

Aurora Mortis

Erdinus Athelard

The one called Erdinus Athelard was born in the cauldron of war. Forged by fire and bloodshed, it was the murder of his father, Elmard, that set the boy on a path to enlightenment, to redemption. With Saltaer's guidance, he looked within to confront his past and vowed change. Though Erdinus was no hero, he fought back against malevolent forces, his youthful rage tempered and honed to a fine edge. As he journeyed in search of new purpose, those who bore witness to his deeds saw not strife—but a beacon of hope for the Sûr-realm.

Raise the Gates

Beneath a moonless sky, Castle Mori'aul loomed, its perimeter dotted with armored guards. Erdinus approached unseen in the dark, a haunted phantom determined to atone for his sins. He scaled the stronghold's great walls and, one by one, subdued the outer guards.

Once discovered, he fought resolutely, his prowess in battle reflecting his vast devotion. Standing alone among the expanse of fallen foes a short time later, he glimpsed a greater purpose within all the bloodletting. It was a turning point along the path, and, with the horrors of Castle Mori'aul behind him, the voice within beckoned for Erdinus to step into the light.

Deathroot

The clamor of battle echoed through Mori'aul all the long night as Erdinus Athelard, his flesh streaked with fresh cuts, moved through the castle's labyrinthine halls. Eventually, he vanished back into the shadows, and found himself near the end of a forgotten corridor in the depths of the dungeon. The walls were damp: the residue of an unspeakable history known only to the dead.

He halted at the final holding cell, frozen for a moment, as his wandering gaze met a pair of eyes glittering in the darkness. A midnight chill swept through the air, as if guiding him closer to the black-cloaked figure in the corner—whose face could not be seen.

“Why have you come?” the figure intoned.

Erdinus gripped the rounded pommel of his sword. “I seek redemption,” he replied.

The hooded creature, enveloped in an aura of eldritch power and deep knowledge, chuckled under its breath. “A noble pursuit. But one which requires *true sacrifice*.” A few moments passed, then: “Will you pay the price?”

Athelard steeled his spirit. “I’ll do what it takes to make things right.”

The figure nodded in approval, its black hood near imperceptible in the gloom. “Then there is but one task you must undertake,” said the low, rumbling voice. “An ancient artifact lies within these depths, coveted by those who would unleash its unholy might upon the world.”

“And what is this trinket called?” Erdinus asked.

“The Duskheart,” said the shadow. “A gem of unimaginable power, capable of turning even the noblest souls. In the wrong hands, its corrupting whisper could plunge the Realm into night *eternal*.”

The young warrior shuddered. “I shall find it and ensure it never sees the light of day.”

The hooded being extended a pale, skeletal hand, revealing a rolled-up map that glowed with the light of antiquity—and, perhaps, something otherworldly. “Descend further to the catacombs. Down there, you’ll find the way to the artifact’s chamber.”

Erdinus thanked the thing in the shadows, and saw the glimmer of a smile beneath its hood. He turned to leave, but not before asking, “Why are you helping me?”

Its eyes like embers, the cloaked form floated toward the cell’s bars. “In our own way, we all hunger for some measure of redemption. May you find yours.”

Wretched Renaissance

In the belly of the catacombs he found the Duskheart, that wretched gem which had cast so many men into darkness. It pulsed as Erdinus retrieved it from its cradle, warm in his tired fingers; it whispered seductions in a dozen long-forgotten tongues. Shielded by a few precious memories, the warrior strode from the catacombs and headed for the nearest town as dawn’s light bathed the countryside.

When he reached the quiet farming village to the east, Erdinus was greeted by a charismatic knight. The swordsman introduced himself as Ivar. And he, too, sought the malevolent relic. *But to what end?* Erdinus wondered. Not wanting the amulet to fall into the wrong hands, he refused to hear Ivar’s plea, and they clashed blades in the bright morning sun.

A crowd gathered around them as blow after blow struck cold steel. Their duel was long, and Erdinus had grown weary from his long night in Castle Mori'aul. When at last Ivar lost his footing and Athelard claimed victory, the latter sheathed his blade and extended a hand. Ivar took it, Erdinus helped him to his feet, and the two forged a partnership—a bridge between factions in the name of unity, to safeguard the Realm against dark magic and darker schemes.

Their honorable stalemate and ensuing friendship would become legend as it spread from one tavern to the next, immortalized in song and in scripture.

Caliburnus Cocktail

As the days went on, Erdinus Athelard and brave Ivar worked tirelessly to unite the townspeople. For, when Erdinus stormed Castle Mori'aul and took the Duskheart from its resting place, the amulet's foul guardians awakened and lit the flames of war.

Fortunately, the two warriors' story had also inspired the people of the village and the surrounding regions. The once solitary Erdinus and the knight he'd spared became leaders in their newfound community—symbols of forgiveness, healing, and peace.

But rumors spread of enemy forces amassing along a nearby border, threatening to plunge the Realm of Sûr into another devastating war, like the one that had stolen Athelard's youth. Fearing for their new alliance, the pair of warriors acted with haste, preparing the townsfolk for the inevitable.

Dying Trials

With dark forces at his city's gates, a door unlocks in the palace of his memory—not opening some new pathway but trapping him within—and there are cries of torment, uncounted voices, swirling wraithlike all around him as blood and sweat and steel and muck fill the air, writing history...

Ode to Ages (Crucified)

As the invaders marched on their home, its people stood shoulder to shoulder and fought valiantly, spurred on by Erdinus's wisdom and Ivar's courage alike. The invasion force was fierce and unforgiving; the town's losses, significant. Yet the defenders stood strong and ward off the darkness.

Their victory came at great cost, but it earned them a respite from the burdens and challenges of leadership. Erdinus and Ivar rode together into the woods, finding solace in nature. They shared stories and felt their bond growing as they spoke of the unknown future, the serene beauty all around them, and, eventually, of the horrors they'd faced in years past. Ivar gained a new perspective; Erdinus gained an ally in his lifelong quest. With the battle won for now, they ventured deeper into the wilderness together. Perhaps they'd return to the village at nightfall. In the meantime, they were content to stay lost in the woods a while.

Pariah

Beneath the canopy of the ancient trees, darkening with each passing hour, he senses the beasts of the forest drawing near—the ones in the wilds of his mind for certain, if not others—and he sees the diverging paths laid out before him: one right, one wrong, and one so very clouded. In this shadow kingdom where the heart beats like thunder and the clouds move with every treacherous, ungenerous thought, he stands alone...

Royal Fool (Round the Courtyard)

In his travels, long after Ivar had returned home, Erdinus came upon a merry settlement known as Dirnwich. The reason for the town being so merry was Mirthful Mark, the jester who performed there, in the city square, daily. Mark was a drunk, Erdinus observed with a sliver of pity. But the warrior had time to kill—not wanting to return to the mess of duties and the tangle of civilization that awaited him at home. So he approached the jester, and they spoke, and Erdinus glimpsed considerable depth beneath the fool's façade.

Each had a past of loss and pain, and each saw in the other's story the same spark of recognition: *in our trials, we are one*. Erdinus had read that in a book once. Maybe one his father had read to him. How long had it been since he'd laughed? He'd summoned a smile for Ivar, but this was something else. Mirthful Mark's tale of redemption, a tale in its second act, warmed Erdinus's heart; he had been quick to misjudge the jester. As daylight fled and the moons took its place, the two souls parted.

And yet—they would never *truly* part. Erdinus clutched the auld amulet at his chest, the dreaded Duskheart, and reflected that Mark's strength, his gift, had come from knowing how to conjure laughter, joy, in the fullest dark.

Kunai Crusade

A hooded figure raced through the streets of Dirnwich, and Erdinus followed. When at last he cornered the stranger, a voice under the hood rumbled a warning about secrets buried 'neath the village: "Leave this place. Leave its *mysteries* for the dead." And then the creature disappeared, as vapor, into the bustling throng.

The specter's warning went unheeded, however, as young Athelard watched a winding trail form along the ground, like liquid torchlight. The path of slithering light led the young soldier to the edge of town, past a row of crumbling stone buildings, and seemed to arrive at a dead end—a wall framed with dead foliage. Erdinus traced the path of the glowing magic that had guided him here, ran his fingertips along the rough brick before him... And then he felt his hand slip into a space beyond. This was a portal.

He pushed further, feeling his way through the membrane of darkling aether, till his boots were no longer planted in Dirnwich but some jagged, dreamlike city: a ringed fortress with a spindly grand cathedral at its heart.

At once the eyes of countless archers were upon him; arrows rained down from the watchtowers overhead. But, swift as ever, Erdinus ran through the alleyways and found refuge in the shadows.

Entombed Animal

The moment he thinks he's safe from the perils of this place, this city on the Hinterlands of the Known, he slips and tumbles into a deep, deep chasm. The mortal falls hard against the cold earth below. But he is not alone down here; horrible screams of animal anguish reverberate through the chamber. As he rises, his bruised limbs protesting every move, he takes account of the blood-bathed dungeon—lit only by a few near-spent candles, lined with prison cells and piled with bones, rancid with the smells of viscera and decay—

Assassin's Prayerbook

The door to one of the many cells hung ajar, and Erdinus stopped for a quick inspection. Inside he found a black cloak, not unlike the one worn by the figure he'd spotted in Dirnwich, along with a book. He leafed through the old worn tome, which held several incantations in a language he didn't recognize. Just as he was deciding to take the ancient book with him, a pair of hunched guards approached Erdinus, waving torches and inquiring about the curious amulet at his neck.

He turned to flee, but the damned hobgoblins were already on him, overpowering him in his beaten state. They shackled him to an angled slab of stone, flanked by all manner of barbarous instruments, and proceeded to torture him. *Where had the Duskheart come from? And who'd sent him here?* How they ached to know. But Athelard bled a great deal to preserve whatever secrets he could.

He thought only of his hope of seeing the sun again.

Landgrave Larson

Eventually, the warrior broke free of his chains, slew his captors, and escaped with his life's blood (and of course his precious amulet, so coveted by those who dwelled in darkness such as this). He searched a long while for some way out, but found himself lost in a catacombs without end. The skulls and skeletons of soldiers, peasants, and other lost souls lined the shadowed hall.

Their silence was broken by a metallic rattling as a distant door unlocked, and was swung open. Erdinus looked up and saw a long set of stairs carved into the wall. An elden man descended the steps, a lantern in one hand, peering at him through the dimness.

"Who goes there?" Erdinus called out.

"I am Count Visalius, protector of these Depths. And there's much I can teach you," said the old man, "about the nature of things. If you're willing to lift the mask."

Marble Ruins

Before Athelard could open his mouth to answer the Count, the stone floor crumbled beneath his feet, and plunged him further into the under-dark. Once he managed to regain his balance, he surveyed this new region within the Depths—an infernal plane of brimstone, rivers of flame and molten rock, canopied by an ashen sky. He might have thought it a nightmare, were it not for the oppressive heat and the acrid taste of the air.

Count Visalius reappeared beside him, a grave expression half hidden by the man's white beard. "This," he said, "is the *true* face of the Sûr-realm. Welcome to the kingdom of eternal torment, suffering—conveniently hidden 'neath the earth, 'neath the waves."

Erdinus felt a sinking in his stomach; he could feel the truth behind the Count's words. The enormity of them, and the implications of this umbral dimension... *If not a dream,*

he thought, *perhaps I've been felled in battle. Maybe these Depths are merely the afterworld.*

Visalius remained at his side as he ventured out into the flame-lit dark of the hellish, primordial ruin. Neither a tumble nor a blade, nor all the distance between the void and the heavens, would keep Erdinus from his soul's redemption.

Capital Storm

To proceed, Erdinus Athelard would have to face *five trials*.

The First Trial: Path of Flame

In the fiery Depths, he walks the Path of Flame. He guides his weapon through hordes of wingèd heathens and hell-knights, their every riposte a flurry of scalding talons, as the ground shifts and wobbles on a sea of magma. But the young mortal presses on.

The Second Trial: Abyssal Descent

Marching deeper into the abyss, he's faced with a Second Trial: the tortured souls who call these Depths home seek to claim him for their ranks. However, his lum'nous spirit repels the poor wretches, and, reluctantly, they grant him safe passage.

The Third Trial: Labyrinth of Illusion

In the Third Trial, the mortal comes upon a twisted, winding path. Lured in by its Sirens and their delicious falsehoods, he's lost for a time in their mirage-maze. He awakens to the true taste of their rotten goblin fruit just in time to escape with his will and wits intact.

The Fourth Trial: Trial of Fear

The Trial of Fear is a road trafficked by many spirits: the mortal's demons, ghosts, regrets. His wartime atrocities and personal failings alike rise out of the obsidian to walk beside him through the subterrene. Here, where their shadows meet, they are as kin.

The Fifth Trial: Confrontation with the Fire Goliath

The Fifth and Final Trial brings forth the Fire Goliath, a colossus half living, half cursed to wander the Nyxian lands for eternity. The young man battles this titan of shadow and flame with his soulstained blade alone, his might unwavering as he calls upon all that he has learned in lives above and lives below. At last, the Goliath's rage fades with a great gasp, and the beast crumples. It leaves but a mount of ash.

Before the wise Count—protector of these Depths—can congratulate him on his victory, the warrior feels the entire plane begin to unravel beneath their feet. All around them, the black bedrock of the night realm collapses, spraying fire about the chamber as Visalius and his pupil claw and climb their way to the sun-kissed surface, the dancing grass, the open sky.

“Your trials have borne fruit,” says the Count. “For you have glimpsed the order behind all things. You’ve seen beyond the Known, and you’ve kept your sight. Yet there’s one more test you must undertake: your role in the Dire Prophecies. The Capital of Lior awaits us.”

Mephisto's Last Stand

As they traveled by day to the grand city of Lior, the Count told Erdinus what he knew of the Dire Prophecies' most pertinent verses. Soon, if the scrolls and songs of old were to be believed, an invasion force would strike the capital, bringing death and destruction to countless innocents.

When at last the mortal—with the old man as his guide—arrived at the Capital of Lior, they found its once magnificent walls and spires and chapels blackened by malice. The armies of the Demon Prince Mephisto had beaten them to their destination; he would not leave without collecting souls to take back with him to the under-dark, least of all without a good fight. And Erdinus would not stand by while the young and infirm suffered at the hands of this vile creature. *To hell with redemption or an old man's knowledge*, he told himself. *I shall lead this city to salvation.*

“Man is flawed, Erdinus,” the devil proclaimed, relishing the sight of the destruction and desolation around them. “Evil will reign for ever, you see, because darkness lives in the hearts of all mortals. Your desires, your ambitions—so many different names for that beautiful key which unlocks the human soul. Opens it up to corruption.”

“I’ve seen that darkness,” said Athelard, unswayed. “Within myself. In times of war and otherwise. In the loveliest of the Sirens, in my own kinfolk, and in the tormented eyes of those who dwell in the Depths for all of time. But I’ve seen, too, the strength of the *spirit* to overcome it. The sword, the soul—I have seen all manner of evil shatter against them. You’ll fare no better, imp.”

The clash between Erdinus and Mephisto, between the citizens of the Realm and the Demon Prince’s armies, was long, brutal. The soul collector was relentless, and he took on a multitude of ungodly forms as he drew more and more power from the capital. But Athelard wielded purpose, righteousness, and something otherworldly besides.

Blow by blow, the ferocious mortal fought back the hideous devil at the city’s heart. And once he had Mephisto’s back against the cobblestone wall of the donjon-keep, his trusted sword found its mark, delivering a fatal blow. The creature let out a deafening roar of defiance as his heart exploded, and what remained of his flesh pierced reality itself, retreating to the foulness of Depths.

A light rainfall found the capital, at first, but it was followed not long afterward by the warmth of the sunshine. And—for the briefest, most triumphant moment—Lior shone like a dwarven betrothal ring.

Count Visalius placed a hand on Erdinus’s shoulder, a rare smile on his weathered face. “Well done, m’boy. You’ve proven that even the darkest of forces are no match for the human heart.” He placed his other hand on Athelard’s chest, just then, and his smile

faded to a look of mingled confusion and concern as he felt the jewel that still hung there against the younger man's armor: the auld amulet known as the Duskheart.

Too tired to appreciate the full gravity of the occasion, Erdinus simply nodded, hoping he'd returned the old man's smile, too. The Battle of Lior marked his most legendary victory yet; the people of the capital would celebrate for weeks, even months to come, penning songs in his honor.

Of course, his quest was far from over, he realized. But he had made a difference in a world beset by darkness. He took a slow breath, looked to the horizon, and felt the sorrow drain from his heart, if only for to-day.