

<https://www.aftertheboardgame.com/>

BATTLE BOX FICTION (Written by Ree Soesbee - AEG Copyright) :

(Source Battle Box I Leaflet)

First Story :

Andover. That was where it had begun. The high spires of the cities had gleamed in the sunrise, sparkling as the sun shed golden light across their wide streets. Beneath wise King Michael, the lands of Andover had long been known as a place of peace. A place where no sword was drawn; no dagger unsheathed. In graceful words over the entrance to the city above the lake read the words, "Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers."

There were no gates to Corinth, Andover's capital. Only arched walls, open to the roads that stretched south to Llyr and north to Toris Kelt, two allied kingdoms whose trade filled Andover's coffers. A hundred years ago, the Elven High King had come here to sign a treaty that would geas his people, removing their magic and destroying their armies of bone. The Elves had fought against it, but with the power of the Archmage Syneri within Andover, they had no choice. The pact was signed. The geas was imposed. The elves would live without their sorcery for a hundred years. A full century of peace, and only silence from the massive Elven forest just beyond the borders of the human nation.

Three days after the geas had been lifted, Andover was consumed in flames.

Andover's ambassador hurried down the stone hallway of Baraxton's Council chambers, straightening his formal robe as an aide running beside him wiped the sweat from his brow. "The Council is prepared to discuss the Elven attack, sir, but I must warn you," the aide said, "the outlook is not favorable."

"Andover is one of the oldest and most respected nations of the West," Frederik Lahr said heavily. "They will listen. Baraxton cannot stand alone, and we have the principalities of Llyr and Toris Kelt on our side." Lahr strode with the proud steps of a nobleman, and the authority of the Holy Church of Neus. His modest robes seemed humble, yet the gold thread that colored his cuffs and sleeves lent him an air of authority. He was an aging man, with gray streaks in his dark hair, but his eyes snapped with intelligence in his noble face. He was assured, confident, and his attitude was one of vigilance. Already he had lived through two assassination attempts just to arrive at the Baraxton Senate. If he had ever questioned his faith before, he did not now. Neus was with him.

He had to be.

As he approached the ivory-inlaid doors of the Council chamber, two red-and-gold clad Baraxton Guards snapped to salute. One reached to pull the large golden handle, and the doors swung smoothly open over the marble floor.



Inside, the 57 Senators of Baraxton argued in loud voices, their fervor echoing from vaulted ceilings and high-backed thrones. Dressed in the colors of numerous human nations, they waved their arms and pounded upon wooden tables, calling to each other for support. Many demanded to know why the Elves had chosen to renew their ancient war. Questions, thought Frederick, that would be answered soon enough.

Slowly, he crossed to the seat of the High Council, kneeling reverently before the Judges of Baraxton. As the Councilmen noticed the cleric enter, they began to hush. Silence passed through the Senate like a wave of fear, dreading the news this newcomer might bring. "My Lords and Ladies," Frederik began slowly, "In King Michael of Andover's name, I greet you."

"In his name, we bid you rise," said one of the three Judges, nodding. Frederik rose to his feet and faced the grand court, taking in the gleaming white marble hall that surrounded him. It was beautiful, with high, vaulted windows and a roof made entirely of stained glass. AS sunlight cascaded through panes of blue and gold, staining the floor with their crystal hues, Frederik could not help but think of the face of his friend. Michael, he thought silently. "Neus, I beg you, do not let me fail him"

"Ten days ago, the city of Corinth was put to torch by soldiers of the Myreth Forest," Frederik began. The Senate, hushed now, murmured assent. This was news they had already known. "When the Archmage Syneri placed the geas upon the Elves, forbidding their sorcery, the King of Andover chose that the geas would last only a hundred years."

"Too short," one Senator in the front chastised loudly. "Too short a time!"

Frederik turned to the man, staring into his eyes with a level gaze. "The Senator should remember that Elven lifespans are not as our own. To them, a century is nearly four lifetimes - six generations of Elves have come and gone since the time of Syneri." The man continued to mutter, but Frederik turned away. "The geas has been lifted, but again the kingdom of Andover is under attack. We turn to the Council of Baraxton, our allies, to reward our faithfulness in the past with their service at arms." His words were met with discordant whispers and mutters from the Senate.

Toward the back, between the high backs of the twin rows of senatorial thrones, Frederik saw a green-skinned figure dressed in ceremonial Nothrog armor. A commander of one of the Legions. More allies to be gained, Frederik hoped, turning back to the Judges.

"My lords," he began again, preparing his argument. Before he could continue, one of the hooded Judges raised his hand.

"No, noble Cleric. There is little more to be said, and yet there is much you do not know. Have you had words with your King since you left Andover?"

"No, Honored Sir."

"Then allow me." The Judge stood upon the high dais, spreading his arms. As he spoke, his booming voice echoed throughout the council chamber. "Shortly after the capital of Andover was destroyed, the armies of Myreth began a full assault on the capitals of Llyr, Toris Kelt, and Markappal. They have risen in force in the western nations, and charred our cousins there to ash. High Queen Tephroth has raised armies of undead from each of the destroyed kingdoms, and marches toward the sea. All those that stand in her way will be forced to choose: the ocean - or the sword." The judge's aged face, wrinkled and sad beneath his black cowed hood, turned to stare down at Frederik with something akin to pity. "The citizens of Baraxton cannot aid you, Cleric Lahr. No one can. Go in peace, Frederik Lahr." The ancient dismissal sounded like a death knell to the old cleric.

"But, you Honor?" Lahr's words stumbled over his tongue, shocked by the abrupt finality of the Judge's voice.

"There is another visitor to the Council, your Honor," the Herald said, stepping forward and pounding his green staff against the ground three times. Frederik Lahr stepped out of the colored light from the stained-glass roof, into the darkness of the courtroom's main chamber. His hands shaking, he barely heard the announcement of the Nothrog Ambassador's arrival.

"I warned you, sir," his aide whispered as he helped the cleric into a chair.

Frederik shook his head disbelievingly. "Baraxton owes Michael their freedom. They owe him debts of trade, of honor, For them to refuse him so abruptly?"

"I believe we are about to discover why." The aide knelt beside his chair, and Frederik found his attention drawn by the tramp of booted feet coming through the council door.

Ten Nothrog, resplendent in their spiked armor, marched as one into the light of the Judges' dais. Their skin was as green as forest leaves, and sharply curved tusks rose over their upper lips, giving them the appearance of an eternal snarl. Although they did not carry weapons, the

Senators of the Council hurried out of their way. A Nothrog did not need a blade to make a man fear for his life.

In their center, a single albino Nothrog walked serenely, his reed robes whispering against the hard marble floor. Albino, thought Frederik. A shaman, one of the Nothrog holy men. The claws on the Nothrog's bare feet clicked against the stone as he stepped between his honor guard and stood before the Council. A long ponytail made of braided hair hung down his back, twisted around sharp blades of metal. As with everything the Nothrog created, it served two purposes: to show his status, and to serve as a weapon in times of need. He was easily the most impressive Nothrog Frederik had ever seen. His eyes, red as blood, seemed to see into one's soul, and as the albino glanced around the room, all whispers died into silence.

After a moment of eerie calm, the Nothrog stepped forward, and his men each fell to one knee with a sharp, precisely coordinated stomp. Walking between them, the pale-skinned Nothrog stepped from through the stained lights, green to yellow, to red, and looked admiringly at the council hall. "Most impressive?" He smiled, and his voice held a touch of poison. "Impressive - indeed."

"My Lord Judges," the Herald of the Council said, and his voice shook slightly. "May I present Lord Nassiral Hate, commander of the combined Nothrog armies." The albino Nothrog hardly looked at the Herald, continuing instead to survey the court around him.

"Lord Hate," rumbled one of the three Judges. "We are honored by your presence. In this time of war across the Lands of the Accord, we are pleased to see that the Nothrog choose to send an emissary of peace to our city?"

Sharply, the Nothrog put up a hand, and the Judge's voice died. "Peace. Yes," said Hate clearly. "We all seek peace, do we not?" Hate moved slowly across the room, his movements coiled and precise, like a watersnake through a still stream. He held the Council's attention in the palm of his hand as he spoke, and his smile seemed charged with electricity. "The Lands of the Accord are fragmented. Broken apart, like pieces of a pottery jug that can no longer hold water. Baraxton is the last hope for the union of the Accordlands."

At this, the members of the Council began to relax, faint smiles appearing on their faces. Hate continued, "Baraxton is the center of all trade. It is the center of human civilization, even though it is not centered within the kingdoms of the Humans. For its entire history, Baraxton and the lands surrounding it have stood apart from the rest of the nations of the Accord, maintaining freedom and isolation. It is time for that isolation to end. Time for Baraxton to take its place as the pinnacle - not only of human civilization, but of all civilization." Nassiral held his arms high, the silk sleeves of his robe sliding back to his pale elbows, and the gathered Council began to applaud. The cheers rang loudly through the hall as the Senate rose to their feet.

Turning toward the Judges on their dais, Nassiral smiled, his face beneficent and kind. "To that end," he said, "The Nothrog hereby assume control of Baraxton." Pointing toward the Judges of Baraxton, Nassiral hissed to his men, "Kill them."

The applause died in shocked silence, and Senators sat, stunned, as two of the Nothrog guards leapt to the dais. The Judges hardly had time to rise from their golden thrones before the burly Nothrog elite were upon them. They had no defense against the fanatic strength of Nassiral

Hate's guardsmen, and within seconds all three Judges lay on the floor with broken necks. Pandemonium broke out in the Senate chamber, and Frederik leapt to his feet in shock.

The Baraxton guards charged forward, swords sliding from their scabbards, only to be routinely disarmed and decapitated by Hate's soldiers. Sword rang against sword, and Nassiral Hate's chanting filled the air. The aisles of the Council chambers filled with Senators trying to flee, but with a single sharp gesture from Hate, the doors slammed shut across the chamber, sealing them all inside the ancient marble hall. The nothrog guard, now fully armed, stood in the aisles with bloodied steel, snarling and shoving the Senators back to their seats.



Nassiral Hate serenely stepped over the bodies of the fallen judges, ignoring the blood that trickled from their open mouths. Seating himself upon the largest of the golden thrones, the Nothrog shaman smiled out at the captive Senators. "Your excellencies," he addressed the Senate, voice booming through the hall, "you will find fighting to be useless. I have ten thousand men encamped only a short distance from the city, shielded by an invisibility spell borrowed - with thanks - from the Deverenian Empire. By now, they are preparing to enter the city gates. The rest of my guard have already seized this building, and soon you will realize that Baraxton is already lost."

"The Deverenians," one of the Senators cursed. "They have betrayed us!"

"No, Senator," Nassiral Hate said gently. "You have betrayed yourselves. As I said, Baraxton has isolated itself for too long, turning away its allies and keeping itself separate from all nations. Now, your pride is about to be your downfall - and your city's renewal."

"The people will never stand for this!" another voice shouted.

Hate smiled from his golden throne. "The people will find me a generous master. Taxes will be reduced by three percent. Tariffs will be virtually eliminated, and I assure you crime in this city will almost immediately cease." Hate spread his hands genially, white skin tinged by the many colors of the stained glass ceiling lights. "Baraxton, good sir, is in excellent hands."

"There will be a fight, Nassiral," an older Senator said, his hand curling into an accusatory fist. "The guards of Baraxton will drive you out."

"No doubt they will try, sir." Hate smiled. "And that is why I am here, and why you and the rest of the Senate still live - for now. Men rarely fight for long once they realize others are being butchered for their insolence." His smile bared curved fangs as he waved a sharply clawed hand toward the door of the chambers. "My guards will escort you all to your new chambers below the Grand Council Hall. Go in peace, gentlemen."

"The prisons?" came the collective gasp from the Senate.

"Don't worry, Gentlemen," Hate laughed, "You will always be remembered for your part in the unification of the Lands of the Accord - under my rule."

As the doors to the Senate swung open, more Nothrog elite swarmed through. Their weapons bared, they began forcing the Senators out of their thrones, shoving them into the aisles and pushing them roughly out the great hall. Frederik found himself jostled along with the rest, sharp swords pushing against his back, and armored fists waving threateningly in his direction when he slowed. Bullied into a large mass, the Senators began to trail down the enameled corridors of Baraxton's capitol, herded like sheep by burly Nothrog guards.

Some of the Senators did not make it out of the Council hall; others who tried to escape along the way were swiftly killed by the Nothrog. After that, there was little resistance from the prisoners.

Frederik Lahr felt his heart sink heavily into his chest as they reached the dungeon. He whispered prayers to Neus as he was led into one of the dark, underground cells. It was cold, and small, with a single cot and a small opening in high in one of the walls. Faint sunshine illuminated the stone chamber from above, but nothing could disguise the smell of blood and fear. Four other Senators, all men of advanced age, were thrown in with him. Laughing, the guards slammed the iron door shut, and the bolt was thrown. Listening at the small hole in the iron slab, Frederik heard similar fates for the rest of the Council. Guttural shouts resounded through the close corridor as the Nothrog imprisoned their hostages, and more clanging doors echoed nearby. Frederik tried to close his ears to the shouts for mercy coming from the other cells. There was nothing he could do for them - except pray. Falling to his knees and holding his holy symbol to his chest, Lahr haltingly began to recite the sacred words of his faith.

"Neus, protect me," he began. "Neus, preserve me."

One by one, the others joined him, tears hiding in the wrinkles of their ancient faces.

Second Story :

Darkness had come again, the setting of the sun beyond unseen mountains. The cell grew colder with each moment, and the old men within huddled together for warmth. "How much time had passed" Frederik wondered. Three weeks? five? No more than that, surely.

Sleep began to settle again upon his shoulders when he heard the noise once more. It was a soft voice, one that should have been drowned out by the snoring of the Nothrog guard at the end of the corridor.

Shaking himself suddenly awake, Frederik Lahr realized that the snoring had stopped - and that the voice was calling his own name.

"Lahr - Ambassador Frederik Lahr?" It was unmistakably a female, and with a human accent. Crawling to his feet, Frederik grasped the small bars of the window in his iron door, ignoring the rat that scurried across his feet.

"Here," he whispered eagerly. "I am Frederik Lahr."

Movement beyond the door, and a black-gloved hand touched his own. "Move back," she whispered. "I'll get the bar."

Frederik heard the scrape of iron against iron, and shivered in his thin robes. Behind him, one of the Senators in his cell looked up with bleary eyes. "What is it, Frederik?" the old man asked.

"Freedom, my friend," the cleric smiled. "At last." He stepped back to take the aged Senator's hand and watched as the heavy door slowly swung open on ungreased hinges. Beyond it stood a small female form, her head covered in a dark hood and light leather armor covering her torso.

"Come, Frederik." Her voice was pleasant, soft and low. "Let's go. I was hired to get you out, and we've very little time to do it."

"Up, my friends," the cleric urged, but the woman interrupted him.

"We can't take all of those men," she said, pushing back her hood to reveal a long ponytail of red hair. "The tunnel is too small." She was young, no older than sixteen, and her nose was covered with a light smattering of freckles that stood out faintly against her pale skin. Twin weapons hung across her belt, strange double-bladed daggers such as Frederik had never seen before. "I was only told to bring you. Logan needs your help."

"I don't know who Logan is, or who you are, but I know these men will die if we leave them in this cell." Frederik Lahr stood before the Senators, his eyes adjusting to the torchlight in the hallway. "They stay, and I stay."

Hearing the resolution in his voice, the thief looked back and forth between the group of men and the stone corridor. Reaching a quick decision, she shook her head. "All right. But I can't slow down for them. They have to keep up." Her voice was annoyed, but confident.

"Neus will protect us all." The cleric turned to the others, smiling. "You heard the lass, my friends." Frederik reached to hold the elbow of the oldest Senator, helping him walk. "Hurry now. Your grandchildren are waiting."

They followed the thief into the hallway, passing the slumped body of a Nothrog guard at a table near the end. Frederik tried not to notice the thick brown blood that stained the creature's tunic. "Neus, protect us," he whispered.

The girl stopped at a series of large pillars near the opening to the dungeon. "Here," she said, bending down to push against one of the larger stones. It swung aside with some difficulty, revealing a passage beyond.

"How did you know this was here?" Frederik asked.

She shrugged, helping the first of the Senators crawl into the narrow passage. "It's how I came in. Don't ask questions. Just go."

The cleric did as he was told, crawling after the last of the Senators. The crawlspace went on for ten feet, then opened into a stone chamber, just large enough to stand. Behind him, he could hear the girl pull the pillar-stone closed, sealing the secret entrance once more. The room was completely dark. After a moment, there was a sound of steel striking flint, and a spark lit the chamber. Blowing on it softly, the red-haired girl lit a torch and handed it to Frederik.

The room was a space beneath the palace, and a series of labyrinthine passages led out from nearly every side. "Follow me," the thief cautioned. "And don't fall behind. There're too many things down here that don't mind their meat aged." Seeing one of the Senators turn pale, the girl slid her weapons from their sheaths. "Don't worry. I got in all right, we'll get out the same way. Now go, down that passage, and first left. Watch the water."



Frederik lit a second torch from the small stack by the entrance, and handed his to another man. He helped his friends down the corridor, and followed the girl closely. "Who are you?" he questioned. "Why did you come for me? Who sent you?"

"Here come the questions." She rolled her eyes and stepped lightly down the passage. "My name is Keziah, and I came for you because Logan needs you free. The Nothrog have camped to the south of the city, and they're preventing us from getting to the Free Kingdoms. We have to get through them, but we don't have the men. You're a cleric. You can help us. And more importantly, you can convince the people of Andover that they should keep fighting the elves."

"Keep fighting? Why would they stop?"

"Well, after King Michael died, a lot of them gave up."

Frederik turned white. "Michael? no."

She turned, suddenly contrite. "You didn't know? No, how could you, locked in that stone cell for so long. I'm sorry." Keziah touched his hand with hers, and he felt the softness of her leather glove. "There's more. I'll tell you as we go. We can't stop - these caverns are too dangerous."

As they walked through the twisting corridors, Keziah's voice rose and fell against the rhythm of their footsteps. "The Nothrog seized Baraxton over six weeks ago. Since then, a lot has changed. The Elves have destroyed most of the western nations of the humans, driving us back toward the oceans. King Michael allied himself with the Principality of Llyr, but there wasn't much they could do. We just weren't prepared for such a massive assault - with no help from Baraxton, Andover crumbled.

"Michael sued the High Queen of the Elves for peace, and she agreed to meet under a flag of truce." Keziah's red hair shone in the firelight, and she helped one of the Senators step over a large puddle of muck and goo. "They met - and that's when it happened."

"King Michael's death?" Frederik said. "The Elves, then? They killed him when he met them for peace?"

"No, I don't think so." She shook her head. "That's what a lot of people said, but Logan doesn't believe it. Neither do I."

"Then what happened?"

Keziah sighed, turning left at a sharp intersection into a passage Frederik had barely noticed. "The same night that they met to sign the peace accord, King Michael was assassinated. But he wasn't the only one. We have reports from Markappal, Sul, the Tribes of the North, even as far away as Imperial Deverenia. A lot of very important people died that night - and all the same way. Whoever is responsible murdered people from every race; generals, leaders, kings, priests, even the High Lord of Rowan - an Elven House. The people in the know are calling it the 'Assassin's Strike'. Somebody engineered all those deaths.

"And worse, somebody actually managed to carry them out." Keziah turned once more, into a passageway that began to lead upwards. "The Assassin's Strike has left a lot of people without leadership. It's thrown the entire Accordlands into chaos. Except the Nothrog, but everyone knows they were already in chaos to start with, so nothing changed for them." She looked back over her shoulder. "You getting all this, priest?"

"Yes," Frederik said, his mind racing.

"It's caused all Storm to break loose," Keziah continued. "The Nothrog are assaulting the Elves - and the humans, for good measure. The elves are claiming it was another human trick, and the humans - the old kingdoms - are saying it was part of Tephroth's plan for vengeance. There's enough proof for everyone to blame everyone else, and nobody's admitting anything."

Suddenly gripping her arm, Frederik said, "Who leads Andover?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, priest." She slid out of his grasp easily. "There is no Andover. There's no more Llyr, either, and a lot of the other kingdoms are in rubble. What the Elves didn't destroy, the Strike did."

"The people have no leader?"

"I didn't say that. A few people survived, through luck or divine protection." Keziah fluttered her hand above her head in a mockery of a halo.

"Who do we have left?"

She sighed. "By we, you mean the Free Kingdoms, right?" She walked further down the corridor, to where the passage ended in a massive stone wall.

"Free?" Frederik followed her.

"Those of the old nations, the refugees and what's left of the armies. All who have survived have joined together, for one last good hurrah in the face of those Storm-taken elves." Keziah knelt beside the stone, her gloved hand seeking something in the darkness. "They're calling themselves the Free Kingdoms, and they're about all we have left."

"Free Kingdoms. Who leads them?"

"Mostly, Sir Robert. Robert the Vigilant, we call him. Vigilant because he survived the Assassin's Strike, and because without him, we'd all be meat for the elves. Robert leads them; him, and Logan. Ah, here it is." Keziah pulled her hand back, and there was an abrupt grinding noise. AS the stone slid aside, Frederik could see starlight, green fields, and in the distance, the white walls of Baraxton. "We're outside the city now. I'll take you to Logan, and he'll decide what to do with your friends."

Third Story :

The encampment was well hidden in a valley just within sight of Baraxton, and the fires were low and dim. Frederik estimated over a thousand soldiers were here – if you could call such a motley gathering "soldiers." Most of them were dressed in leathers, carried only substandard weapons, and seemed the type of characters you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley.

"Leave your friends here, at the fire." Seeing Frederik's nervous glance, Keziah chuckled. "They'll be all right, and warmer, to boot. Just tell 'em not to pull a knife on anybody." Frederik snorted indignantly, but did as he was told. Keziah walked through the camp unafraid, calling out an occasional greeting to one of the people huddled around the small campfires. "Seen Logan?" A few pointed in the direction of a larger lean-to, just inside the forest's edge. Keziah headed that way, and Frederik followed.

Inside five men huddled around a low fire, arguing in hushed but forceful tones. One looked up as they approached, although Frederik was certain the man couldn't have heard them coming.

"Logan," Keziah said. "I've brought Lahr."

"Good." The man stood, and his leathers creaked as he moved. He was a tall, lean human, with reddish-brown hair and cunning blue eyes that scanned Frederik without humility. His features were common, but pleasant, and his hands were calloused and scarred. "I'm Logan Ebonwoulfe." Frederik's eyes widened. "Heard of me, have you?"

"You're the leader of the Baraxton's Thieves' Guild. A myth."

"I don't feel like a myth," Logan laughed. "I feel too wet and grumpy to be a legend today, man. But you're right about the guild." Logan spread his arms, indicating the encampment. "Welcome to the Cartwright's Association."

The cleric reached for his holy symbol, holding it to his chest. "Assassins."

"No," Logan said icily, and his eyes turned cold. "Thieves. Get your facts straight, holy man. We don't kill for money, and we don't butcher innocent folk like those Nothrog scum down there in the city do." The tall man stepped closer to Frederik, and snarled into his face. "When the Nothrog took the city, they ruined it for all of us. Me, you, and the innocents still in there. And worse, the Elves to the west have made sure that we can't even get to the Free Kingdoms to lend our aid without going right through the central Nothrog encampment.

"And that's where you come in." Logan grinned.

"Me?"

Sharply, the Master Thief nodded. "My men have no healer. They need someone with experience. They aren't ready for a straightforward assault, and they can't make it without the wisdom and blessings you could bring them." Logan paused, and placed a steady hand on Frederik's shoulder. "Help us, priest, and I swear by your god we'll see Andover free again, or I'll die trying. Andover, Llyr, Baraxton – we'll free all of them." He looked down at Frederik seriously. "But we'll have to get through Baraxton first, before we can make it to what's left of

Andover. Nassiral Hate's best legion stands between us and the Free Kingdoms, and we have to punch a way through."



Suddenly, Lahr saw the hand of his deity upon his life. He saw his fate shift, bringing him here rather than allowing him to die at the side of his King. There, he could have done nothing to stop the Elvish invasion – the murders – the Nothrog attack on Baraxton. But now, with this motley and unlikely band of heroes, there just might be a chance to restore Michael's dream of peace. His holy symbol warmed his chest, and Frederik Lahr knew his path.

Logan lowered his hand, extending it toward Frederik. "My men are thieves. But they're loyal to their freedom, and they're willing to give their lives for it. They only need one thing, Frederik Lahr. They need faith."

"I can give them that." Frederik said, clasping Logan's hand in his own. "And may Neus guide us all.
