the Brigands their share, and even gave a bonus to the Mercenaries he had hired. In this way Riven became the most notorious Brigand Lord of the Myth Wood, but also the most honorable.