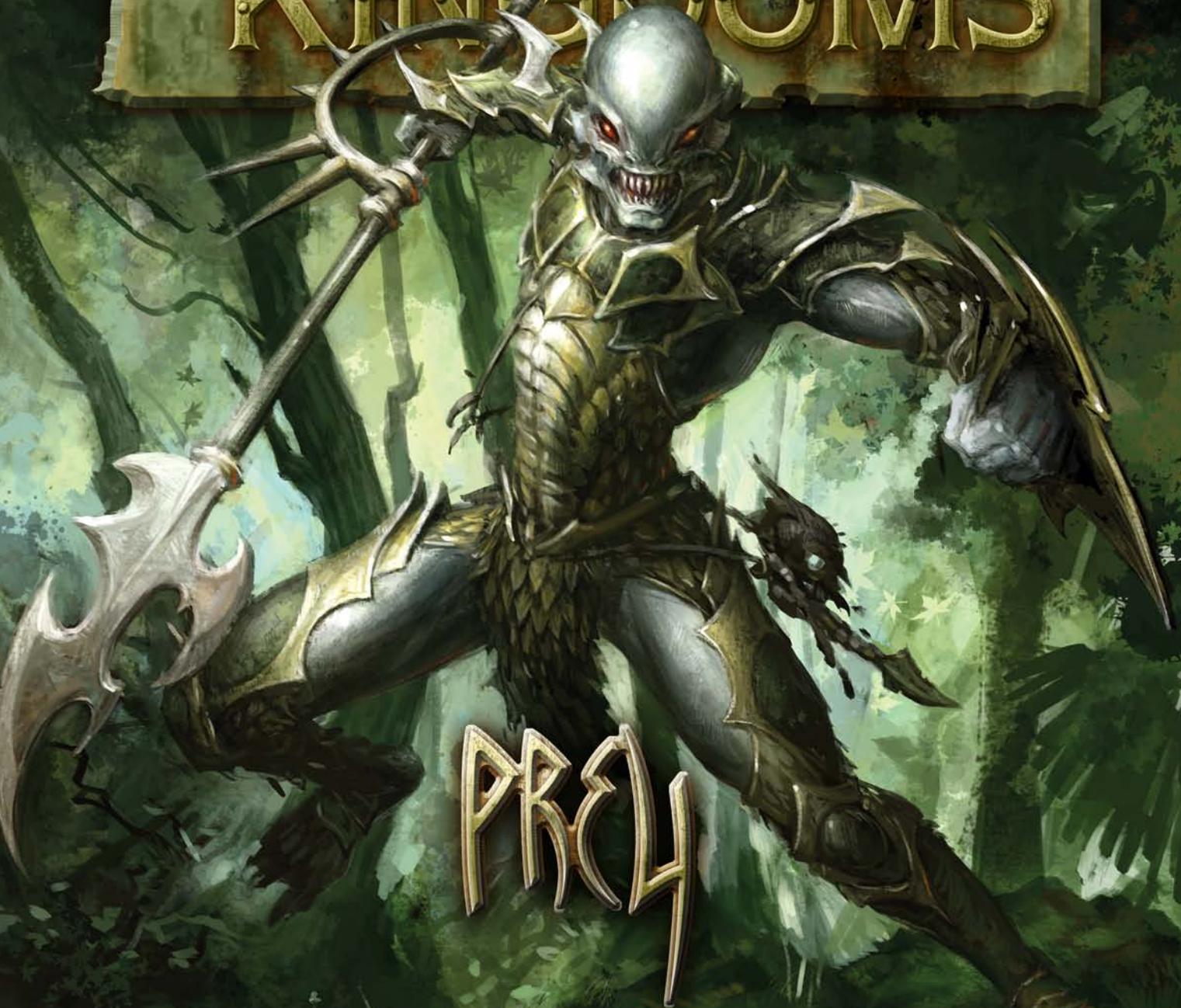
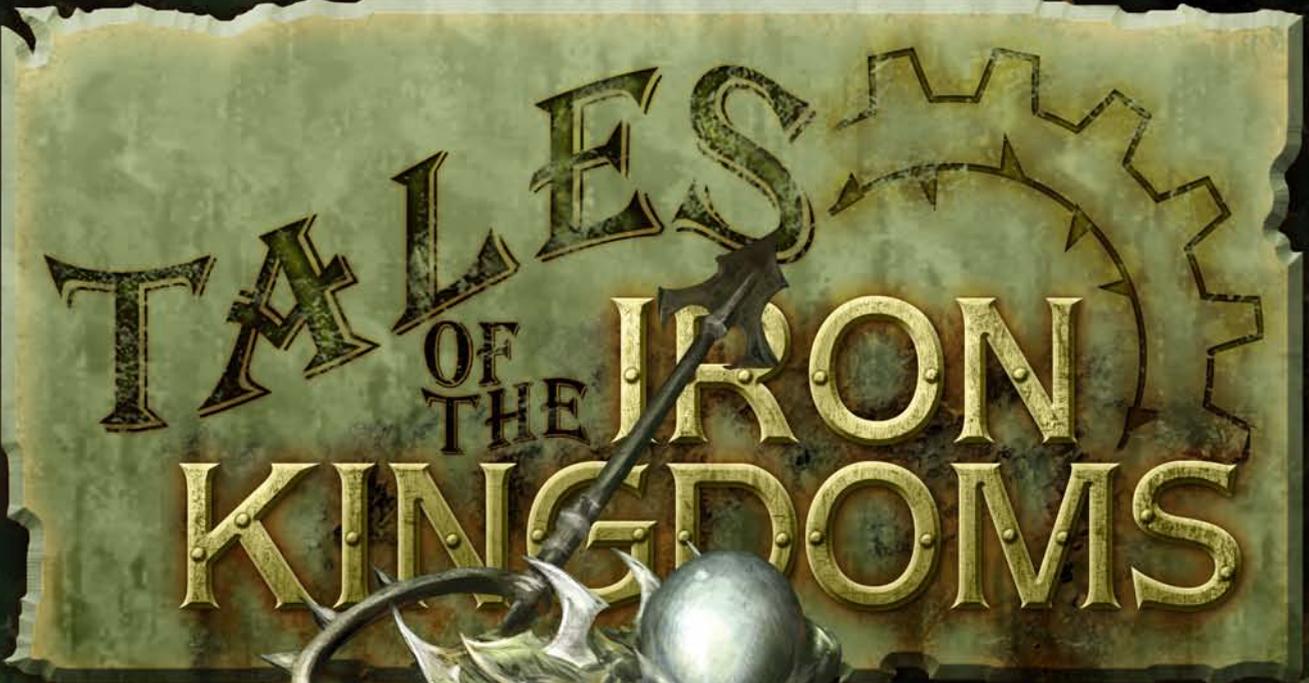


# TALES OF THE IRON KINGDOMS



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The hunter beat aside another heavy blow from the trollkin's axe with its buckler and then leapt away, letting its *kelkax* lick out in mid-jump to halt the prey's forward momentum and maintain distance.

The trollkin howled in fury and slapped at the wavering point of the hunter's weapon with his axe. The spines on the back of his hairless head quivered with rage, and he clenched his heavy jaw hard enough to grind his broad, flat teeth together.

The hunter had enjoyed few opportunities to stalk the blue-skinned brutes called trollkin, but their reputation for strength, resilience, and crude but effective fighting prowess was not undeserved. This trollkin, one of the largest and strongest males of his band, far surpassed others of his kind in both strength and skill, making him worthy prey.

The trollkin was nearly as tall as the hunter, yet far more massive. The prey wielded an enormous, cleaver-like axe in two hands, maneuvering the cumbersome weapon with surprising speed and accuracy. Despite the lack of a shield, the hunter's *kelkax* had been unable to penetrate the trollkin's defenses. He had swatted away each probing strike with the flat of his axe or the leathery palm of his hand.

They fought on a field of slaughter, surrounded by the corpses of trollkin and the dead, pale flesh of draconic beasts and blighted elves. The outcome of the battle that had unfolded here was unclear, as both sides had retreated into the nearby forests after taking heavy losses. War was everywhere in this cold, northern land, and although the reasons for such encounters were unimportant to the hunter, they provided it ample opportunity to stalk the most dangerous prey.

The hunter was anything but hasty, and in the first few moments of fighting it had done little but probe its prey's defenses, testing the trollkin's speed and stamina. As the battle had progressed and the hunter had realized it faced a creature of great skill, it had changed tactics. Attempting to capitalize on its superior speed, the hunter had moved

in and out of the prey's striking range, using the reach of its weapon to keep the trollkin from launching more than a single attack at any time. Often, this tactic caused an opponent to overextend and create an opening the hunter could exploit. It had worked for a time, but this prey was not so easily fooled. On one pass, the trollkin had not backed away from a thrust of the hunter's *kelkax*. Instead, he had stepped forward, letting the point of the hunter's weapon slide harmlessly beneath his left arm. He had then grasped the haft of the *kelkax* and yanked the hunter forward, directly into the spike atop his axe. The hunter had been able to twist aside and avoid most of the blow, but the spike had ripped into the flesh of its left shoulder, drawing blood. Blood that now ran freely down its arm.

To be wounded by prey was rare. To be fooled and then wounded by prey was unthinkable. The injury was painful, but the pain carried a thrilling revelation. The hunter had never faced a creature so skilled it was unclear who would emerge as victor from the confrontation. The very real threat of death added a delicious sense of the unknown to this battle and made the trollkin warrior that most special of prey: a near equal.

The hunter moved back another step, flipped its *kelkax* into an underhand grip, and brought its buckler in tight against its body. The buckler was more than a defensive tool; it was also a potent offensive weapon. Its sharpened edge could slice flesh as well as any blade, especially when propelled by the hunter's considerable strength. In this battle, however, the hunter had not used its buckler to attack. A warrior as experienced as the trollkin must know the shield could be used as a weapon, but the hunter had so far forced him to focus on the *kelkax* and nothing else, removing the offensive threat of the buckler from the prey's mind. Now it was time to see if the ruse had been successful.

The prey, perhaps sensing their battle was nearing its conclusion, raised his axe skyward in a high guard. The trollkin warrior had seen the hunter change its grip on the *kelkax* and had

changed his own guard to match. Worthy prey indeed.

The trollkin spat guttural words the hunter could not understand, but his meaning was clear: the prey was ready to finish the fight. The hunter surged forward, leading with the *kelkax*. In response, the trollkin brought his axe whistling down in a mighty overhand cut. The hunter had anticipated this and thrust the barbed head of its weapon at the descending axe, catching the heavy edge in the notches along the *kelkax*'s blade. A deft twist of the *kelkax*'s haft deflected the energy of the prey's strike and pulled him off balance, causing the trollkin to stumble forward and in range of the hunter's buckler. Before the prey could bring his weapon up to ward off the blow, the hunter smashed the razor edge of its shield down between the trollkin's head and left shoulder, shattering the collarbone and driving the metal edge of the buckler deep into his flesh. Blood gouted hot and wet across the hunter's face, filling its mouth with the coppery taste of victory.

The shock of the blow and resulting rapid blood loss drove the prey to his knees, and the trollkin's axe fell to the ground with a hollow metallic thump. The hunter instantly seized the advantage and jerked the buckler from the prey's flesh, eliciting a coarse grunt of pain, and then slammed a taloned foot into his chest, smashing him to the ground and flat on his back.

The hunter quickly reversed the *kelkax*, taking the long-hafted weapon in an overhand grip and then moved to stand over the prey. The hunter placed the point of its weapon on the hollow of its prey's throat. A quick thrust, and death would be almost instantaneous.

The trollkin whispered something sharp, his face a rictus mask of hatred and pain, but he did not close his eyes, as so many did before the final blow was delivered. The hunter was glad for it and inclined its head ever so slightly—a sign of respect it showed very few.

The hunter took a deep breath. The long, powerful muscles in its arm tensed, and the point of the *kelkax*