

# What Little We May Do

By Richard Paul

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Dedicated to Alan Coates – (I think I still owe you a coat)



RICHARD PAUL

WHAT LITTLE  
WE MAY DO

SECOND OF THE ACCOUNTS FROM THE WAR OF THE  
SEA OF NOTHING



# PART ONE

## To the Left is the Perspective of Fifth-Queen Freyna

### 1.

An unkind year's last winter wind  
Spitefully and obligingly  
Filled fifty night-blue sails  
O'er the stretch to County North-Hill.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty ships reached the narrow strip  
That long had served their sailors.  
Then near one thousand sword-swains  
And blood-maids stepped out on the sand.

A thousand reavers come to kill,  
To burn and pillage all they saw until  
Deep blood-lust drank its fill.

Come to save some too—leastways so they thought,  
But above all, bloody revenge they sought.

### 2.

Up the soft clay cliff they climbed<sup>2</sup>  
And to the nearest lights they stole,  
Straight towards a sentry post.  
Disdaining its horn, they burned it.

The villages by the coast  
Emptied to hear that dreadful horn.  
It heralded pain and death,  
Both were too familiar.

They saw not a soul at first.  
Looting at ease slaked not their fiery thirst,  
They longed to do their worst.

None more-so than their Captain, the young Fifth-Queen,  
Who needed spilt blood to wash foul shame clean.

## To the Right is the Perspective of Hill Duke Antyrin

3.

Meanwhile, 'pon the giant hill  
For which the county was named  
And on whose high, wide peak  
Stood proud Castle Vigilstone,

From there was weary North-Hill ruled  
By the Lordling Antyrin,  
Only son of Duke Aenyryn,  
Who waged war long leagues to the south.

He had seen just sixteen winters  
Yet ruled well enough that all could know worse  
Who dwelt betwixt his borders.

As this young master listened to talk of seeds  
For sowing, the news reached him of hateful deeds.

4.

A rider rode fast to the Hill  
And pounded on the heavy door.  
A steward showed her to the hall  
Where the young Lord received her.

'The Ultik swine are upon us,  
They swarm about the coast, my Lord.  
They number one thousand at least.  
Great is their mischief and greed.'

Antyrin stood frozen in place.  
Warlike Ultiana they must once more face  
With valour and haste.

And yet, the call for men for the Southern war  
Left North-Hill of its soldiers badly shorn.

5.

He gathered what men he had  
And sent for others from nearby,  
Bidding them rally at Spear Point<sup>3</sup>  
And bring provisions and arms.

Two Sheriffs he picked for Captains,  
Othrigar of Harrishire,  
Deralis of Marlibrook,<sup>4</sup>  
Old soldiers both and vital.

Fleet messengers he sent too,  
Cross the kingdom to beg from any who  
Had men and could spare a few.

Tarrying not, he gathered armour and sword  
And with one hundred warriors took to horse.

**6.**

Time was still lent to the Fifth-Queen  
And fortune in a battle's form.  
Across a bridge o'er a river  
They faced two hundred Hill-kith.

Fishers and farmers, young and old.  
Mothers stood beside their sons.  
Daughters by fathers. All armed  
And all bolstered by outrage.

Here they'd bar the Ultiks' way  
And block up the great river with the slain  
Whilst their strength remained.

The rest of their folk would use this dear-bought time  
To flee to Vigilstone and safety there find.

**7.**

Fools had been funnelled by bridges  
And gone in cramped ranks to death  
Too many times in the past  
For the bridge to aid the Hill-kith.<sup>5</sup>

Oaths and volleys were cast across  
The river and most fell short.  
Thick shields caught small arrows,  
A whistling wind hid all barbs.

Those who fought for time were well pleased.  
They won a haul in the exchange and did need  
But stand thus to impede.

And yet, such a wall could not stand forever.  
Worse still, the Ultiks would prove the most clever.

**8.**

Night-blue sails broke through the mist  
When the sun had almost set.  
Ships summoned by a runner  
Sped hence at their Queen's bidding.

Four sailed athwart and tethered  
Broadside to broadside, bank to bank,  
A freakish bridge o'er the river  
But one which served all the same.

The Hill-kith did not simply wait  
But, snarling, charged toward a furious fate,  
So deep ran their hate.

Bold and mighty they were, but by far too few,  
Nor their hate's masters, thus quickly came their doom.

9.

Less time was lent to Antyrin  
Yet still, much time was taken.  
Too few riders came too slowly.  
Those who followed them, slower still.

Old leather, rent and loose,  
The sharpest mattock from a farm,  
Sheep-skin caps and shaking knees;  
Such were the footmen approaching.

And of mounted men-at-arms,  
Caparisoned better for war and harm,  
Their scarceness gave alarm.

To join but five score come from Vigilstone.  
One score and two more came from their nearby homes.

10.

Refugees passed by his camp,  
A few on horseback the first night.  
Behind them walked hundreds more  
Of wits and vigour nigh bereft.

They told of the homes they'd left  
And the burning glow of each  
Which they watched as they took flight.  
'My Lord, all the coast is ablaze.'

They told too of their bravest,  
Those who took up arms and tarried to resist.  
'By now, Death's hand they've kissed.'

Young Lord Antyrin struggled to reassure  
His folk that this peril they could endure.

11.

There seemed no end to those who'd fled  
Yet none who could join his warband  
Which feebly lingered the while,  
The waiting strained everyone.

At last, Antyrin's patience snapped  
To hear a starving baby  
Wailing in the freezing night,  
'Neath this the sobs of her mother.

He bade some to aid them both  
Then paced in a rage. Was not his oath  
To vouchsafe her growth?

What Lord sat about whilst, nearby, babies starved?  
What Lord sat by whilst his land was cooked and carved?

He ordered Othrigar prepare  
 Their small force of cavalry  
 Make ready to depart at once.  
 They'd harry the Ultiks' flanks.

Or better yet, catch them asleep  
 And let flaming brands light  
 Their tents that the Hill might laugh  
 As the Ultik vermin burned.

Both his Captains urged restraint.  
 They were too few and all North-Hill's pain  
 Wouldn't ease if they were slain.

Antyrin replied, 'Our strength won't much improve  
 Quick enough. We need sly schemes and speed of hooves.'

## 13.

A week since their ships landed,  
 Loot and lives and proper deeds  
 They had cause to boast all three,  
 Yet not one of them was sated.

In the course of their marches  
 They found seven lost children  
 Misplaced by their fleeing parents:  
 Three New-Sons, four New-Daughters.

Children of enemies are ta'en  
 Back to Ultiana, there trained and untamed  
 And from a fool's fate saved.

Such was the mercy come from Ultik hands:  
 To better raise the whelps of the foeman.

## 14.

One of the Queen's scouts reported  
 A pitiful gathering  
 Of the sheepish Hill-bumpkins  
 Less than quarter their own number.

Another reported horsemen  
 Coming at speed and with snarls,  
 A force likely come for spoiling  
 But still in measly numbers.

She chose from her fighters  
 The same number as she heard came against her  
 To face the coming curs.

A sad thing that they must make their own challenge,  
 That they must contrive circumstance for revenge.



15.

One hundred in gambesons  
O'er which were worn ringed mail.  
On heads were set bat-faced helmets,  
A dread-visage of swooping death.

Keen slicers were borne by all,  
Long shields hung o'er their backs  
Bearing the sigil of their home,  
A wolf with four golden eyes.<sup>6</sup>

These followed the scout down the way  
He had first come, where the North-Hill riders may  
Appear and be slain.

They needed wait but four meagre hours,  
So quickly had the Hill brought up its powers.

16.

Horses and men had speeded on  
With too little food or rest.  
The limbs and eyes and necks of all  
Were almost too heavy to bear.

A crude camp was erected,  
A flagging man was set alight  
By the fire he started.  
The sentries' eyes deceived them.

Food they took and rest as well,  
Even hot-headed Antyrin could tell  
They'd come too near their knell.

If the Ultiks attacked them as they were,  
They would be slaughtered, their wasted bodies burned.

17.

The hundred Ultiks spied all this  
With unenthusiastic eyes.  
Never before had the Hill-kith proved  
Lack-witted to this degree.

In the days of Aenyryn,  
Scarcely a decade ago,  
They faced good numbers of troops<sup>7</sup>  
And competent stratagems.

With sneers, the Ultiks held their ground,  
Waiting for rest to render their foes more sound.  
Then they'd cut them down.

Of hated Aenyryn there was no sign,  
Ill would it be if he had already died.

18.

They rose still tired and hungry.  
The horses were stubborn and vexed,  
But all were able, and must be,  
For Ultik reavers were near.

Atop a mound, they paused and stood,  
Their iron clear 'gainst the white sky.  
Through their beastly masks they stared  
And o'er the freezing plain they laughed.

A herald came down from a hill.  
'If not for our pity, you'd all have been killed.  
No more shall we hold still.

'Arm yourselves fools, and be ready to fight!  
We see you've no brains, but perhaps you've some might.'

19.

Looks of fear o'ertook some,  
The hearts of others favoured shame,  
But Antyrin would suffer none.  
'Up, all of you, don your armour,

'Ready your bows and take to horse.  
Think you of nothing but this fact:  
We have found Ultiks to slay.  
They lurk and wait for our vengeance.'

Action drove out chaff from heads.  
Very soon the grass about would be stained red  
By o'er one hundred dead.

'Remember the faces of those who fled south.  
We'll avenge them! Here it begins! *With me now!*'

20.

*'Eostre, we stand in guard.  
O'er your works of blessed spring  
The flames and iron shod feet  
Of our foe shall not defile.<sup>8</sup>*

*'Let your works be untroubled  
By this clash we cannot avoid.  
Let your heart be undisturbed  
By the fools who spurn your time.*

*'We delight in the growing life  
That comes with the wheel's turn and spreads rife,  
Immune to foolish strife.*

*'May our rejuvenation not be stalled.  
Instead, let those who disregard you fall.'*

**21.**

Enkli, son of a Shilling-Prince,<sup>9</sup>  
Captain of this Ultik hundred,  
Stood and turned to his soldiers.  
'It is time at last, swains and maids.

'Take up your slicers and form  
A ring round which set the shields.  
Forsake your ageing breakfasts  
For fresher meat approaches.'

The invaders made ready,  
Though their long, dark vigil left many weary  
And their arms shaky.

Yet they formed a fortress of armoured bodies  
Whose like none had ever overcome with ease.

**22.**

*'Ostara, we heed your call.  
The wheel turns once again.  
Fine time has come. For all things, spring  
Out of winter, we arise!'*<sup>10</sup>

*'As your world reclaims its life  
Empowered by the hungry sun,  
So we strike out o'er the sea  
To be as vital as we may.*

*'Blood shall be as rain to plants,  
Like life-giving air; the warrior's dance,  
Like meat, dread circumstance.*

*'Let all we may do nourish your delight.  
May all we do be pleasing to your sight.'*

**23.**

At last the North-Hill riders came  
In a great circling column.  
Thrice they rode around the Ultiks,  
Yet there were no arrows loosed.

Gaps appeared in the shield-burg  
And small, fleet axes were cast out.  
Most found air, but some found necks  
Of horses and of riders.

A forth circle went round them,  
And thuds of impacts on shields came then,  
But only at one end.

Enkli heard a Hillsman's call from without,  
Then...a crackling... then his fighters' panicked shouts.

24.

Each North-Hill rider had carried  
From out the stores of Vigilstone  
A vial of pungent pitch,  
Kept ready should there be a siege.

They flung these vials at shields  
And high o'er the blinded burg  
To land on helmeted heads.  
It clung tight to all it touched.

Then riders left back at their camp  
Lit six brands and bore them up the Earthen ramp  
To light the crest's lamp.

Fire spread swift across shields and Ultiks  
As tightly packed as a bundle of dry sticks.

25.

The arrows Enkli wondered at  
Found any who escaped the blaze,  
Save some who, mad with anguish, charged  
To the too distant water.

The young Captain himself was killed  
In the centre, batted and crushed,  
And suffocated by thick smoke  
Which engulfed all his number.

In a handful of moments  
The fiery slaughter had reached its end,  
Leaving but flames to tend.

"This was a contest 'twixt fools,' Antyrin said.  
'Yet living fools may learn, unlike the dead.'

26.

Though the stench of roasted flesh  
Turned more than a few stomachs,  
The Hill-kith howled their triumph loud  
Borne like the smoke back inland.

'When the rest of them are dead,  
I'll raise a burning beacon  
That they'll see in their cursed land.  
Let it guide more to their doom.

'Leave this fresh-cooked meat for the crows  
And let their wretched and unworthy bones  
Lie amidst the stones.'<sup>11</sup>

'Now, some of you take up our own fallen.  
We'll pull back a little way and rest then.'

27.

The screaming and the pyre  
Drew in the rest of the Ultiks  
And scouts brought an account  
To the approaching Fifth-Queen.

What bodies were not burned through  
Were burned anew, down to ash,  
That waiting souls might be made clean  
And readied for what comes after.

The Queen bid her reavers be glad,  
A hunt for a cunning prey must now be had  
Whom fury had sent mad.

It took so little to anger the Hill-kith  
And much they'd done already to vex them with.

28.

She ordered her small army south,  
Knowing they could not tarry  
To be picked at by arrows  
Nor could they chase after horses.

There stood down inland larger towns  
Typically thought passed the range  
Of Ultik sight or ambition,  
Yet theirs was no commonplace raid.

The fish and bread they had stole,  
With their own supplies would keep their bodies whole  
Till they'd won their goal.

Necessity demanded much still to do.  
For crimes done, the Hill-Swine would have much to rue.

29.

A rider high Beldonon,  
Whose face had taken a wound,  
Was sent back to Vigilstone  
With news of this first triumph.

His tale heartened spirits,  
Faith in victory was found,  
Toasts were raised that night to their Lord  
Who was proved his Father's son.

A change came upon the day.  
Now hearts more eager awaited the frey:  
Let come what foes may.

Yet still, the Southern wars took such a toll<sup>12</sup>  
That 'midst his kith there were two hundred spears in all.

30.

On the Ultik fighters marched  
To where their maps showed a town  
Built as a maze of walls and garths  
Which held the name of Ethton.

Sharp ears and eyes sensed spying scouts,  
So then did sharp arrow-points.  
For all the size of their host,  
The Ultiks moved on unseen.

Five days would see them arrive  
At the town where they would find violence and strive  
To claim a goodly prize.

The Fifth-Queen hoped her rival in this land  
Who slew her men would, at Ethton, make a stand.

31.

Antyrin sent out many eyes  
That he might know where his foes were,  
But 'midst the tall and wild wheat,<sup>13</sup>  
There were no clues to be found.

None who found the Ultiks survived  
And no one found these bodies.  
The young Lord, a day from home,  
Could do naught but trust to guesswork.

If nothing else, Antyrin deemed  
It worth the effort to dispatch a small team  
To attempt a bold scheme.

Many arrows and all the pitch that was left  
He sent back North in twenty hands most deft.

32.

A day's travel and he was back  
Beside the walls of Vigilstone  
Where a fairer scene awaited  
Than the one he'd left behind.

Masses of tents housed soldiers,  
Smoke held scents of pork and herring,  
Makeshift smithies worked their work,  
Many laughed and no one despaired.

Like so many times before,  
North-Hill arose to push back from Her shores  
The putrid Ultik boors.

What matter if they'd not the numbers to contend?  
Slyness served them well before, why not again?

Yet little could be achieved  
 With the enemy hidden.  
 Those who ranged o'er land to seek them,  
 If they returned, bore no news.

Hopeful rumours spread 'round the camp  
 That the Ultiks had departed,  
 That with the losses they'd taken  
 They had run back to their ships.

Though all wished to thus believe,  
 They knew deep within it could not be easy;  
 A fight they must still see.

And yet, where was the rest of the Ultik blight?  
 It was not their way to linger out of sight.

## 34.

A child named Dunestan  
 Wandring beyond Ethton's oak walls  
 Was first to spot the Ultik horde  
 And live to give report of them.

Yet Dunestan was a dreamer,  
 Oft work-shy and whimsical,  
 Teller of outlandish tales.  
 No one believed the poor boy.

None believed the Ultiks were close  
 Till lazy sentries saw the bellicose  
 Approach of their host.

Disbelief froze them for far too long,  
 Ultiks never came so far. This was wrong.

## 35.

Urgent, ancient bells sounded  
 Compounded by screams of panic.  
 Some took up weapons and hauberks  
 But too few, always too few.

It cannot be understated  
 How much the High King Tyrikan  
 Had emptied his land of soldiers  
 From North-Hill to South-Vale.

So fierce was the Southern war,  
 So terrible the foe, that ever more  
 Fighters from home were torn.

So great the threat which towards them ever burned  
 That thus to Ultiks the realm's back was turned.

36.

A few dozen bold archers  
Resisted the Ultiks' climb  
O'er the rotting palisades,  
But soon were put to flight or slain.

The Fifth-Queen had given command  
Aforehand beyond the walls  
Where the scent of Hill-kith prey  
Would not yet rule them in her stead.

'Revel bloodily in this place  
That our opponents might see and give chase  
To amend their disgrace.

Horrible screams carried on ashen winds  
To Skenwodd with which Ethton was twinned.

37.

Word came quickly to Vigilstone  
Of the terror brought to Ethron  
Moving the young Lord to rage;  
So readily it could find him.

He ordered his army to move,  
Once again tarrying not,  
Yet leaving his horses behind.  
Cavalry could not lay siege.

Two agonisingly slow days  
Marching through tormenting gales and rain  
Saw hard-won hope drain.

In his mind, a wretched whispering danced:  
*We are vastly outnumbered, have we a chance?*

38.

All who fought the Ultiks died,  
Their bodies were burned with honour.  
Those who tried to flee o'er the wall  
Or hide suffered a ghastly fate.

On threat of torturous use  
Within a ring of armed watchers  
In pairs were Hill-kith made to fight  
To redeem themselves through battle.

All this before their children's eyes  
Who'd lose much weakness watching weakness die  
To begin their new lives.

It was not long ere tidings reached the Fifth-Queen  
That soldiers marched hence—the plan worked well indeed.



39.

When the Hill-kith were judged near enough,  
The Fifth-Queen led her army out  
Save one hundred who were tasked  
To see the children to the boats.

Once more a slaughter awaited.  
They had over twice the number  
Of the Hill-Fools who'd come hither.  
Where were their warriors and Lord?

Had some evil plague befell?  
Through no part of that could anyone die well,  
Long and foul rang its knell.

Yet there was no sense indulging black thoughts,  
Worthy or not, there was a fight to be fought.

40.

Antyrin had focused solely  
On the number of Ultiks  
And how their great advantage  
Might somehow be overturned.

What plans he had were desperate  
And relied on too much luck.  
Yet even before aught began,  
Hen-hearts in his ranks slipped away.

Some were caught and executed,  
And all those left, willing or not, were led  
To where they must be bled.

They could not hope for more fighters to come,  
Nor let North-Hill burn with naught in answer done.

41.

On his signal, all musicians,  
Such as there were in his host,  
Began to play 'Thousand Dawns':  
Chief battle song of North-Hill.<sup>14</sup>

Proud and clear rang the music  
Alongside the Hill-steered wind,  
Stirring in despairing hearts  
Memories of an ancient pride.

'Hear me! Pests come to the Hill:  
Piece by piece we'll have all your rancid host killed  
With flesh unburned and held still.'

Thus howled Antyrin o'er the wide field.  
Let all know they would not flee nor yield.

42.

The Ultiks jeered in reply,  
Lifting aloft their sharp weapons,  
Howling bestial battle cries  
Or pounding hilts on shields.

All this until the Fifth-Queen  
Stepped passed the ranks through the vanguard  
Flanked by seven of her guards.  
She silenced all as she passed.

'You convince none. Now hear me,  
I am Freyna, Fifth-Queen of the ten Queens.  
Me and mine are displeased.

'We've come to avenge an injustice done,  
But how can we with so little to be won?'

43.

As she spoke, anger marked the face  
Of the often cheerful Freyna.  
'I have come here for my mother,  
Defiled by you bastards.

'Do you know of what I speak?  
How Aenyryn the Coward  
Ambushed her band in the night,  
Killed fighters asleep and chained her?

'And how he paraded her  
Through all your towns before all your bumpkin herds  
And then, at last, starved her.

'She was denied the Queen's death that was her right,  
Her soul pinioned to a rotting body's blight.'

44.

Antyrin was only six  
When those events had taken place.  
He remembered rejoicing  
Heard from some event in the streets.

His mother forbade him to see  
And wept strangely on that day,  
Keeping her gaze from his father's,  
Looking oft crestfallen thenceforth.

Still, this was no time to ponder,  
At least not aught but a coming slaughter;  
Likely their own, not hers.

He looked into the eyes of this 'Fifth-Queen'  
And masked his dread and despair. Spiteful he seemed.

45.

'Oh this is rich, is it not?!  
Ultiks answering a grievance?  
Seeking revenge for the murdered?  
Brainlessness serves irony.

'Think, if you can you witless bitch,  
How many your swine-mother slew.  
How many were avenged through her?  
Can you not ken hypocrisy?

'Indeed now I do remember  
The mad, starving screams from out the dungeon heard  
Till no more she stirred.'

Such cruel words came not naturally to him,  
Not even now with the future growing grim.

46.

A cheer from his own side arose  
In answer to Antyrin's barbs  
Whilst cold silence from the Ultiks  
Compounded the ice of their stares.

'Is it not obvious, Fool Queen,  
That your mother and most others  
Would yet live if they'd not sought death  
And simply remained at home?

'Her fate was her own doing.  
My Father's deeds were done in answering  
To her own murdering.'

Antyrin's voice faltered. His throat grew dry.  
He looked coldly at the hate in Ultik eyes.

47.

The Fifth-Queen stood still a trice,  
Till her composure was sure.  
This churl with his half-hearted spite  
Had slipped her a fine secret.

First though, there were words to be had.  
'Why can your kind not understand  
No matter how often we come  
To teach you the realities?

'What would you be without our raids?  
You'd live empty lives and fill ghastly graves.  
Your souls are what we save!

'All worthiness and truth stems from battle.  
Can none of you realize this? None at all.'

48.

It was a clash of ideals  
That Hill-Dukes and Ultik monarchs  
Had debated in parley  
Throughout bloody centuries.

'Your craven lust for bloodshed  
Is one you share with no one,  
Least of all us of North-Hill.  
Yet you can't reach this conclu—'

The young Lord's words were halted  
By the flight of a loosed arrow, which sped  
Swiftly forth, passed his head.

An archer behind him, expecting to die,  
Dared to chance an arrow aimed at the Queen's eye.

49.

Antyrin had made certain  
'Ere they had left Vigilstone  
That all his bowmen were given  
Arrows with steel-tipped points.

One of Freyna's loyal guards  
Saw what weasel-work was coming  
And stepped before her chieftain  
To take the arrow for her.

And the loosed shaft cut the byrnie  
And found the flesh and beating heart of she  
Who had saved her Queen.

'Well, that's that then,' Freyna said. 'Let's begin.  
Slay all you see save that one, Aenyryn's kin.'

50.

The rogue archer's deed caused chaos  
For when the Ultiks charged then,  
The shock nullified order  
Which Antyrin could not restore.

Their enemy moved like a wave  
Enclosing round a boulder,  
Striking the vanguard and the flanks,  
Losing few and slaying most.

A few score arrows and the blades  
Held by terrified Hill-kith caused no dismay.  
It was a short-lived frey.

Antyrin fell to a blow to the pate  
And he was borne off to face a different fate.

51.

The young Lord awoke in a tent  
Laid out on a bed of hay.  
His head protested as he rose,  
His heart sank as he remembered.

On a table near at hand  
His armour and sword were waiting  
As was food, water and wine.  
Outside was only silence.

Antyrin knew what awaited.  
Part of him was glad for soon he would be dead  
Like those whom he had led.

He'd done all he could, he had tried his best,  
Yet still he'd failed what men called 'The Duke's Test.'<sup>15</sup>

52.

He ate what was provided,  
Drank the water and the wine;  
The last he'd know in this life.  
He was certain to die soon.

He donned his armour silently,  
Disdaining to tarry for grief.  
Soon this great blunder would end,  
Soon his guilt would become moot.

He was a North-Hill nobleman  
Readied for battle, his sword in his hand,  
Beside its Lord to stand.

He stepped from the tent to face hundreds of eyes  
And the chosen Ultik 'gainst whom he must vie.

53.

A voice shouted from somewhere,  
'You are the son of wickedness  
And wickedness you must redeem  
Be it through valour or shame.

'This night, you give your life for she  
Whom your father grievously wronged.  
You'll win glory in her name  
And mend her death with your own

'Or you will not, in which case  
Your shame will shadow the last Fifth-Queen's disgrace  
And, thus shamed, take her place.'

'Whoever that is, be silent and behold!  
Let this fight be fought 'ere we grow old!'

54.

Nods answered the Duke's impatience  
And the one chosen to face him  
Stepped forward to the centre  
Of the makeshift arena.

They were all but buried whole  
Beneath chain links and a coif  
Under which was set a veil  
Revealing nothing but the eyes.

Their sword was slim, their armour thin.  
Quick indeed was whoever stood within;  
They bore it like their skin.

Antyrin was clad in heavier gear,  
Slower and more cautious did he draw near.

55.

He caught a blow on his shield  
And struck back, swift as he could,  
But rent nothing save empty air.  
His foe had dodged, then struck again.

This next strike scraped his pauldron  
Though it was aimed at his throat.  
He pushed forward with his shield  
Then stepped quickly to the side.

His sword struck again, biting air.  
This Ultik was slippery, quick as a hare  
And not easily snared.

But this speed also hindered their own strikes  
Which glanced off his armour, stabbing air alike.

56.

Seven attempts were made by each,  
Angling wide or falling short,  
Till the Ultik's slender sword  
Cut Antyrin from nose to ear.

The young Lord seethed and stepped backwards  
First feeling, then tasting the blood  
Beneath the pain, the noisy pain,  
Which was not ignored easily.

His opponent did not tarry  
But charged straight at him over-much hasty  
And all too eagerly.

Antyrin raised his sword and held it out.  
This spike the Ultik ran upon with a shout.

57.

The blade would have pierced the heart  
Had Antyrin's foe not turned  
With less than a second to spare,  
Taking instead a lesser blow.

The blade ripped the mail rings  
And tore the flesh betwixt two ribs.  
The cut was not a deep one  
Though blood still trickled without.

Both paused and stepped back a pace,  
One to nurse their side, the other his face,  
Then each moved with less grace.

Pain could not help but hinder the Ultik's gait.  
Antyrin's poise succumbed to slithering hate.

58.

Each strike he made grew more rash  
As the tide of recent traumas  
Were loosed by pain and frustration;  
His heart demanded Ultik blood.

His wounded foe was hard-pressed  
To dodge the frenzied outburst,  
Yet dodge they did until at last  
An opening was presented.

One last lunge struck Antyrin's throat.  
He stood frozen with a steel-marred croak  
Then fell back as he choked.

He'd found the end he'd craved, yet it was not sweet.  
He felt naught but terror's chill, his death to meet.

59.

With eyes growing evermore dim  
And wits slipping away in haste,  
He saw, or thought perhaps he saw,  
The face of Freyna, their Fifth-Queen.

The coif and veil in one hand,  
The red-tipped sword in the other,  
She looked so happy, yet not proud.  
Relieved perhaps? Grateful perhaps?

'Thank you,' she said, kneeling down.  
'That fight was fair toll. My mother has found  
Her way back above ground.'

She took his hand and smiled, warmly and kind,  
Then she kissed his bloody lips as he died.

**60.**

Freyrna stood and turned to her kind,  
Halting their glad cheers with a wave.  
'The shamed Queen is now avenged  
By the blood that did her wrong.

'Someone take this man's body.  
He'll join us for our revelries  
Then we'll burn him on a pyre  
Fit for a noble and a friend.'<sup>16</sup>

They carried Antyrin away  
And bid the soul inside to not dismay.  
He'd made fine friends that day.

The army marched back north with cheers and song.  
The deed was done, they'd be home before long.

**61.**

Upon their return they found  
Hewn bodies, pitch and arrows.  
Scheming Hill-kith had crept hence  
To burn their ships and failed.<sup>17</sup>

With the morning they made ready  
To sail back to their homeland  
With their loot and rescued children  
And the bones of Antyrin.

Meet it seemed to bear the bones  
Of one who should have been an Ultik home.  
He'd earned this, he'd atoned.

And Freyna had one final courtesy  
To show the one who'd set her Mother free.

**62.**

In the coastal capitol,  
Hight Ulthera, they burned him,  
Removing the barrier  
Of rotting meat that bound him.

Yet before they set him free,  
A servant of Ostara  
Married Antyrin to Freyna.  
He was made Ultik through marriage.

The Fifth-Queen took his ashen skull  
And hung it round her neck, there set to mull  
A memory of the culled.

A courtesy done for a noble foe  
That his wife, the Fifth-Queen, wore the empty bone.



## FOR MY SON

*Written by the Ultik reaver Udrunn of Ulyu after returning from a raid on North-Hill's northeastern coast during which she claimed a son whom she named Tinyr.*

We're two days back at Ulyu.  
My son's at last asleep.  
He holds more grief than e'er I knew  
Could grow in a lad of three.

I know well what I must do,  
I once was such as he,  
But fate was kind and thus I grew  
On the right side of the sea.

\*\*\*

What horrid creature would I be  
Had mother not rescued me?  
She tore me from the grasp of sheep  
And raised me for red glory.

What horrid thing would I remain  
Through all my empty, worthless days  
Had my mother never come  
To have my false kin slain?

\*\*\*

And so I'll save the son I've claimed,  
He'll soon discard his woe.  
My boy will be a sword-swain  
And weakness he'll outgrow.

In such young minds cannot remain  
The faces we've laid low.  
True kin and kith shall smite his pain  
And we'll be all he knows.

\*\*\*

What would he be had I not come?  
What long death would he die?  
Passion? Valour? He'd know none,  
Not even the tears he cries.

What shall be his life to come?  
What glories shall he find?  
Through a worthy life he'll run  
And gloriously die.

\*\*\*

One day he'll return to where  
I claimed him for my own.  
No hint of home will he find there,  
The Hill he will disown.

Back to Ulyu he'll bear  
A mewling babe, for them he'll care.  
To my grandchild he'll show  
All the worth he'll come to know.

\*\*\*

What would we be if never found?  
Lives spent serving the ground?  
Fearing life's most lovely sounds?  
Meeting death reluctantly?

Some few are spared such travesty,  
Such as my son and me,  
Saved young and sent o'er the sea,  
From bestial fate unbound.

## Notes for Part One

1. The Kingdom of Elreach, comprised of five counties including North-Hill, South-Vale, East-Stretch, West-Shoulder and the central Crown-County.
2. Known by the Ultiks as the Treachery Guard, it was considered to be the first enemy they faced upon reaching the northern shore of North-Hill, so named because of the hundreds of Ultik reavers who had fallen to their deaths over the centuries trying to climb the treacherous clay cliff.
3. 'Spear Point' was the rallying place for the armies of North-Hill, from which they set out to hunt down Ultik raiders. Every Hill-kith child was made to memorize the way to it from the age of five, as there was no doubt they'd be summoned there at least once during their lives.
4. Both had been friends of Duke Aenyryn and fought at his side twice against Ultik raiders. Both were left behind to assist his son young son in ruling, despite their repeated pleas to accompany their old friend to the southern wars, which seemed to them a more appealing prospect than muddling through the business of governing a county.
5. Roughly Five hundred years prior to this story, the Ultik Third-King Etharian was ambushed whilst leading his men over this bridge. The Hill-kith struck from both sides whilst the narrow bridge, which necessitated a slow, cumbersome crossing, effectively split the King's force in two. Ultimately there were no Ultik survivors, and the bridge came to be known as 'Fool-Taker Crossing' by the local Hill-kith.
6. Legend claimed that a black wolf's head was the sigil of Orthrin, first of the First-Kings and that four golden eyes on a blood-red background was that of the nomadic warrior Jiainr who became the first First-Queen. Once they had married, they combined their sigils into the four eyed wolf, which eventually became the symbol of the Ultik kingdoms once they were unified.
7. During this Ultik raid, Duke Aenyryn had been able to rally one thousand men and women to Spear Point to contend against a force of nine hundred Ultik raiders, though this was itself a paltry force compared to what the Hill had mustered in the decades before the southern war began. Two years after the battle, all Hill-kith who survived were summoned south for this war.
8. Eostre was the Goddess most typically revered and worshipped in North-Hill. The Hill-kith felt it was their duty to protect Her workings, specifically springtime and the potential for the growing of crops it brought, from Ultik defilement.
9. A Shilling-Prince or Princess was a descendant of one whose family had grown rich through commerce. They were expected to show a greater degree of valour during their life's battles due to the greater favour fate had bestowed them in terms of equipment and training.
10. Ostara was the Goddess most typically revered and worshipped in Ultiana, whose people believed that passion and bloodshed were as much a part of the transforming nature of spring as the warmer days and blossoming trees, as all these things returned and flourished once winter was over. The vast majority of all Ultik raids took place in the springtime as this was considered an appropriate way to glorify Ostara.
11. One of the many differences between Ultik and Hill-kith culture was how they treated their dead. The former burned dead bodies so as to free the soul bound within. In North-Hill however, a dead body was buried, so as to nourish the soil and thus repay both the Earth and Eostre for all they had granted the deceased during their lifetime.
12. Anyone north of South-Vale and the lands surrounding the capital city of the Crown-County knew very little about the war in the south. In North-Hill, all that was known was that over the course of five years, more and more people fit enough to fight were called away to swell the ranks of the High King's armies. Not a single man or woman ever returned from this war. Any insistence from Duke Aenyryn that his people were needed in the north to defend against Ultiks were disregarded by the High King, who rumour has it decreed: 'The threat facing us is so great that it is worth the risk of turning our backs to the Ultiks, though knives be in their hands.'
13. As the county was depopulated, an increasing amount of farmland in North-Hill became untended and strewn with weeds; fortunately, in a manner of speaking, there was less need for farmland as there were fewer mouths to feed.

14. 'Here comes a day of devastation,  
It's time to kill the killers.  
Our charge becomes their execution,  
We need to kill the killers.

A thousand dawns, a thousand deaths  
A thousand deaths on a thousand days.  
A thousand bodies, each one bereft  
On a thousand bloody days, of breath,  
A thousand dawns see thousands slain. '

(A section from 'Thousand Dawns', a song written by the 10<sup>th</sup> Duke Aengerin who lived through four Ultik raids, believing that in any battle they'd need to match their enemy for fury and lunacy, he wrote this song to help inspire both in the Hill-kith. Its effect was generally considered negligible, but it became a tradition to sing it before any battle regardless.)

15. As it fell to the reigning Hill Duke or Duchess to lead his or her people in battle during an Ultik raid, it was considered a test of their character, strength and cunning to prevail.
16. Antyrin's earnest fight and worthy death was so thorough an act of redemption to the Ultiks that they quickly judged his soul like unto their own, and quickly lost any scorn they'd felt for him beforehand.
17. These were the twenty Hill-kith sent north by Antyrin after his victory over Enkli's small force.