

**MONTE COOK PRESENTS: IRON HEROES**

# SONG OF THE BLADE



**A LEVEL 1 ADVENTURE BY MATT SPRENGELER**





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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to **Iron Heroes**! You are about to enter a world where skill, cunning, and tactics are far more useful than a +3 backscratcher of blathering. The perils your characters face here can only be overcome with steady nerves and cold steel. Mysterious relics from an inhuman race have been found in the forest, and with them come great danger. From giant spiders to corrupted cultists and even the dreaded dire skunk, strange menaces abound. If the innocent are to be saved, if the treasure is to be won, if the monsters are to be slain, the situation demands Iron Heroes.



## ADVENTURE SUMMARY

**Song of the Blade** is an introductory Iron Heroes module that takes a group of four beginning PCs to approximately 4th level. Along the way they become familiar with the town of Axenbough, as well as the nearby Meanderwood Forest and perhaps the foothills of the Godsfang Mountains. Axenbough is a cheerful community on the surface, reaping the bounty of the forest, but a vile presence is beginning to make itself felt. A spidery race called the Aatarkhop ruled this land eons ago. Now the actions of a few heedless cultists are calling the wicked arachnoids from their slumber.

The adventure begins in Axenbough, where the characters meet the mayor, an arcanist named Byron Madigan. He has acquired a bronze helm of ancient origin and strange design. Although the helm has obviously seen

combat, it was just as clearly designed for a non-human head. The first chapter of the adventure deals with the helm and its place of origin, an old overgrown fort in a part of the woods shunned by sensible folk. They have good reason to shun it, as strange and dangerous beasts dwell within. The hillside behind it also conceals ancient burial chambers that the party must revisit in the end. Upon successfully escaping, the party should have a small collection of bronze antiques that Madigan will pay well for.

Unfortunately, this also makes enemies for the PCs. A cult with many followers around Axenbough worships the beings that created these bronzes, a wicked arachnid race called that Aatarkhop. The cultists begin stalking the PCs and ambush them repeatedly over the weeks that follow. Help and information come from a reclusive woman of the woods called Grandmother Hickory. A retired adventurer who battled the cult in her youth, she gives the players some clue about the peril they now face. In order to test their resolve and skill, she sends them to battle an unpleasant dire skunk.

Upon their successful return, she explains the cult's history and goals in more detail. The old woman also has two suggestions about defeating the spider-worshippers. One such suggestion takes the party to another long-lost Aatarkhop site, now home to a territorial hippogriff looking for a meal. The other results in a lengthy trek through the web-shrouded home of a powerful ettercap called Old Bloatbody. There the PCs will find a large group of cultists. Defeating them and killing Old Bloatbody free a large section of the forest from fear.

However, the cult isn't idle while this is going on. Led by their mysterious Seer, secretly a respected local warrior named Haley Brimm, the cult kidnaps Madigan's son Sammael and blackmails the arcanist into ordering the



arrest of the PCs. They also attempt to kill Grandmother Hickory, succeeding unless the party arrives in time to aid her. All hope is not lost, for Byron's wife Elsa secretly contacts the party. Her son has been replaced by a hideous shapechanging thing that monitors her husband on behalf of the cult. She helps the PCs trap it, which reveals that young Sammael was taken to Axenbough's sawmill. The boy is gone when the party arrives, but a pack of cultists are still there, and they put up a good fight.

Clues from this fight lead the party to a woodland stockade where Haley and his followers are in the middle of a vile ritual around a huge bonfire. Using Sammael's blood and a hoard of old Aatarkhop eggs, the cult plans to turn themselves into hideous spider-like shapeshifters. Rescuing the boy and stopping the cult are good ideas. However, the best laid plans of mice and adventurers will fall into disarray when the fire rages out of control, trapping the party in a burning stockade full of angry cultists. If the party survives, they'll have the gratitude of Axenbough (especially the Madigans) and whatever treasure they can carry. This includes *almost* all the pieces of a key that opens a lost Aatarkhop vault in the hills... but that's a subject for another day.

## AXENBOUGH & THE FOREST

The town of Axenbough is the eastern outpost of a loose league of human cities. It sits in the middle of the mighty Meanderwood Forest, which takes its name from the winding Meander River that cuts through it. The eastern edge of the Meanderwood rises sharply into the grim Godsfang Mountains. Whatever lies beyond these jagged peaks is a mystery to most folk.

Axenbough itself has 4,000 residents. Its mayor is a man named Byron Madigan; he is respected for his keen intellect and for his status as the town's only arcanist. His wife Elsa and son Sammael mean more to him than anything else. The law in Axenbough is enforced by chief constable Daria Batslayer and 40 guards. Their ranks are augmented by a group called the Axenbough Rangers, an official militia that patrols much of the Meanderwood. The Rangers are 200 in number and led by a respected man named Sartanis; he and his companion, a trained wolf named Shadow, are a common sight around Axenbough.

The town's major commercial activities all relate to the Meanderwood. Logging and forestry provide most of Axenbough's income, with products being shipped down the Meander River to

the western settlements in exchange for their worked goods. Most crafts are available here, and Axenbough is known for its high quality wooden goods and armaments. The town has a frontier attitude — everyone is looking to make their own fortune in the face of a dangerous wilderness, many folk keep their weapons to hand, and everyone lends a hand to those in need without expecting a favor in return.

The Meanderwood is a dangerous place, especially beyond the patrols of the Rangers. It has long been troubled by dire animals of all kinds. A group of bandits calling themselves the Dire Dogs also operates near Axenbough. Recently, huge vermin have become common, particularly monstrous spiders. The good folk of Axenbough don't realize it, but this latter problem is due to the influence of a vile cult. The cult is led by a Ranger named Haley Brimm. They worship an ancient race of spider-like humanoids called the Aatarkhop, and their practices are drawing enormous spiders from the depths of the forest.

One person in the Meanderwood has some idea what's happening. The reclusive old woman called Grandmother Hickory (weapon master 8) fought this cult many years ago. Now she lives in a weather-beaten shack in the middle of the forest. Of the woods' many denizens, she is the one most likely to help battle the cult, although she may well test anyone who comes to her for aid.



## AXENBOUGH (Large Town)

Conventional; AL N; 3,000 gp limit; Population 4,000.

### Authority Figures:

Mayor Byron Madigan (LN arcanist 6); Chief Constable Daria Batslayer (LN warrior 5); Sartanis, captain of the Axenbough Rangers (NG hunter 2/weapon master 2).

### Important Characters:

Elsa Madigan, wife of Byron and heir to the sawmill (LG expert 2); Haley Brimm, noted Ranger (LE archer 3); Kolmen Splinter, skilled woodworker and bowmaker (NG expert 8); Stalya Torwell, owner of the sawmill and mother to Elsa Madigan (LN aristocrat 7).

## Random Meanderwood Encounters

The PCs will cross and re-cross several sections of the Meanderwood Forest over the course of this adventure. The creatures listed below are appropriate wandering monsters for most of it (Old Bloatbody's glade in Chapter 2 has a separate list). It is suggested that three checks be made every day the characters spend traveling or camping in the woods, each with a 10% chance of generating an appropriate encounter using the creatures listed below. Each creature's CR is listed next to it to help you determine an appropriate number of creatures for your party to meet; selecting the exact creature is left to your judgement.

Tiny monstrous spider (1/4)  
 Badger (1/2)  
 Small monstrous spider (1/2)  
 Dire Dog scout (warrior 1) (1)  
 Medium monstrous spider (1)  
 Wolf (1)  
 Boar (2)  
 Dire badger (2)  
 Hippogriff (2)  
 Large monstrous spider (2)  
 Dire wolf (3)  
 Giant praying mantis (3)  
 Giant owl (3)  
 Dire boar (4)  
 Griffon (4)  
 Owlbear (4)  
 Huge monstrous spider (5)  
 Spider eater (5)

## ADVENTURE HOOKS

The PCs will need to be in Axenbough at the beginning of the adventure, but how they get there is up to them and the GM. Options include the following:

**We Live Here:** The party members are all residents of Axenbough. They might know the Madigans personally, or they might aspire to join the Rangers and patrol the forest. Such characters are likely to have a personal connection to the events that unfold.

**Show Us The Money:** Byron Madigan is a man known throughout the region, and when he offers a reward for information, the PCs are bound to hear about it. Whether they live nearby or miles away, the chance to do a favor for a powerful arcanist (and be paid for it) is a powerful lure.

**Trading Party:** Any or all of the PCs could have come up the Meander River from the cities of the west. Trading boats regularly ply the waterway, and they always need guards (or rowers).

**Dog Hunting:** The bandits called the Dire Dogs have preyed upon the region for some time. Not only is a reward offered for the capture of their leader Reynard, the brigands may well have robbed the PCs or someone they care about. They're an elusive group, and tracking them down is beyond the scope of this module, but they provide a reason for armed bands to be tromping around the forest.

**Eldritch Favors:** Aside from any arcanist PCs, Byron Madigan is the only person around here who's known to use magic. That's why the folk of Axenbough keep electing him as their mayor. If any PC needs some kind of arcane help, he's the only one they can turn to. In return, he might show them a bronze helm and ask if they might assist him....

## GM'S NOTES

This adventure is often presented as an encounter flow-chart rather than a set of rooms to explore. When it's time for the next encounter, drop it on 'em and don't worry about the geography. You're in charge here. Many of the dangers the PCs face live above ground (although there are some dungeons to crawl through), and given the devious minds of most players, it seemed wisest to present those dangers in an open-ended fashion.

By the end of this module the PCs should have gained enough experience to be at or near 4th level. It is assumed that the party will reach 2nd level by the early stages of Chapter 2 and 3rd level before the cellar confrontation in Chapter 3. If this isn't the case, consider either reducing the threats the PCs face or throwing a few extra encounters their way. The Meanderwood holds many secrets: the

## ENCOUNTER TABLE

To help the GM prepare, we have included a quick reference table showing all encounters at a glance.

**Pg** – the module page number that the encounter can be found on. **Type** – this indicates if the encounter is a trap (T), roleplaying encounter (R), or combat (C). **Encounter** – the key monsters, traps, or NPCs that can be found in the encounter. Names in *italics* are classed NPCs. **EL** – the encounter level.

Pg	Type	Encounter	EL	Pg	Type	Encounter	EL
6	R	<i>Byron Madigan</i> (arcanist 6)	6	37	C	Ugly (ettercap)	3
10	C	<i>Hyid</i> (Warrior 1), <i>Jakkel</i> (Warrior 1), and 2 dogs	2	38	C	Large monstrous hunting spider	2
13	C	Spider swarm	1	39	C	<i>Alys</i> (Hunter 2), 20 cultists (Commoner 1s), 10 cultists (Warrior 1s), various cultists (Expert 1s)	variable
13	T	Spear trap	1	40	C	Old Bloatbody (ettercap)	4
14	C	2 badgers	1	44	C	Dire wolf runt	2
15	C	Guardian statue	2	45	C	4 Axenbough town guards (Warrior 1s)	2
16	C	Medium monstrous hunting spider	1	46	C	"Sammael" (tomhnoddi)	3
16	C	Guardian statue	2	48	R	<i>Sartanis</i> (Hunter 2/Weapon Master 2)	4
17	C	Medium monstrous hunting spider	1	48	R	Shadow (advanced wolf)	2
18	C	2 guardian zombies	1	52	C	<i>Juddsen</i> (Expert 1/Warrior 2)	2
21	C	4 guardian zombies	2	52	C	12 sawmill cultists (Warrior 1s)	variable
24	C	<i>Goravi</i> (Executioner 1), <i>Dwill</i> (Warrior 1), and <i>Tazen</i> (Warrior 1)	3	55	C	3 Ranger cultists (Expert 1/Warrior 1s)	2
26	R	<i>Grandmother Hickory</i> (Weapon Master 8)	2 or 1	57	C	2 Medium monstrous hunting spiders	3
27	C	Wounded boar	1	57	C	2 Medium monstrous web-spinning spiders	3
27	C	dire skunk	2	58	C	2 spider swarms	3
28	C	<i>Konor</i> (Warrior 1)	1	59	C	<i>Haley Brimm</i> (Archer 3), <i>Chook</i> (Armiger 2), and 30 Ranger cultists (Expert 1/Warrior1s)	variable
29	C	4 cultists (Commoner 1s)	2				
32	C	4 Dire Dogs (Warrior 1s)	3				
33	C	Hippogriff	2				
35	C	3 cultist guards (Warrior 1s)	2				
36	C	Medium monstrous web-spinning spider(s)	1+				

Dire Dogs, various magical beasts, other Aatarkhop ruins. After sharpening their blades on the skulls of a few more foes, your party should be ready to jump back into the pursuit of Haley Brimm and his minions.

## USING THE SWORDLANDS

Although *Song of the Blade* isn't written specifically for use with the Swordlands setting provided in the core *Iron Heroes* book, the adventure fits it with very little adjustment. Byron Madigan is a logical candidate to be one of the First, in which case he may well be the founder of Axenbough rather than an elected mayor. Elsa can be First or human as the GM wishes, and the same is true of Sammael. Nasty GMs might also make Haley Brimm (and possibly his sidekick Chook) come from the ranks of the First, particularly if any of the PCs are members of that powerful race.

In this setting the Aatarkhop are an early and powerful type of slave created by one of the Masters. They controlled these lands as part of the ongoing war. Powerful magic from one of that Master's rivals caused the Aatarkhop to die out, but failed to kill all of their eggs.

Most of the Meanderwood is considered part of the Swordlands. The ruined hillfort and points east of there are Ghostlands, especially the grim Godsfang Mountains. Axenbough itself is a young community, no more than 50 years old, and its connections to the west are tenuous at best. Byron Madigan could be trying to form stronger links with nearby settlements in hopes of strengthening Axenbough as it struggles to survive on the frontier. His interest in Aatarkhop artifacts comes from his desire to learn more of the vanished Masters, and he wishes to find reliable associates who can venture into the Swordlands and beyond to discover what he seeks.