

TALES OF THE LORE VALLEY

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THE WIND RIDERS

by

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Book 1 of the Wind Riders Chronicles

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The Wind Riders

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Kris Kramer, the author of this work, is part of the4threalm.com, a group of writers who work, edit, critique and publish collaboratively. He would like to invite you to see more of his work, along with that of several other talented people, at the site below. And be sure to participate in the discussion. We're nothing without our readers, and we want to know what you think!

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For Cassidy

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Excerpts from *The Histories of Iador by Autilis*

Prologue

Words are a terribly wonderful thing. Or perhaps they're wonderfully terrible. I think either description will find ample supporters, although I usually find myself leaning more toward the former. How else, but through the almighty power of words, could I relate to you, my readers, the tales I have to tell? Or keep alive the exploits of valiant and worthy heroes whose names should be remembered and celebrated?

Let these words convey to you stories of fearless men and women flying sleek magical ships through the air; a heartbroken warrior and a desperate wizard caught in the throes of prophecy; a captive man and woman, once enemies, who bring peace to their people; a battle in the mountains that unites long-bitter enemies; a city of the dead that leads to a new life. And all these heroes surrounded by the specter of war against a great enemy, one that arrived from a place we knew only as Beyond, and the people who rallied together to face not only that enemy, but their

own history and fears as well. And because of their resolve, the world was changed forever.

But who am I, you ask? I am no one important. I am merely a chronicler of a time long passed, albeit a time that shaped the world as it exists today. I am here only to tell you of a place that was never quite what most thought it to be. A land at the top of the world, surrounded by vast, unending water, and filled with people who never suspected the role they would have to play. A meager collection of nations and kingdoms, with names like Trohm, the Outerlands, the Senin Valley, and the Lore Valley. It is the Lore who carries the title of these stories, however, because that is where this tale truly begins, and where it ultimately ends.

*-Autilis, Excerpts from his Tales of the Lore Valley,
Volume 1*

Chapter 1 - The Mission

Somewhere deep in the majestic Lore Mountains, just south of the fabled Lore Valley, a Wind Rider named Iago lay quiet and still on the hard, rock-strewn ground, appearing to all the world to be restfully sleeping, though that was far from the truth. Jagged sandstone hills surrounded him, casting shadows across the narrow vale he'd chosen to hide in this afternoon. He didn't notice the light breeze blowing through the canyon, or feel the slight kick of dust it carried over his face. In fact, he was unmindful of anything, save the aches in his body, and in his conscience.

The muscles in his back throbbed, but not from the rocky terrain poking through his shirt. He'd spent the morning leading rigorous weapons training with his Landers, trying to keep himself focused on something of meaning. His men obliged during the training, and he had a number of bruises about his arms and legs because of it, but none of it was enough

to make him forget the trouble he'd wrought, or lessen the burden on his conscience. Afterward, he'd spent some time double-checking weapon and armor inventories, but none of it helped clear his mind. So sometime after midday he'd found a spot a good distance away from the camp where he could be alone to think. His thoughts lately were not ones he chose to share, so he stayed away from the others when they became especially upsetting. And though they troubled him greatly, he was not ready to leave those thoughts when Alaan finally got close enough to shout his name.

"Master Iago!"

He'd heard the footsteps a hundred paces away. The young boy, Alaan, purposely stomped on every big rock in his path as he walked up the hill. Iago had no doubt the boy was here to summon him to the Pilot's Council to discuss his request to help. That would be welcome. He needed something useful to occupy his tortured mind. He took a deep breath, lifted his head and put away his troubles. He would have the rest of his life to concern himself with those.

For now, he forced a calm look on his face and turned to Alaan, who stood a few paces away.

"Master Iago, the Pilot's Council has called for you, I mean they-" Alaan paused, thinking of the word, "summoned you."

"Thank you, Alaan." Iago dragged himself off the ground with a grunt. His body, while not terribly old, had been through much in his hard life, especially in the last year, and there was never a part of him that wasn't sore or hurting. "Go tell them I'm on my way."

"Yes sir, Master Iago!" Alaan bounded down the hill the same way he'd come up, determined to put his mark on every large stone in his path. Iago brushed the dirt off his pants and rubbed the back of his bald head, then decided to take a more relaxed route. He followed the gentler slope in front of him, wondering anxiously whether the Council had actually decided to go through with his risky idea. None of the current members of the Pilot's Council knew him very well, so Iago would have to earn their trust, especially for an endeavor such as this. He knew there were still whispers about him in the camp. Whispers that weren't entirely false.

The path curved around to his left, following the sloping side of the hill that led straight into the small, rock-strewn valley that the Wind Riders now called home. Tall, gritty hills bordered each side of the narrow valley, providing excellent cover, and the flat valley floor allowed enough room to put up several dozen small green and brown-colored tents. In the center of the camp stood a few larger tents, including the one used by the Pilot's Council for meetings and discussions, as well as an indoor teaching room for the Pilots in camp. Iago headed for that one, knowing the Pilot's Council had been meeting there for the last several hours.

The tents, however, were not what drew his attention. His eyes were reluctantly drawn to the three large, wooden ships sitting on the ground. Called Karawan, these were the magical vessels the Wind Riders used to sail through the skies. One, the Goldenbird, lay on its side with a large fire-blackened hole in the hull, damaged beyond repair from the attack two weeks ago. The other two, the Blue Hawk and the Red Lark, sat on either edge of the center of camp, still operational, but with little reason, or

motivation, to use them at the moment. Each Karawan was roughly eighty feet long and a quarter of that wide. The deck and hull looked similar to an actual seaworthy sailing ship except for the flat bottom, which allowed the ship to land on the ground. A mast came up from the rear third of each ship, extending about ten feet above the deck, with a flag hanging from the top, in its center the silhouette of a hawk soaring on a solid white background. Wooden crates had been stacked next to the two usable Karawan and two young former slaves from the mining caravans, Davin and Ingran, loaded ropes, wood and weapons from those crates onto the Blue Hawk.

The mast allowed the ships to fly. Iago didn't know how or why, but he knew that much. Each mast ran down into the base of the ship and curved forward, extending all the way to the ship's bow and provided part of the internal structure of the vessel. The mast was enchanted using Air Magic and the Pilots were trained to control their ship using the mast as a magical rudder. The Goldenbird could easily have its hull repaired, but if the mast had been damaged, and

he assumed it was, then the ship would not fly again. It would have to be rebuilt from scratch.

Iago looked away. He hated to see only two working Karawan when two weeks ago there had been seven. The Tyran attack had cost them five of their ships and left over half their number dead or scattered. He heard someone say last week that a hundred and twenty people were left in the camp, and only six of them were Pilots or Pilots-in-training. The Wind Riders used to have over twenty Pilots and over four hundred people.

As he reached the center of camp, he stopped just outside the tent and again brushed the dirt off his clothes. He wore a thin, sleeveless, brown tunic, favored by Anzarins because of the heat of the wastelands surrounding all the Anzarin cities. Scars of various length and size covered his arms and torso, as well as his face. He would never be mistaken for a handsome man, not with all the damage his body had taken over the years. He looked dangerous, like a back-alley thug that many of the slavers they encountered would hire, yet something in his dark brown eyes undermined that tough exterior. Roni and

Senak, two men from a Lander squad other than Iago's, stood outside the tent wearing the customary gear of a Wind Riders Lander - dark blue tunic, brown pants, sturdy leather boots, a sheathed sword on one side of their leather belt and a small hand axe strapped on the other. They nodded at him, standing somewhat at attention, and after Iago straightened his own tunic the two Landers opened the tent flaps for him to enter.

Iago stepped inside the tent and waited at the entrance as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, and the people inside finished their conversation. Three members of the Pilot's Council, the ruling body of the Wind Riders, waited before him, seated on the far side of a narrow wooden table in the middle of the darkened tent. Each wore the traditional uniform of a Pilot, a light blue robe over sand-colored tunic and pants, and a silver chain around their neck from which hung a small hawk medallion.

Iago waited only a moment before Avina, the Pilot-Captain of the Wind Riders, looked up and smiled at him.

"Good morning to you, Iago."

"Good morning, Pilot," he said.

"Please, sit." Avina motioned to a chair on the opposite side of the table. Iago nodded politely and sat down, hoping his nervousness wasn't obvious.

"Thank you, Pilot." Avina may be old in years but she was young at heart, always smiling at her fellow Wind Riders and giving encouraging pats on the back. Her manner and her small stature made her seem grandmotherly to everyone else in the camp, and Iago liked her for that. He thought she liked him as well, but he didn't know how much Idaris, the former Pilot-Captain, had shared with her about Iago's background. He assumed very little.

"We have discussed what we think to be the best solution for the future of the Wind Riders," Avina said, "and we feel that your idea has merit. Leirn is the only man in camp who is capable of purifying the Mergoran crystals we have left, but he is injured so badly that, well... unless things look up for him he may not last the week, unfortunately."

"I have heard the same, Pilot, and I am most sorry to hear that." Iago wasn't normally so

deferential in his speech, but the Pilots ran the camp and he always felt the need to stay on their good side.

"Nonetheless, your idea, while dangerous, is sound and is probably our only chance to keep our ships flying and to let us defend ourselves from this new Tyran airship." Avina leaned in closer. "We have gone from hunter to prey, Iago. These crystals are the lifeblood of our magic, our ships, and our people. Without them, we might as well surrender to the Tyrans now, and save them the trouble of chasing us."

Arigin, the new Second of the Pilot's Council, sat to her left, a dour man with straight black hair and a tanned face hardened by decades spent in the mountains. He was many years younger than Avina, but nowhere near the comforting soul, due to his lack of a gentle touch with his fellow Wind Riders. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "You will take a group of Riders to Tyr, find your old associates, and get us people who can purify our crystals. I can not stress enough that this must be done with all haste, and also quietly." Iago understood the plan, since he was the one who suggested it, but he still nodded and agreed to help in

any way he could. "Galen here will go with you, along with his Second, Margis. Galen will act as the voice of the Wind Riders on this trip. You will set up any meetings that need to be set up. Galen will handle all negotiations."

"Of course, Pilot." Iago nodded at the heavily tattooed junior member of the Pilot's Council sitting across from him. The Pilot, barely into his twenties, with brown eyes and long, straight blond hair, nodded back. Because of the loss of so many with experience, both those who taught and those who piloted the airships, Galen was now the 3rd most senior Pilot in camp - or as some people put it, the only Pilot left other than Avina and Arigin. He was also Assarin, which explained the intricate tattoos that covered his face and body. Assarins used those marks to document important events in their life, but that's about all Iago knew of the Assarin people and their rituals. "I would ask that I also be allowed to take one of my Lander crews. The journey won't be safe and we might need a few extra hands." Iago knew first hand that the trip to Tyr would be littered with all sorts of roving bands of criminals, thieves and slavers.

Having armed soldiers travel with them would be the best deterrent, and he already knew who he wanted at his side.

"Of course, take whoever you need, though not so many as to draw attention," Avina said. "This mission must succeed so do what you think best to ensure that." Iago felt the confidence in Avina's voice, which surprisingly propped up his own.

"This mission must do more than succeed," Arigin chimed in, speaking as he always did in a cadence that most considered lecturing, "it must ensure the future of the Wind Riders. We are crippled and beaten, and it will take a miracle to restore us to our glory." Avina frowned at Arigin's assessment of their situation, but he pressed on, jabbing his finger on the table for emphasis. "You must not return to this camp without crystal purifiers. If you come back here empty handed, you may as well do what Avina suggested and just bring a troop of Tyran soldiers with you to execute us."

Avina put her hand on Arigin's arm, and he leaned back slightly. "I do not think we will fail that easily. But, I agree that this is exceedingly important.

The Wind Riders haven't known this much adversity since the night we fled from Elbasa thirty years ago and found our sanctuary here in the mountains. We should have died then, and some of us did, but out of that struggle the Wind Riders were born. This is but another struggle, one which we will overcome, just as we always do. Just as we must do."

"You and Galen carry a large weight on your shoulders now. You carry the weight of our future as well as the hopes of everyone out there who believes in us. But I have faith that between the two of you, you can carry it."

Iago stiffened up and raised his head. He met Avina's eyes directly, not defiant, just assured. "I will not let you down, Pilot. I was not here when the Tyrans attacked, and for that I am sorry. I have no other wish than to have been with you that day. I let the Wind Riders down, but I will never again see that happen. I promise you that."

Avina smiled. "I know, my son. You will not fail us."

Iago wouldn't fail them. Not again.

Chapter 2 - Farewell

Galen carefully studied the items set out in front of him in the little tent he shared with his cousin, Gelanir. He'd convinced himself that something was missing, something critical to their survival that he wouldn't remember until three days out of camp. He'd laid everything out on the floor from left to right - his cloak, a couple assorted tunics and pants, a water bag, a food bag with dried meats and bread, a thick blanket rolled up and tied, a money pouch, a small stack of papers, and two small bags stuffed full of something resembling rocks. He took the cloak, pants and tunics and put them into his shoulder-pack, figuring that once they were packed away, he wouldn't have to think about them anymore. He put the blanket next to the pack also, since it would be tied down to the top of it, and then took the food and water bags and hooked the straps on each of them through the strap of his pack.

He ran through a mental checklist in his head. The basic necessities would be clothes, food, water, and tools. Iago would bring some of his Landers, who would be equipped with tools, both camp and cooking. He would bring his own clothes, and the group would stock up on water before they left, plus they would never travel far from the Mirken River so water wasn't a concern. He had some of his own food, and they could certainly hunt anything else they needed.

Galen frowned. Everything seemed to be taken care of, but what about once they reached the city? The money would cover lodgings and food, about two weeks' worth according to Iago, more than enough time to carry out their mission. Some of the papers he'd packed were notes given to him by Avina, so that he could practice his Air Magics while on the trip. The rest were blank papers for Galen's own amusement. He thought he might be able to keep a journal of the trip, for his own record, since he'd never visited such a large city in his life.

The two small, stuffed bags were especially important, though. Galen never let those escape his notice because they were packed full of unrefined

Mergoran crystals. Those would be material to give any potential refiners in town to test their work and their worth. He knew the crystals were valuable, but that's not what had him worried. Mergoran crystals were illegal in this part of the world. Anyone who carried them in the vicinity of an Anzarin city, without express permission from the Clerics, could be executed. Not to mention that if word got out that he had them, they'd be targets of every bandit, thief and guard near the city. Galen had been made very aware of that fact by Avina, Arigin and Iago during their meeting.

Galen sighed and tried to let go of his packing anxiety. He was nervous, obviously, and more than a little out of sorts since being chosen to lead this mission. Actually, that wasn't true. He'd been scared for over a week now, ever since being chosen as the new junior member of the Pilot's Council. He hadn't even completed his training, and now people in camp looked to him for leadership. He didn't even know what to say or how to act most of the time, and now he was expected to save the Wind Riders.

His world had been turned upside down since the Tyran attack, in more ways than one. He'd lost a lot of friends that day. He'd almost lost his only family. And any sense of innocence he'd held on to since joining the Wind Riders had been chased away by a Tyran airship, a weapon they shouldn't even have. His training was over. No longer would he and the rest of the camp be protected by a cadre of experienced and knowledgeable Pilots that would teach him and tell him when he was ready. Except for Avina and Arigin, all the experienced ones were dead. Now he would have to shoulder that load himself, ready or not. Capable or not.

He caught himself wondering several times today if that's why he'd been chosen for this trip. Arigin was much better suited to go to Tyr with Iago and his Landers, and it struck him as odd that he wouldn't be going on such an important mission. Avina herself said that the future of the Wind Riders depended on their success. So why send the one member of the Council who could easily screw it up due to inexperience? The only reason he could think of is that they'd decided to throw him into the fire, to see

what kind of leader they had in him. The Tyran attack decimated their numbers. Those that remained either stepped up, or people died, and Galen supposed this was his one and only chance to show his worth. So making sure he was packed correctly would be a good start.

Galen moved his pack and the bags to one corner of the tent, next to a small lockbox, so he would be ready to leave first thing in the morning. He rubbed his eyes, and then took one last look around to make sure he hadn't missed anything. Even though he wasn't anywhere close to satisfied, he turned around and walked out of the tent.

The sun had long since passed over the crest of the hills on the west side of the valley, leaving an orange glow that filled the late afternoon sky. The sun would be setting anytime now and he could already smell roasted meat being served for dinner near the main tents. Galen's stomach rumbled; he hadn't eaten since breakfast. But he would come back for food later. He had one last stop to make.

He strolled past the center campfires, and around his fellow Riders who were cooking and handing out

food. There were no tables set out so everyone ate on the ground, circled around some of the campfires. He moved towards a long, rectangular tent set off to the side of the center, easily twice as large as any other tent in camp. Inside, three rows of pallets lay on the ground, extending to the back. Most of the pallets were occupied by Wind Riders injured in some way from the recent attack, while a few who had survived unscathed wandered around checking bandages, taking blankets or food, and administering to any needs the injured had. Before the attack this tent had been used as a mess hall, or a meeting place. Now it held almost sixty injured Wind Riders, some far worse than others.

Galen walked down the left row, halfway to the back. His cousin, Gelanir, lay on his side on one of the pallets, chatting with the man next to him, Avgir, while an older woman named Ilsa took away their dinner plates. Both were Landers, injured in the attack. Gelanir had been on the Goldenhawk when it took a powerful direct hit from the Tyran airship, and then crashed upon landing. The impact sent Gelanir flying from the vessel, breaking his leg and arm, and

opening large gashes on his side. He was in much better shape now, but Galen had spent those first two weeks wondering if his cousin would even survive.

Gelanir was a few years younger, and the only family he had left in the world, so Galen looked after him as an older brother would. When they were young, their family had been uprooted by the White Horsemen invasion and forced across the Lore Mountains and into the Valley, a trek called the Great Journey. Half their families had died on that march through the treacherous mountains, and the rest were lost soon after, when they were scattered by the Anzarins.

When Galen's father died in those mountains ten years ago, Galen and Gelanir were all that was left of their branch of the Corovin clan. They wandered the hills for weeks, starving and near death, before a roving Karawan found them and took them in. That was a day Galen would be forever grateful for. And that's why he would not let these people, his new family, down.

Galen smiled as he approached. "Good evening, Avgir."

Avgir nodded back. “Good evening to you, Pilot.”

He turned to his cousin. “How are you feeling?”

Gelanir had the same Corovin clan mark on his face that Galen had, although at a glance he seemed to have fewer overall markings. Gelanir did not keep up with the traditional Assarin practices as rigorously as Galen. “Tired. I wish I could walk already. I need to stretch my legs.”

“You will. Maybe by the time I get back.”

“I hope so. I can’t stare at the inside of this tent anymore. I need to get out, and get back on a ship.” Gelanir frowned, a strange sight from him. Gelanir was a lot more easy-going than Galen could ever be. He was sure his little cousin was in here all day laughing and joking with everyone, keeping everyone else’s spirits up. “How long are you gone?”

“Three or four weeks, I think. Hopefully we spend very little of that time in the city.” Galen sat down on the floor next to his cousin. “I’m not comfortable knowing what they would do to me if they caught me.”

Gelanir nodded. “Be careful. I’m not looking to be the last of this family.”

Galen furrowed his brow. He expected himself to say something pessimistic like that, not his cousin. “Don’t worry. I won’t be leaving you alone.”

“So you came here just to say goodbye, then?”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. You want me to take care of the Records Book. In case you don’t make it back.”

Galen smirked, not at all surprised that his intent had been so obvious. “It’s important. I just want you to know that it falls on us as the last two members of this family to make sure it’s taken care of. That’s all I ask.”

Assarins had a practice of recording their history however and whenever they could, thus the body tattoos marking significant events in their life. When an Assarin died, however, it was the responsibility of the family to record all those markings for posterity in a family Records Book. Each marking was duplicated exactly in the book, so that the events of each person’s life would be recorded for all history. As portions of each book were filled, they were taken to

a library in the main city that stored all the Records for every clan in Assar. When the White Horsemen attacked, the library had been emptied and the records taken north as part of the Great Journey. Galen didn't know for sure, but he hoped that the new Assarin lands in the west had a library for him to take his Records Book to someday, so that they would be remembered.

Gelanir nodded. "I will. I still have to Record all this," Gelanir motioned to his injuries, "whenever I can take the bandages off for good. Hopefully, before you get back."

Galen smiled as realization hit him. He hadn't meant to bring his Recording kit, which contained all of the blades and inks he used for his markings, because he didn't think he'd have a chance to do much of it on the trip. But working on his markings was one of the few things in this world that calmed him and gave him focus. That's exactly what he would need on this journey. Perhaps that's what his mind was trying to tell him earlier.

"No, it will have to be after I get back. I'll be taking all of that with me. But thank you for reminding me."

"See, even lying useless in bed I'm still the smart one." Gelanir smiled.

"I don't think smart Assarins get thrown off of flying ships."

"That's because they're not as adventurous as I am."

Galen smiled and grasped his cousin's shoulder. "I'd take you with me if I could. I'd feel better with you around."

"I'll be there for the next one," Gelanir said, tempering his joviality.

"Let's hope we don't need that," Galen replied, feeling nervous again. He wasn't sure he'd sleep well tonight. Or for the next few weeks.

Chapter 3 - The Cliffs of Lharsil

Dawn came to the camp, bringing with it a tempered sense of excitement and hope amongst the Wind Riders, both of which had been in short supply the last three weeks. Iago waited anxiously near the south end of the valley, just outside the farthest row of tents with the three men he'd selected to join him. They were all members of his Lander squad, and most importantly for a mission like this, they were all men he could trust. Those who knew the underworld of Tyr had a common saying, 'The best place to sheathe your dagger is in the back of the man in front of you.' Unfortunately, after nearly a decade of navigating the back rooms and shady dealings common in that city, Iago could vouch quite well for the validity of that saying.

The youngest of the three Landers, Halgren, called Hal by everyone else, was a former slave rescued by the Wind Riders. Hal wasn't terribly bright, but his hefty build and his eager, rambunctious

attitude made him a valuable man in a fight. He stood slightly shorter than the others, with a square face and long, brown hair, and the edges of his mouth seemed to naturally curl up, making him appear to always be smiling. Saalis, another Lander from Iago's crew, waited next to Hal, his steady expression unreadable, as usual. He was roughly Iago's age, and a jack of all trades, spending his free time as a cook, or helping out the physicians in camp. He carried the marks of a former slave all over his arms and back, though, mostly burns and brands, typically given out as punishment in Anzarin cities. He kept his brown hair so short that it spiked more than hung, and his world-weary brown eyes stared at the ground in front of him.

Jonir was Iago's favorite, though. A few years his junior, Jonir shared a similar background to Iago, working as a guardsman in Tyr. He'd abandoned that life to join the Wind Riders during a raid some years back, and after being assigned to Iago's group shortly after his own arrival, Iago had found in Jonir the kind of determination and intelligence that he needed in a second in command. So Jonir became his Lander-Sergeant after only a few raids together and Iago

never once regretted that decision. Jonir was Iago's height, but slightly more fit and several years younger. He wore his dark brown hair just long enough to tie at the back of his neck, and his handsome face and easy smile made him one of the most personable people in camp.

The Landers and their Captain all wore various light tunics and pants for the daytime weather, with heavy cloaks for the brisk night winds. Iago had been the first to show up, since he slept so poorly these days that he'd already been awake for some time. The rest had gathered here minutes ago, double checking their supplies and equipment, and chatting with the small group of well-wishers who'd arrived to see them off. Most of them were women who had prepared food or stitched clothes or other items for the group. One of them, a light haired, pretty girl from Otaro named Essa, stayed close to Jonir. Iago hadn't known the exact nature of their relationship, but he didn't have to wonder anymore when he saw them together this morning. She'd baked some breads and pastries for Jonir to take with him on the trip, and

was quite obvious with her infatuation, even if Jonir seemed embarrassed by it in public.

Galen approached several minutes later, wearing his regular tan clothing and the blue cloak Pilots received upon completion of their training. He hadn't finished his but Avina presented him with one anyway because of his seat on the Council. A tall, gangly young man followed behind him, with thick, black hair, and wearing similar clothing except for a dark brown cloak. This was Margis, Galen's Second, a quiet kid, not known for socializing much. In fact, he spent most of his time with the other Pilots, probably training or whatever it was Pilots did when they were out of sight. Both of them looked like children wearing grown up clothes to Iago. They seemed nervous and uncomfortable, out of place amongst the adults. That wasn't fair to them, of course, but Iago needed them to be ready for this journey, and capable of dealing with whatever difficulties might come. At some point along the way, their lives may depend on one of these two making sound, experienced decisions, and he wasn't sure either

could do that yet. He hoped they would prove him wrong.

Avina and Arigin arrived last. Avina chatted briefly with everyone, giving words of encouragement while Arigin just stood at the edge of the gathering, fidgeting with his hands and glaring at everyone. After speaking with Galen, Avina motioned Iago off to the side, away from the others.

"I must ask you," she leaned in close and lowered her voice, "do you think Galen will have any problems in the city?"

Iago shook his head. "I believe your faith in him is well-founded, Pilot. I think he will do fine."

She waved her hand dismissively. "I don't mean in his duties. I'm sure he can handle that. I worry that he's Assarin. I haven't been to the cities since the problems in the West so I don't know how he may be treated."

Now Iago understood her concern. Tensions between Assarins and Anzarins in the west were high, and those tensions had started to spread east to the larger Anzarin cities like Tyr, Elbasa and Otaro. Iago had been in Tyr when word reached them about the

fall of the Anzarin cities near the Trin Lake, but despite some initial anger at the conquering Assarins, no one in the city seemed to care about it after a while. Anzarins from the steppes and those from the Trin never really considered each other as more than distant cousins at best, and besides, the Assarins seemed content with their new lands and showed no sign of expanding, so most eastern Anzarins left the matter alone. Refugees from the conquered cities, however, would not be so forgiving.

Iago glanced over at Galen, who was busy adjusting his Mergoran Chain for the tenth time this morning, a string necklace that Pilots wore around their neck, under their clothes. The Chain had Mergoran crystals tied up all around it, so Pilots who wore one always had crystals touching their skin, and thus, ready to use.

“I don't think it will be a problem, Pilot. Anzarins in the steppes aren't too concerned about anything that happens outside their walls. He may get some stares, but no one will bother him.”

Avina smiled. “Good. That is good to hear. Now be careful with this group, Iago. I am trusting you to

keep them safe.” Iago nodded. He was sure he could do the job, but it was hearing that word again, and it made him uncomfortable. “You’re our best Lander Captain, Iago, you always have been. I know Idaris thought highly of you, and rightly so. I know you can do this.”

“Thank you, Pilot,” Iago said, wondering once again how much Idaris had told her about him. “I won’t let you down.”

Avina moved to the center of the gathering and cleared her throat, garnering the attention of everyone present. “Bid these men good luck, fellow Riders. They embark this morning on a dangerous trek to save the future of our people and our mission. With our blessings they will succeed and return to us with what we need to continue on our fight against the Clerics and their wickedness.”

Iago saw the hope and the worry in the faces of the Wind Riders gathered around him. They had suffered greatly over the last several weeks, losing scores of friends or relatives to the destruction caused by the Tyran attack, and those who weren’t dead were either captured or scattered throughout the mountains

by now. He knew this group carried a heavy burden on its shoulders and the next two weeks would either save the Wind Riders, or hasten the death knell for these wonderful people. He was surprised to realize that even with all that, he felt calm this morning, almost confident. It felt good to have a mission in front of him he knew he could handle. And he would. No matter what.

“Galen. Iago. We put our faith in you to lead these men.” Iago bowed his head. He saw Galen do the same. Avina stepped forward and stood in front of the two men, putting her hands on Galen’s right shoulder and Iago’s left. “Go now. Our fate rests with you all.”

Iago nodded and he, Galen, Margis, Jonir, Saalis and Hal filed out of the camp to a chorus of waves and well-wishes, heading westward and out of the narrow valley.

Toward the city of their enemies.

* * * * *

The weather that first day proved to be remarkably pleasant. The cloudy sky blocked the normally oppressive sun, and cool winds blew in from the south, just enough to keep the air from getting stagnant, but too weak to kick up the dirt. Heavy rain rarely came this far north into the mountains, or even the steppes, but some in the party mentioned that every so often they felt drops of water, which meant a powerful storm might be hitting the south end of the mountain range, near the old Kingdom of Tehvol. But it was calm here. Calm, quiet and peaceful. Hal remarked on this as they traveled through the morning, proclaiming it as a good omen for the rest of the trip. Hal was especially superstitious, and took any sign of good or bad fortune very seriously, no matter how often the others ribbed him for it.

As midday faded into afternoon, the party finally made it to the banks of the Mirken River, just north of the Falls of Fenuhl, the great waterfall on the north side of the mountain Gahardarac, that most considered the starting point of the river. The Falls began within the mountain, in a cavern also called

Gahardarac, though no one knew if the cavern had been named for the mountain or the other way around. The cavern was a large, still mostly unexplored, gathering spot for the rainwater that always fell on the top of the southern Lore Mountains, and rumors persisted that a large lake could be found deep inside, and that the Happarans, who lived in the nearby mountains, used it for their water and mills, rather than coming down to the river.

They stopped briefly at the riverbank, taking a quick rest to load up their water bags and admire the huge waterfall in the distance. They were in the valley between Gahardarac to their south, and the mountain known as Lharsil to their north. The river ran right up to Lharsil, then cut west around the base of the mountain and continued north on through the foothills, out into the Halaraan Steppes. The plan of travel, as announced by Iago, was to move northeast, away from the river and any travelers who may be near it, hit the base of Lharsil the next day, then move back west towards the river. The river actually cut through a portion of the mountain, creating a deep canyon with several-hundred-foot high cliffs. This canyon,

known as the Cliffs of Lharsil, was generally avoided because parts of the pathway along the Cliffs were dangerously narrow. Most travelers went farther west, or they stayed low, moving through the base of the canyon, even though the footing there was suspect. Even so, traveling through the canyon floor was much safer than moving up top, where a strong wind or a clumsy slip could send you falling to your death.

No one took the news that they'd be taking the high road through Lharsil very well, but they understood the necessity. They had to avoid anyone who might be near the river. Few travelers ventured this deep into the mountains, and anyone who did was most likely a tracker or a bounty hunter, searching for runaway slaves or criminals, or even the Wind Riders themselves. They could not afford to be seen until they were well into the foothills, which would take about four or five more days. They could have gone east around Lharsil, but they didn't have the time or the supplies to travel that far out of the way. They needed speed, and they needed stealth. No one in the group had been told this would be an easy mission.

After resting, they moved north to a shallow, narrow section of the river, which they crossed using a natural ‘bridge’ of large, flattened rocks laid into the river floor. The water flowed easily around each rock, and still allowed a person to step from rock to rock and make it across relatively dry. Iago didn’t know but he suspected the Happarans were responsible for that bridge. They were well known for their stone craft and he had seen many other ‘natural’ formations that seemed unusually practical in these mountains.

They spent the rest of the day moving through the shallow valleys away from the river and down to the southern end of the mountain. A stretch of green surrounded each side of the river for a few hundred yards in both directions, full of grass, shrubbery and trees. Past that, though, the soil became dry and brittle, and the ground turned back into shades of brown and orange. The trip wasn’t too arduous but they spent a lot of their time working their way up and down the small, rugged, sun-scorched foothills that littered this part of the Lore Mountains. The Landers handled it well enough but Galen and Margis were usually the two furthest behind. They weren’t ready for the

rigorous path Iago chose, and it showed. Iago decided they should stop soon. He didn't need two irritable, sore-footed Pilots on his heels for the next few weeks.

They set up camp a little before nightfall and gathered around a fire, made with the help of Galen's limited Fire Magic skills, cooking and eating a couple rabbits that Saalis and Hal had nabbed while still near the river. Galen took only a few bites before pulling out a small box. He opened it and set the contents out in front of him, two small bottles of dark ink, some bandages and cloths, and a couple small blades. He pulled up his left shirt sleeve and began heating the blades in the fire.

"What's all that, Pilot?" asked Hal.

"My dyes and blades. I use them to do Recordings."

"You mean the tattoos?"

Galen nodded. "This is how we keep our history alive. We make these markings on our bodies to remember important events. Except the one here," Galen pointed to the elaborate marking that surrounded his left eye, "that one identifies our clan."

"Corovin, right?" said Jonir.

Galen smiled. “You’ve been paying attention.”

Saalis perked up. “What do the other ones mean?”

Galen set the blades down. “Not all of them would mean much to anyone else.” He lifted up his shirt to show a large array of symbols drawn over his chest. “These represent the family members lost before Gelanir and I were found. Each one was a cousin, or uncle and aunt, or parent, or brother.” Galen pointed to the different types of symbols as he talked. Everyone could see that there were a lot of them on his chest, almost two dozen from a quick count. It was a disturbing reminder of what Galen had lost in his short life. Galen put his shirt down and opened one of the dye bottles, then grabbed a blade.

“Is that your language? Those symbols there?” said Jonir.

“It’s the old Assarin language, from more generations ago than I can count. But we learn it while we’re young so we can use it to do our Recordings. That way we keep our history, and the language alive. We don’t tell stories like Anzarins do,

we keep our past alive like this.” Galen motioned with the dye bottle.

“What are you recording now?” asked Jonir.

“The attack. We lost a lot of friends there and I hope to keep their memories alive this way.”

The others nodded while Iago grabbed a piece of meat to distract himself from the sickness rising in his stomach.

“So what is Tyr like?” Margis, who was by far the least talkative person of the group, asked. He’d spent the evening sitting next to the fire with a bundle of papers, glancing through them distractedly.

“It’s no place for any sane person to be,” Hal said, chewing on a piece of rabbit meat. “I was never a free man there, but all I saw was evil men doing evil things.”

“That sounds about right,” Jonir added.

Saalis chuckled. “Parts of it aren’t so bad. I was there a few months once, I forget where though, ‘cause it’s so big.”

Iago put down his food and grabbed some water. “Tyr has five districts. A couple of them aren’t real

safe places if you don't know people. Of course, one of those is where we'll be going. Avis."

Jonir nodded in agreement. "The Avis district is the worst, but outside that there are some genuine people there. If you know where to look."

"Where are you from, Margis? Otaro?" asked Iago, picking up his food again.

"Aye, Captain. My whole life."

"I lived in Otaro for a long while, too," Saalis said. "I was a guard, and then I was a slave. But you were probably still running down the streets as a kid when I was there."

Margis smiled. "Probably."

"What about you, Cap'n? You're from Elbasa, right?" said Hal.

Iago nodded, working on a piece of meat.

"You was a guard there, weren't ya?"

Jonir chimed in. "He was a Cleric's Guardsman."

Iago nodded again, still chewing.

"That's a good job, Cap'n! Those are the ones that make the good money and stay in the big houses with the Clerics. Why'd you leave that one?"

Iago shrugged. "It wasn't the right place for me."

“You got any family there? In Elbasa?” asked Saalis.

Iago hesitated briefly. “No.” He chewed on the meat for a moment before answering more fully. “I was an orphan by the time I was eight, but I was on my own even before then.”

Galen continued his markings. “Most of us have lost a lot of family. I think if we hadn’t we wouldn’t be here, with the Wind Riders.” Hal, Jonir and Margis nodded. Iago put down his food. The stomach pains were hurting bad, now.

* * * * *

The second day of traveling was similarly uneventful. They spent most of it moving from the northern base of Gahardarac to the southern base of Lharsil, walking along rocky paths and pulling pebbles out of their boots every few hours, muttering loudly about how the pebbles made it into the boots in the first place. They made a quick stop at midday to rest and eat lightly, but were on their feet again before swallowing their last bites.

The only excitement of the day came around mid-afternoon, when they spotted a lone traveler heading south. From a distance he seemed to be Anzarin, and he carried a small pack, with a dog and a leashed goat following behind. His path took him some ways west of the group but Jonir wondered aloud if they should give him an even wider berth.

“I don’t think he’s a tracker, or any such sort. I think he’s running from them,” said Iago.

“Why’s that?” asked Galen.

“I would guess the goat, the dog and whatever’s in his pack are everything he owns, or everything he could walk away with. He’s probably in trouble with guards, or he owes too much money so he’s running to avoid slavery. He probably thinks he’s safer on the south side of the Lore hiding from those Horsemen, than the north.”

“That’s foolish,” Galen said.

Iago shrugged. “I’ve lived in those cities. I would rather chance the unknown than stay and be a slave myself.”

“Aye,” Saalis said. “I’ll take my chances with those White Horsemen than go back to slavery any day.”

“Either way, he’s probably more worried about us being trackers.” Iago watched the man as he got closer and took his path wide west of the group. Hal waved his arm in greeting as the stranger passed by, but he did not return it. The dog stopped to watch them warily a few times, and threw in several barks for good measure, but stayed close to his master.

After the man receded into the distance behind them, a realization struck Iago and he stopped.

“Your cloak,” he said, looking at Galen

“My cloak?” Galen seemed puzzled.

“Your cloak is what all the Pilots wear. You can’t wear that anymore. Anyone looking for Wind Riders out here might recognize it.”

Galen froze for a moment, then shook his head guiltily. He pulled off his cloak. “I’ll need to wear something, though. The nights are cold out here.”

Iago let his mind work, cursing himself for not thinking of this earlier. What good was he as their guide if he let something as obvious as this trip them

up? “You can wear it at nights, that won’t be a problem. Once we get through the foothills though, you need to put it in your pack and keep it there until we get back to camp.”

Galen nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry for not realizing that before we left.”

“No, it’s my fault. But be glad we thought of it now, before we got any closer. Remember, no one should be wearing anything that would give away what we are, just to be safe.”

The rest of the day passed quietly, with no sign of travelers. The sun’s heat bore down on them in the afternoon but Iago told them they were ahead of the pace he expected, so they stopped to rest as needed. Iago loved this part of the journey. He enjoyed wandering the paths and trails of the Lore Mountains. He hated the cities, especially Tyr. Too many people packed together, each with their stories of desperation. The misery on the faces of the poor, or the refugees, most of them just trying to survive. Children with no food to eat. Beggars sleeping on the roads at night. The Clerics hoarding their money and power,

believing kindness to be a sign of weakness. It was more than he could take sometimes.

But the mountains were different. Here, there were no guards to imprison the innocent. No Clerics flaying the skin of their servants. Just silence. Silence and space. He always enjoyed the Lore Mountains. He considered them much more beautiful than the Rhokan, which were closer to Elbasa. He wanted to scale one of these mountains someday, so he could look down on the world from a vantage point where no one could look back. He enjoyed solitude and he could think of nothing better than to be so far out of reach of the trials of life and men that he could just watch the clouds pass by at arm's length. He wondered what that would be like, if it would be as joyous as he imagined it. He looked up at the top of Gahardarac as they moved farther and farther away from its majestic peak.

One day he would find out.

* * * * *

The third day of their journey took them around the base of Lharsil. Galen, weary but confident up to this point, tried to remember what he could about the route. They would spend half the day working their way around the mountain back towards the river, and the other half working their way up to the Cliffs. Iago had warned them the night before that the winds up there would be considerably stronger than in the valleys, and parts of the path would be narrow enough that they could easily fall off to their death. That news had given them some anxious jitters that still hadn't gone away.

The journey around the base was similar to their first afternoon of travel, near Gahardarac. They moved up and down rocky trails, taking rougher, less-traveled paths. Again, they made frequent stops to remove rocks from their boots. Hal complained the most out of the group, exclaiming that he might as well walk barefoot since it would probably be more comfortable. They neared the river by midday and stopped to rest briefly. Everyone refilled their water bags and canteens and ate a quick lunch of dried meats. Iago cautioned them to eat sparingly, since

they would not be able to catch their dinner tonight, which caused a groan from the Landers. Galen took a moment to readjust his chain. The three days of hiking caused a few of the crystals to come loose from their knots a bit, and he needed to make sure he didn't lose any. They were increasingly valuable now until they found purifiers for the raw crystals they had stockpiled.

Just before moving out again, Iago stood before everyone with a stern face. "We'll reach the Cliffs this afternoon, but we won't get to the most dangerous paths until late tonight. I have never traveled this route so I don't know what dangers we'll face, but I do know the path is clear enough to get through because it's been done before. It's narrow in some parts and the winds are high so we need to be careful. I don't know where a safe camp spot is either, so we'll just have to take the first one we find. Tomorrow will be easier but I suggest we move as long as we can tonight until we get to safety."

"Do we have to come back the same way?" said Jonir.

“No. I think we’ll be taking the fastest route back instead of the deadliest one.”

“Good. I’ve heard enough about the Cliffs that I’m not looking forward to this.”

“I’ve heard there are ghosts up there,” Hal said in a concerned voice.

Saalis smiled. Jonir shook his head and said, “There are no ghosts. That’s a children’s tale.”

“Don’t be so sure. I’ve heard about them Cliffs, too. People aren’t so stupid, they don’t just go up there and fall off ‘cause the wind. The ghosts up there scare them off.”

“Well, no ghost is scaring me off,” Jonir said.

“We have two Pilots with us, Hal. Their Magic will keep ghosts away.” Galen was sure Iago stifled a smile as he said that.

The group resumed their trek - the other Landers still reassuring Hal that they would get through the Cliffs unscathed - trudging forward as the path sloped steadily upward. The wind picked up as they moved higher, and it seemed to get colder, too. Galen had his cloak on again, and he pulled it tight around him as they moved up the rocky trail. The grass, sparse

throughout the mountains, turned from green to brown, only showing itself in clumps under and around the rocks or popping through crevices.

The day dragged on unmercifully as they hiked along the rock-strewn path, moving higher up the mountainside, and farther west toward the river. The longer they walked without any noticeable change in the scenery, though, the more Galen wondered if they were behind schedule. They should be near the Cliffs by now but since he had no idea what the Cliffs were, or what they even looked like, he kept quiet, hoping they would present themselves in an obvious fashion.

Just as he began to wonder whether Iago had led them completely astray, the group approached a high cliff face that curved around to the left, facing the direction the river would be. It seemed to go up as high as he could see, falling farther and farther back at points, creating rows of ledges above. The path led them right up beside the cliff face and followed it around, keeping in sight of the river. Galen wondered if these were the Cliffs of Lharsil. If so, he was extremely unimpressed.

He quickly changed his mind once they came around the next bend. The path ahead narrowed to about ten feet wide, and nestled against the sheer cliff face to their right. The other side dropped straight down about three or four hundred feet, right to the Mirken River below. Galen's eyes bulged, and his stomach turned. He backed away from the edge, worried that he might faint, and he stared at the magnificent canyon ahead, which stretched on as far as he could see. The sheer rock face on each side made it seem as if one of the Basarah had taken a giant axe and cleaved the mountain in two. These were the Cliffs of Lharsil, the same cliffs that inspired countless stories and legends. Now he could see why.

"That's incredible," Jonir said, shouting over the heavy wind that suddenly buffeted them, whipping their cloaks around wildly. Galen bowed his head and pushed himself through it, pressing on with the rest of the group as they continued down the path.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Galen said, also raising his voice.

"It's amazing!" exclaimed Saalis, which made Galen smile. It may be terrifying, but it was also a sight he would never forget.

"Why haven't we ever flown out here before?" Jonir asked.

"The winds, I'm guessing," Galen answered. "It would be incredibly dangerous to bring a Karawan out here. If you don't have an exceptional Pilot, you'd get smashed into the sides."

Jonir winced. "Good point."

The ledge continued to get smaller as they traveled, while the wind picked up in intensity. Galen looked around for a spot that would be suitable to camp in, but he couldn't see one anywhere. The ledge wasn't too narrow to lay down, but he had no desire to sleep right next to the edge of a cliff, and besides that, the wind would make it impossible to rest. It was getting late in the day, though, and he began to wonder just how much farther they needed to go to reach a spot he'd feel safe enough to camp in.

They moved along the ledge for a short time, less than an hour, when it started getting smaller. Much smaller. It shrunk in size from roughly ten feet wide

to maybe half that. They could still walk it as long as they were careful, and they did for a while, until it lost another foot or two. With the high winds here and the ledge becoming increasingly narrow, Galen began to see how easy it was for people to fall off to their death. He wondered if Iago had the same thought, because Lander-Captain stopped and held up his hand.

“Saalis, I need that rope you have!” he called out. Saalis opened his pack, pulled out a coiled up length of rope, and handed it to Iago, who unfurled it, and tied a large loops at either end. He put one of the loops around his waist, and tossed the other end to Hal, who brought up the rear.

“Put that around you!” he called out. Hal nodded and put the other loop around his waist. Iago leaned in between everyone. “You four, grab the rope and hold on as we make our way across. It’s narrow at parts and the wind might be strong enough to carry you right over the edge. If you hold on to the rope, and one of you falls, the other five can carry the weight so you don’t fall to your death. But you have to hold the rope tight!” Iago squeezed the rope in his hands in demonstration.

Everyone nodded and moved in between Iago and Hal, grabbing a part of the rope. Galen twisted some of the rope around his wrist then got a death grip on it. He had been around Landers and their training enough to know that the way he held the rope would snap his wrist if someone next to him fell, but at the moment he didn't feel safe without doing it, irrational as it was. He wanted that rope to hold him just as much as he held it.

They moved slowly, deliberating every step and footfall. Sometimes the ledge widened enough to feel safe again, but just as Galen thought they were past the worst of it, the wall pushed back out again, threatening to leave no ledge at all. They moved this way for hours, not even stopping to eat as the sun slowly descended over the cliffs across the river.

The worst came just after the sun had set. The ledge became so thin for a stretch that none of them could walk it straight. They had to put their backs up against the wall and move sideways, else any gust of wind or lost balance would send them over. Galen had never been more frightened in his entire life. Even wandering the mountains alone with his cousin

as a ten year old boy was nothing compared to standing on the edge of a three hundred foot cliff for nearly an hour as they scooted across sideways. The wind screamed past his face now. He was positive that if Saalis, who stood just behind him, had yelled, he wouldn't even hear it.

Most unsettling was the darkness. Since the sun had set, the canyon below became harder and harder to see. Eventually, it got so dark that they couldn't see the bottom at all, except for random patches where the moon reflected off the water. Every few minutes a foot would knock a loose rock over the edge and it would disappear into the blackness below, sending horrible images into Galen's mind. He thought falling to his death during the day was bad, but now he had to imagine falling and not even knowing when he would hit the bottom.

Galen tried hard to think of something else, anything to take his mind off what could easily be a gruesome, horrifying death. He thought about the mission, but he couldn't concentrate enough to think about any of the details. They all seemed to escape him. He glanced at the others, moving across the

ledge the same as him, slowly and carefully, each with looks on their faces that revealed they were working just as hard at this as he was. He couldn't see Iago very well, who was too far ahead to make out in the darkness, but Jonir, just in front of him in the line, had a face like stone, tense and unmoving.

When the ledge finally did widen again, Galen took a deep breath. Even though it only widened to four or five feet, and eventually almost back to ten, it seemed as wide as the plains to Galen after that maddening hour. He knew at that moment that he would never take this path again, even if his life depended on it. Just the thought of coming back here might make his heart stop. He bowed his head against the strong wind and trudged on as Iago kept up their pace.

Galen had no idea what time it was when Iago finally led them to a rocky outcropping that jutted into the cliff face. Amazingly, it was the perfect spot to camp for the night as it was some ways from the edge, and the high rocks formed a natural wall against the winds. Galen's senses came back alive as they entered that little clearing. Everyone moved in close

and laid down their packs, rubbing their faces and eyes as they regained the feeling in their cheeks.

“Take advantage of this and rest up. We still have a ways to go in the morning,” Iago said, his voice hoarse. Galen was not ready for more of these cliffs, but that was a distant worry. He was hungry but his body ached so terribly that he didn’t think he had the strength to stay awake long enough to eat. Instead, he laid out his blanket and pack, covered himself with his cloak, and fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning came fast, and after eating the group wasted little time in moving again. They wrapped their cloaks tightly around themselves and moved back out to the ledge, and the furious winds. They had no need for the rope anymore, so it was put back into Saalis’ pack, but Galen still felt safer with it out. He liked having something to hold on to.

The group moved slowly, taking one deliberate step after another. The hikes up and down the mountains earlier in the journey were nothing compared to what Galen experienced here. He fought just to keep his cloak over his head, to keep the wind from whipping his face into total numbness. If he

looked up it would fly right off, so he just grabbed the hood with one hand and pulled it low over his face. He kept his head down and continued to trek forward, hoping it would all be over soon.

Roughly two hours later, the winds died down, and Galen realized that they had been moving on a downward slope most of that time. He'd lost track of where they were exactly but he moved next to the edge and noticed that the river seemed much closer. He had been so used to keeping his head down and looking only at the feet of those in front of him, to avoid the wind, that he'd missed the fact that they were finally past the Cliffs, and the path ahead of them spread out wide, more like the normal mountain paths they were used to. Galen let out a long, deep sigh of relief. They'd done it.

He looked behind him at the imposing Cliffs of Lharsil. They were past the worst of it; all they had to do was work their way back down to the river. He was drained, mentally and physically from this part of the journey, and he hoped the rest of the trip would not be quite as adventurous. He didn't think he could handle many more brushes with death.

Chapter 4 - Duren Olan

Just before dusk on the fourth day of the trip, the party returned to the banks of the Mirken River, having finally crossed to the north end of the Cliffs. They approached the river cautiously, Iago having made them aware that travelers could be nearby setting up camp or refreshing water supplies before heading south in the mountains.

After confirming that the area was clear, Iago brought everyone down to the riverbank where they refilled their water skins, and snuck in a few minutes of rest while he scouted ahead again. Galen welcomed the respite. The party had traveled hard past the Cliffs, always moving carefully and deliberately, taking less used, more difficult routes. Galen was used to a tough life being in the Wind Riders, but the last two days had him still catching his breath.

Half an hour passed before Iago wandered back into the camp.

“We need to move. I found a place for us to stay tonight,” he said as he unpacked a canteen and a water bag.

Galen rose from his resting spot, making sure his pack was in order. “Are we finally past the mountains?”

“Aye. We’ll reach the foothills in the morning, then it’s two more days until we’re in the steppes.” Iago walked over to the river bank and filled his canteen. “Three days from now we’ll be in Tyr.”

Galen nodded, hoping to cover up the tinge of nervousness he felt. “Good, the sooner we do this the better.”

Hal threw his pack over his shoulder, smiling. “You sure we can’t just stay here tonight, Cap’n? Take a rest from all this walkin’?” Saalis chimed in with his agreement.

“No. It’s not safe here.” Iago didn’t even look up.

Hal turned to Saalis. “So much for restin’ my legs.”

Iago led the group northeast from the river, up a narrow, rocky trail and along the top of another sheer cliff face, although this one was only thirty feet high,

instead of several hundred. They walked about half an hour along that ridge when Iago finally stopped and motioned the others to the edge. On the ground directly below them, carved out of stone into the side of the cliff, were seven man-made structures, buildings, each a single story except for the one in the middle, which was twice the height of the others. Each stood wide and rectangular, built with very hard and precise angles, and intricate circular designs were carved into the walls along the top, designs Galen didn't recognize. They seemed too small to be houses, though, or any kind of useful building. Galen didn't think he could stand upright in any of them save the center one, and only then if the first floor had no ceiling.

The buildings faced forward, across a wide, flat outcropping, punctuated by another structure, a tower, built away from the cliff wall, directly in front of the center building. The tower, which was roughly three or four times the height of the other buildings, and barely big enough around for a large person to fit inside, stood at the edge, overlooking the rolling hills to the north. At the top was a small, railed platform, a

watchtower, which probably had a view for dozens of miles.

“What is this place?” Galen said, transfixed on the elegantly simple architecture. No, not simple. Practical.

“An old Happaran outpost,” replied Iago, “It’s called Duren Olan. But the Happs left it a long time ago.”

Galen nodded absently. Happarans were the original miners of the Lore Mountains and had numerous towns and outposts throughout the foothills, but the steady push of Anzarins to the south had driven the Happarans out. Galen had never met a Happaran before, and unfortunately he doubted he would see any in Tyr. From what he knew of them, Happarans preferred to avoid human settlements entirely.

Jonir studied the buildings. “Are they empty?”

“They are tonight.”

Iago continued along the cliff face about forty more feet, where he stopped and crawled down over the edge. Galen came closer and saw that there were steps, like a slightly inclined ladder, carved into the

rock and Iago used them to climb down to the buildings below. He followed, as did Jonir, Margis, Hal and Saalis, though Margis hesitated at the top of the ladder.

“What do you mean by ‘tonight’?” he asked. “Is it usually occupied?”

“Occasionally. Some of the more experienced trackers and patrols use this place sometimes. But trust me, as late as it is now, if there’s no one here, then no one will be here until late tomorrow. We can camp here tonight, out of the wind, and tomorrow morning we can use that watchtower to see anyone who may be headed up the river this way. You can see into tomorrow up there.”

Galen was not amused. “You brought us to an outpost used by Tyran guards and trackers? Do you mean for someone to just stumble upon us in the night?”

Iago shook his head. “No one is anywhere near us, Pilot. Any Tyrans in the area who know of this place would already be here. Anyone else coming this way is camped farther down the river.”

Galen pursed his lips. “I hope so.”

Iago led the group to the taller, center building and opened the thick wooden door. He led everyone inside, where Galen was actually able to confirm that he could not stand straight. The ceiling stopped about a hand's width above his shoulders, forcing everyone to crouch as they walked around the room. Iago dropped his pack in a corner and moved to the back wall, kneeling and lifting up a grate in the wall that no one else could even see in the dark. He reached into the opening and smiled, motioning Galen over.

“Pilot, there's wood in here. Maybe you can use some of your Fire Magics to get us some light.”

Galen knelt down next to Iago and peered in the opening. He could see the silhouette of something solid. He hoped it was wood. “Right in there?”

“Aye. It's safe.”

Galen nodded and began to concentrate. He did not work on Fire Magic very often so he was happy to get a few chances for practice on this trip, even if all he did was start campfires. He closed his eyes and recited the Irahdan mantras in his head, over and over, until he felt the warm glow of the crystals around his neck. Once he had the mantras ingrained in his

consciousness, he opened his eyes, focused on the objects in front of him, held out his hand, and... a warm light suddenly filled the room. The firewood crackled as it caught fire easily, and Iago closed the grate while Hal and Saalis clapped their hands, grateful for the heat.

The grate kept the light from the fire subdued enough to give the room a comfortable, yellowish-orange glow, rather than just light up all the corners as a fire would normally do. The room itself was bare, as any furnishings had long since been stolen or destroyed. The walls, though made of stone, were finished with a different material on the inside, perhaps chalk or some other softer material. There were no markings on the inside, like the ones carved into the outside walls, but Galen thought he could see a faint discoloration around the top of the room, where some decorations may have once been painted. A narrow stone staircase snaked up the side wall, left of the fireplace. It led towards the back of the room, to a wood hatch in the ceiling that covered the opening to the second floor, hinged at the side. The

hatch was closed but Galen wondered if he should go up and check the top room, just to be safe.

Jonir crouched by the front windows, making doubly sure no one else had wandered by while they enjoyed some comforts. “You’ve been here before?” he asked Iago.

“A few times. This might be my fourth, if I remember right. There’s another Happ outpost east of here, east of the steppes even. I used to roam those lands a long time ago and I used that outpost a lot. That one was called Kolqan Olan I think.”

“How did you know about the wood in the fireplace?” asked Margis as he settled against the wall.

“It’s a custom of these outposts. When you use it for the night, you restock the wood the next morning before you leave, for the next visitor, or bad fortune will visit you.” Iago winked at Hal and smiled.

Saalis chuckled. Hal slapped him on the arm. “Don’t laugh at bad fortune. I know these hills have evil spirits in ‘em.”

“Don’t worry about evil spirits, Hal,” Iago said, “we have cover from the wind and a fire to keep us

warm. Now let's eat and get some good sleep. The rest we get tonight has to last us three days.”

No one stayed up late. Everyone ate quickly and settled in to their blankets with a minimum of conversation. Galen stayed up slightly later than the rest, but only by a few minutes. Like Jonir, he was unable to rest easy without taking one last look out the window. Seeing nothing in the darkness except for the stars in the sky, Galen at last lay down and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Iago woke up just before sunrise with a start. He sat up and looked around, seeing the others still asleep and the fire almost dead, and he wondered with no small amount of aggravation what roused him from one of the more restful nights he'd had in a while. He rubbed his eyes and considered grabbing a few more precious moments of sleep, but the purple hue of the nighttime sky told him that he would have to get back up soon, anyway. He stretched for a moment, resting on the floor before finally deciding

that now was as good a time as any to gather more wood for the fireplace.

He threw his cloak around his shoulders and stepped out of the room, closing the door quietly. He'd intended to head for the building at the east end of the settlement, where the wood was normally stored, but before he even took a step, the watchtower beckoned him. It was still dark out so he wouldn't be able to see much, but he decided to climb up anyway and take a look. He felt like a kid every time he saw the tower, and with no one else awake yet, he wanted to go up and take advantage of the view. Being high off the ground made him feel almost normal sometimes, like he had no cares at all, and that sense of freedom was a major reason why he loved being part of the Wind Riders. No feeling in the world could compare to soaring through the sky on a Karawan and seeing the mountains below you. Standing at the top of this Happaran watchtower wouldn't be quite the same experience, but it would still be fun.

Iago reached the base of the stone tower and opened the short wooden door. He crouched through

the opening and grasped the ladder inside. It led all the way up to a hatch, which opened to the railed platform at the top. As he took his first step up, though, he froze, hearing a crooning noise in the distance that made the hairs on his neck stand up. It was a low, deep moaning, coming from the south, in the direction they'd come from last night. It could be a trick of the wind, but he didn't believe that for a second. Some creature made that noise, human or animal. He also realized he was hearing the same thing that had woken him up.

The noise stopped abruptly. Iago stepped off the ladder and crouched down, looking out the doorway for signs of any movement nearby. He saw nothing, so he went back inside and hurried to the top, though the base of the tower was not very large around, and the inside walls threatened to brush against Iago's shoulders as he reached the ceiling. He opened the hatch and climbed through to the open wooden platform and he scanned the area, searching for any sign of nearby life. Again, he found nothing out of the ordinary. The mountain behind him blocked his view of everything except the ledge they had taken to get

here. Still, he searched left and right, looking for movement, but nothing stirred in the darkness.

The noise came again, closer this time, and Iago's skin crawled from the unease of not knowing what he faced. Then he heard a second moan, on top of the first, closer still. He turned east again and watched the sloping ridges of the mountainside. That's where it came from, both of them.

Movement below startled him and he reached for his belt, grasping for a sword he didn't have. It was only Galen, fortunately, peeking through the door of the building. The Pilot looked left and right, a very concerned look on his face. Iago, not wanting to draw more attention than he needed to, rapped the wooden railing and waved his arms until the Pilot saw him. He put a finger to his mouth, signaling him to stay quiet, then motioned him back inside. Galen nodded and retreated through the doorway while Iago climbed back through the hatch and down the ladder.

When he reached the ground he noted the silence that filled the air. Whatever made that noise must be on the move. He sprinted back to the building and closed the door behind him, finding Galen already

getting dressed while the others slowly sat up and rubbed their eyes.

“Hurry!” Galen shouted in a whisper.

Jorin reached for his weapon. “What is it?”

Iago grabbed his pack, along with his belt and sword. “Something’s out there. Creatures of some sort. I don’t recognize the sound, but I think it best if we move before they get here.”

“They’re Garns,” said Galen.

Iago stopped in mid-buckle, so surprised by Galen’s words that he didn’t know what to say. Garns were fearsome tribal creatures of the western Lore Mountains. He’d never seen one, but he heard they looked like large men, standing two heads higher than a human and as strong as three. They were savage raiders, known for eating any meat they could find, even human. But no one had ever seen one out here.

“I thought Garns were only in the West,” Saalis said, echoing Iago’s own confused thoughts.

Galen threw on his cloak and grabbed his pack. “I don’t know. Maybe they’ve moved east. But that noise you heard was a Garn scouting the area.”

Iago finished fastening his belt. “I heard two of them. Close”

“They travel in packs of three or four usually.” Galen pulled his robe over his head, his crystal necklace already around his neck. “They moan like that when they think they’ve found something. If they’re not hunting some goats or boars in the area, then we’re in very serious trouble.”

Iago stuffed his blanket into his pack. “Get everything ready to go. There’s a small ledge just west of the outpost that leads down. It will take us back towards the river. We need to get there, now.”

A crash outside startled them. Iago jumped back against the side wall, grabbing the hilt of his sword, as did Saalis. Galen backed up into the left corner by the staircase and Margis did the same on the right while Hal crouched down on the floor. Jonir moved to the front, trying to peer out a window without being seen. Iago made eye contact with him, but Jonir just shook his head and continued searching for whatever caused the crash.

Iago turned to Saalis and pointed to the hatch at the top of the stairwell. Saalis nodded, grabbed his

pack and climbed a few steps until his back was crouched over, pressed against the hatch. He reached out to open it, and Iago grimaced, worried that the hinges would be so rusty that they would creak loud enough to be heard in the Outerlands. To his surprise, and Saalis', whose expression showed that he'd expected the same thing, the hinges made no noise as he opened it and peered around the second floor. He looked back at Iago, nodded, then climbed up top. Iago pointed to Margis, whose face was pasty white now, to go up next, then Galen.

While the two Pilots shuffled up the stairs, Iago moved to the front wall, stopping next to the window on the right side of the door. From where he stood the only angle he had through the window was the area just outside the door and beyond that to the west. The crash had come from the other direction, though. Jonir had by now found enough courage to stand right next to the left window, scanning the opposite angle. He looked out, then turned his head to his right and leaned out ever so slightly. He immediately jumped back, causing Iago to flinch and grab his sword again.

Jonir pointed to the right and held up two fingers. Iago mouthed the word “Garns?” and Jonir shrugged.

Hal, who had moved to the wall behind Iago, looked terrified. “What are we gonna do, Cap’n?” he whispered. Iago put his finger to his mouth and shook his head, then pointed upstairs. Hal grabbed his pack and followed the Pilots to the second floor.

Another crash, closer this time. Iago tensed, and he saw Jonir do the same. The noise sounded like doors in the other buildings being flung open. Or pounded open. He figured the Garns were scavenging for food, thinking this was a regularly occupied settlement. There were seven buildings total, three to the left and three to the right. If they were going door to door, then they were only two doors away. Iago motioned for Jonir to go upstairs. They each grabbed their packs and hurried up the staircase, Jonir, then Iago, who closed the hatch behind him.

The others crouched against the back wall, the Landers with stern, hard faces and the Pilots with wild, scared eyes. Iago and Jonir took spots on either side of the hatch and waited. Iago looked for a lock or some kind of mechanism to keep the hatch shut, but

there was no way to secure it. If the Garns came in here and decided to check upstairs, they would just have to fight them. He slowly pulled his sword out, getting it comfortable in his hand. Then he waited quietly, unmoving. The silence was unnatural. It made everyone uncomfortable and all of them were visibly sweating in the cool morning air, but no one said a word or made a sound for fear of breaking the stillness.

After an interminable wait, another crash came, closer. They were next door, and Iago heard faint scuffling coming through the walls, but not much else. All the Landers had their swords out now. Iago turned to Galen to see the Pilot's eyes squeezed shut. The sounds stopped and everyone readied themselves, knowing as Iago did that this building was next. Saalis, in a crouching position on the floor, began bouncing slightly, as if ready to pounce.

The next sound they heard was another of those low moans. Only this one came from above the building. Iago saw Galen's eyes pop open and look to the ceiling, and realizing that a third had joined them, likely waiting on the ledge behind the structures. It

was soon accompanied by a second, then a third, coming from below, just outside. Iago began thinking, frantically. The third one would have to work its way here by coming down the side like the other two did. Fortunately, the buildings were made entirely of stone, so the door downstairs was the only way in. Unfortunately, it was also the only way out.

The moans stopped. Another crash. The door below slammed open.

Everyone froze, listening to the sound of Garns on the other side of the hatch. Loud sniffing and scuffling noises filled the air, then the sound of the grating to the fireplace being opened, followed by grunting. Iago crouched low, ready to stab at anything that came through the hatch, and hoping that the Garns decided not to come near the stairs. He waited for a seemingly endless moment.

Then he heard a sickening sound behind him. Iago and the others turned to see Margis crouched over in the corner of the room, vomiting. Iago felt his stomach drop as Margis caught his breath and retched again, loudly. Hal grimaced and turned away while

Saalis shook his head, worry obvious on his face. There was no chance the Garns hadn't heard that.

The scuffling sounds stopped. They turned into sniffing noises. Iago waited, sword in hand, ready to strike. He could smell the foul stench coming from the corner but he barely thought about it. He watched the hatch intensely, staring at the planks of wood separating them from possible death.

The hatch popped open, and before Iago could even think, Jonir lunged forward with an awkward thrust that struck flesh. A thunderous roar of pain filled the room and in the split second of Iago's hesitation, he finally saw what a Garn looked like. Every grotesque feature of this beast seemed double the size of a normal man. Its huge, bulbous eyes hung over a wide mouth and a large nose, all shadowed by a forehead that jutted out grossly. This one had long, wispy dark hair that hung from the sides of a nearly bald head. The Garn's shoulders were wide and thick, its arms almost as big around as Iago's waist. The creature wore nothing save a ragged loincloth, and it held a large mace, two handed for normal men, in its left hand.

Jonir's blade found its target, digging deep into the Garn's right shoulder. The creature twisted away, pulling its back against the wall, with the hatch in between, but as it turned, Jonir's blade came free from his hand. Now weaponless, Jonir lost his balance and toppled to the floor, before righting himself and scurrying away on his backside. Iago took advantage of the confusion and drove his own blade into the Garn's chest. The creature cried out again, and grabbed Iago's wrist before he could pull the sword out. Iago grimaced at the monster's incredible strength, and he thought his hand might pop off from the pressure of its grip. Iago tried to wrest himself free, but he couldn't budge. Jonir, still the closest, lunged past Iago and grabbed the hilt of his sword, still sticking out from the beast's shoulder. It came free but not before the Garn slipped back down the stairs, dragging Iago down with him.

Iago fell forward, his arm, shoulders and head falling through the hatch and into the bottom room, with only his legs bracing his body up top. The Garn still had a death grip on his forearm, but it was dying, and slumping farther down the short staircase. Iago

turned and saw the second Garn, looking very similar to the first, standing near the door. Iago blanched as it stared back at him, upside down from his current point of view, almost as if considering how to eat him. Iago panicked and pulled harder, reaching up with his free hand to grab the edge of the hatch.

Strong hands grabbed his legs and waist, trying to keep him from being dragged completely through, where a quick death would await. But no matter how much they pulled and he struggled, he was stuck as long as the Garn held his arm. The second Garn howled at him and approached, stooped over uncomfortably by the low ceiling, holding an axe that looked like a trinket in its oversized fist. Just as he thought it was all over, the first Garn relaxed his grip enough for Iago to slip his hand free. The three Landers fell back as they yanked him up through the hole and as far back from it as they could get in this small room. The hatch door fell shut, leaving the room in shocked silence.

Iago tried to catch his breath, panting more than actually breathing. That second Garn would be up here any moment, and his sword was still lodged in

the chest of the first one. Hal and Saalis sat on either side of him, their weapons ready. Jonir crouched off to the left some, waiting to pounce once again.

A harried moment passed, and finally the hatch flew open. Jonir struck, this time with a wide slash, but the second Garn was more prepared for them. It whirled its axe in a backhand motion that caused the two weapons to crash into each other, sending Jonir's sword flying into the wall behind the Garn. Jonir rolled out of the way as the Garn swung wildly again, trying to hit anything nearby.

The Garn took another step up the stairs, trying to crawl into the room when it stopped and let out a roar. The roar turned into a choking sound, however, and then it cut off completely. Iago watched in confusion as the Garn dropped its weapon and began clawing at its own throat. All of a sudden the Garn slammed itself into the wall behind it and stayed there, its eyes bulging even more than normal. Out of the corner of his eye, Iago noticed Saalis looking off to the right. Iago followed his gaze and saw Galen, his right hand held out towards the Garn, eyes intently focused on the creature, silently mouthing the same

few words over and over. He turned back to the Garn, watching as its hands slowly slid down to its sides, the life draining away. Everyone continued to stare, completely captivated as the Garn eventually stopped moving completely. Iago turned back to Galen to see him still chanting.

“Galen.” Everyone flinched when Margis broke the silence, except for Galen, who continued, almost in a trance. “Galen!” Margis said. This time he was heard and Galen’s mouth stopped moving. He took a deep breath and let his arm drop, at which point the Garn fell down through the hatch, the door again falling shut.

“What was that?” asked Hal, his eyes wide.

Galen exhaled and brought his hands up to rub his extremely pale face. He waited a moment before finally answering, “Air Magic.”

“I thought Air Magic just flew the ships and made shields.” Hal almost seemed afraid of the Pilot now.

“He hardened the air in its chest, choking the beast to death,” Margis said, somewhat in amazement.

“It’s not a trick we’re taught to use very often. But I thought now might be the time.” Galen sniffed and ran a quivering hand through his hair.

Saalis readied his sword. “There’s still another one out there.”

“Aye.” Iago had just now managed to get his mind working again after his encounter with the first Garn. “We should make a run for it.”

Jonir grabbed his sword and his pack, then lifted the hatch while everyone else gathered their belongings. He peered down, then moved around to get a better view of the entrance below. After a quick check, he pulled the door completely open and hurried down the stairs. The rest followed, Galen and Margis coming down last. Iago saw the Garn with his sword leaning against the wall at the bottom of the steps. Its eyes were closed but it was still breathing, albeit very slowly. Blood covered the Garn’s chest and shoulder, and a puddle had formed on the floor, while the second one lay on its back in the middle of the room, completely still. The other Landers crowded around the doorway, trying to see out the door and the windows.

“I don’t see it,” said Saalis.

“Maybe it’s hiding, waiting for us,” Hal said.

“Garns don’t hide,” Galen replied, as he reached the bottom of the steps.

Iago continued to stare at the first Garn, consumed with getting his sword back. Would the Garn wake up if he pulled it out, or was it already too far gone? He had to decide quickly if he wanted his weapon back. “Move outside if you can’t see it. Make a run for the ledge to the left of us. It leads back down to the river.”

Jonir stepped through the doorway cautiously, his eyes looking everywhere. He finally went completely through and shook his head. “I don’t see anything.”

“Go! Quickly! I’ll be right behind you,” Iago said. The others moved through the doorway and followed Jonir as he ran west, away from the outpost. Iago glanced one last time out the windows, and then he grabbed the hilt. He hesitated for a second, and tried to stand as far away from the beast as he could. Finally, he yanked his sword out. The Garn leaned forward slightly from the force, then fell sideways onto the floor. Iago frowned, wondering if he should

put the Garn out of its misery, then deciding better of it. He didn't want to be in this room anymore, so he ran out the door.

Chapter 5 - Tyr

It had taken Galen all morning to relax from the fight at Duren Olan. His hands shook for some time after leaving the outpost, and he still felt jittery, constantly looking back to see if that third Garn had decided to come after them for revenge, or just a meal. He tried his best to relax but it was no use. That encounter had been totally unexpected and wholly unwanted, especially now, and he had trouble coming to terms with why it happened at all. And not just for obvious reasons.

Pilots, like all magic users, learned concentration exercises to help them focus when casting or chanting. A magic user with no focus is no more useful than a miner without a pick, because it's the single-mindedness of the caster that affects the intensity and power of the spell. The only thing the crystals do is provide the spark for the magic to begin, and they affect the duration of the spell, although that can also depend on skill. But every focus exercise Galen had

ever learned was of no help to him now. He was more rattled than he could ever remember. But it was more than that. He also felt vindicated. A part of him opened up when he killed that Garn, releasing a weight on his memories that had been sitting there for a decade now. The whole experience had been a small taste of vengeance for him, and he struggled with the empty sense of triumph he'd experienced in that Happaran building.

Memories flooded back into his mind, unbidden, of sleeping in the mountains with his family after the Breaking, over ten years ago. Half his family had been lost during the Great Journey, dying from either the strain of traveling through the mountains or from disease and starvation. All that remained with him when the Anzarins drove them back into the mountains were his cousin, Gelanir, his father, his uncle and two other cousins, children of another brother who had died. They slept in a small cave that night, hiding from the cold wind that threatened to kill off the rest of them. They had little food and only a few blankets amongst them, all they could take

when they were attacked. Galen managed to actually fall asleep easy that night, mostly from fatigue.

Then that moaning sound came. It awoke Galen first, who tried to reason with himself that it was nothing to be frightened of. Then it came again, from somewhere else. He remembered the fear setting in, then the panic as he woke his father. But by then it was too late. A pack of three Garns found them, swinging their large clubs at anything that moved. Galen's father and uncle fought as well as they could, but they stood no chance. One swing smashed his father's head and he saw him drop to the ground, lifeless. He heard his uncle, busy grabbing the two younger cousins, yelling at him and Gelanir to run away, and they did. They turned and ran as fast as they could, stopping only for one anguished moment as they heard several cries of agony behind them.

The two of them ran forever, until they finally collapsed from exhaustion. They found some cover from the night and the wind and waited, sure that the Garns would find them any minute, but too tired to run anymore, too dazed from the horror they'd seen to keep fighting. They fell asleep, with Galen convinced

that they would never wake back up. But the worst part came when they did. They wandered the mountains for two weeks, cold and hungry, surviving on brittle plants and small bugs before they were found by chance and saved by Wind Riders who'd come west to scout. But Galen's memory of the fear he felt that night never left him. He thought he'd gotten over it. He thought age and experience had pushed the memory away. But the moment he heard those sounds again at Duren Olan, he became a young boy again, and he remembered every terrible part of that night in excruciating detail.

But even though he'd exacted a small price from that Garn for taking his family from him, it wasn't enough to overcome the feelings of loss now swelling back up inside him. He never got over all the death he'd seen; he'd always been too busy running, from the White Horsemen destroying his homeland, from the Anzarins forcing them back into the mountains, from the Garns who killed his father and uncle and cousins.

Why had this happened now? Why did he have to deal with all this again, when they were on the most

important mission the Wind Riders had undertaken in over ten years? Damn Iago for leading them this way. They never would have run into to the Garns had they taken a normal path. Damn Arigin for not taking the lead and making this trip in his stead. Damn the Tyrans for their treachery and destruction. He spent years trying to put those memories behind him, and damn them all for bringing them back.

* * * * *

They stopped at mid-day to rest, and Iago gave everyone an update on the rest of their journey. They'd reached the northern base of Lharsil, almost to the foothills where the rocky paths and sheer cliffs were giving way to grassy valleys and smoother hills. It would take them another two days at the most to get through the foothills and into the Halaraan Steppes. But that assumed that they didn't run into any trouble on the way. Bandits, slavers and rogues of all types would be roaming both the steppes and these hills. He didn't worry about being captured or taken, though. As long as they were careful and sharp-eyed

they could avoid the larger groups easily, and the smaller ones would avoid them as long as they saw that four of the group carried weapons. Small bandit groups, or slavers, would avoid parties with armed guards. They weren't worth the trouble.

Iago also told them that they'd taken a fast pace through the mountains, taking little-used paths that kept them out of sight and avoided trouble. But they wouldn't have that luxury in the foothills or in the steppes. From here on out, they would have to face whatever trouble came their way head on, because there was nowhere left to hide.

Once they reached the foothills, they thankfully spent less time hiking and climbing and more time wandering through the shallow valleys and over low, gradually sloping hills, walking easy and hoping to avoid Tyrans. They made camp in one of the valleys and ate some rabbits they were fortunate to come across that afternoon. The group talked lightly, mostly about Duren Olan since they had the entire day to regain their senses and put words to what they saw and felt that morning. Galen avoided the conversation, though. He ate light and slept early.

The next morning brought another day of travel through the hills, their last before reaching the steppes the following morning. Galen was almost glad to finally see Tyr. He wanted this journey to end, so he could get past the hardships of the trek, and the doubts and fears in his mind. He remembered Iago talking about the lone traveler they encountered on the way here, and how he had said some people prefer unknown dangers to known. He only now felt like he understood what that meant.

After another uneventful morning, they stopped at midday to rest and eat. Before resuming their march, Iago turned to Galen and Margis and gave them a serious look. “Wear your crystals and cloaks for today and tonight, Pilots, but take them off in the morning and don’t put them back on. Don’t give the appearance that you are magic users in any way. You’ll be targets to everyone in the city if you do.”

Galen and Margis both nodded, though reluctantly. Galen would be uneasy without his crystals at the ready, since magic was his only defense against whatever danger came next. But even though the encounter with the Garn was still fresh on

his mind, he could be practical and stay anonymous for the rest of the trip. He just didn't have to be comfortable with it.

The afternoon dragged on much more slowly than the previous one, mostly because the weather had become noticeably warmer as they approached the steppes. The sky was empty save for the sun beating down on them, and a faint wind kicked up dust here and there. At one point, Galen realized he'd been lost in his thoughts for so long that he'd lost track of time. The sun sat on the crest of the mountains to the west, which meant they'd be stopping somewhere soon, but he didn't know when. Iago was unpredictable that way.

Suddenly, Iago crouched low, motioning everyone else to do the same. They laid flat in the tall, dry grass, as Iago stared at something unseen over the crest of the hill. After a moment Jonir crawled up next to him, then Saalis and Hal. Finally Galen decided to go see what they were hiding from so he too crept along the ground until he reached the others. He looked down into the valley ahead of them, some five or six hundred yards away, where he saw a

familiar sight. A long caravan of large, wooden carts, some pulled by horses, some by slaves, moved slowly across the valley. About forty soldiers on horseback, wearing the red and brown garb of Tyran soldiers, rode alongside, some using lashes or whips to keep the slaves moving faster, to keep up with the horse drawn carts.

At least a hundred slaves manned the caravan, chained to each other, pulling what looked to be fifteen carts filled with crystal extraction supplies. They would spend roughly two months in a mine deep in the mountains, pulling everything they could out of the caves. Some of the slaves would die in those conditions, but that's why the Tyrans brought a few extra. When the next caravan arrived, this one would load up the carts with whatever usable crystals they'd found, then head on back to Tyr with the survivors. With the exception of Margis, all of the Wind Riders here had seen this a hundred times. Saalis and Hal had actually been slaves just like the ones they now watched down below.

“Miserable bastards,” Jonir said. “They wipe out half our numbers and now they can bring out mining

caravans twice the size they used to. Give me a Karawan right now and we could put some fear back into them. And teach them not to be so brazen.”

“Aye,” Saalis said. “I knew we might see this, but it still boils my blood to know what those people will go through in those mines.”

Hal shook his head. “I never knew people ate more than once a day until I was freed. All we got in the mines was some water and old meat in the morning. Nothing else. Barely even saw the sun during those times either.”

Saalis nodded. “Not times I like to remember.”

“Let’s get to Tyr. We make a deal for purifiers and we can fix this,” Iago said. “We can go back to righting wrongs, again.”

The others nodded, but Galen hesitated. It was strange letting the caravan go, knowing the terrible situation the slaves were headed for, because he had never done it. He was used to seeing the smiles and appreciation on the faces of freed slaves, hearing their heartfelt thanks and seeing the gratitude they had for having a new life. But seeing this made him realize exactly what kind of life those people had before he'd

ever found them. This was the first time he'd come face to face with what they went through, and it was also the first time he was powerless to do anything about it.

They moved away from the caravan, taking the long way around, just to be safe. After a few more hours of traveling the group finally made camp between two small hills a good distance from the river. Again the conversation was lively around the campfire and again Galen was not part of it, preferring to spend time working on his journal and going over his notes. He turned and watched the others at the fire, talking, laughing, eating, and he wondered how this trip would end. They had already faced death once, twice if he counted the harrowing trek past the Cliffs, and they had come through just fine. But what would happen at Tyr? Everyone who had ever been there left no doubt about the dangers in that city, and here he was, leading five Wind Riders right into the heart of their enemy.

Galen watched Iago, sitting casually with the others as they traded old tales of Anzarin legends and heroes. He definitely had the look of a fighter, strong

but with a weary confidence to him that made him seem both dangerous and humble. Iago seemed to be a solitary person, more so than anyone else he knew in the camp, and people talked on occasion about the secrets he kept. Here was the man who would guide them in that terrible city, yet Galen wondered just how much anyone here knew about him. Galen himself knew nothing about Iago's history before joining them, only that he had spent a long time in Tyr and Elbasa, working as a Guard among other things. Why did he quit? And what brought him to the Wind Riders?

He remembered the day Iago found them, stumbling into their camp almost a year ago and being taken by Landers to the Pilot's Council for questioning. He'd met with Idaris for some time in private but no one knew what details passed between them that day, only that Idaris had proclaimed him to be one of their own after that, and to be treated as such. Strange circumstances, but no one thought much of it at the time. Galen knew that Idaris and Iago had been close since then, but when they spoke, they always did so away from prying ears. He

wondered how much Idaris' death in the attack a few weeks back had affected Iago, especially since Iago hadn't been there when it happened.

Galen's brow furrowed at that thought. Iago wasn't at camp when the Tyrans attacked because he had some things to attend to, a trip Idaris had approved. Galen grunted in confusion. Why so many secrets? What was in this man's past that he could never say? He assumed only Idaris really knew, and with their former Pilot-Captain dead, only Iago held the answers. Perhaps that was fortunate for Iago.

Galen shrugged. Now was not the time to question the trust he had to put into the members of this group. He needed Iago to get them into and out of Tyr safely, something he couldn't do himself. And even though he was bothered by the lack of control he had over that part of the mission, he trusted Iago, who had shown his loyalty and determination many times over since joining the Wind Riders. But with their entire future now at hand, everything needed to happen just right once they got into the city. He hoped that Iago had the same faith in his contacts that Galen gave to him right now.

* * * * *

Iago wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his wool cloak. He wanted to take it off, so he could cool down, but he knew he was too easily recognizable in these parts, so he kept the cloak on with the hood up over his head. The mild heat combined with the constant walking made him sweat like a stallion, but he ignored it and moved on. He would have to see about getting a Liren cloak in town, though. They were much thinner and lighter than this one, and much more comfortable. Although, he didn't look forward to dealing with Liren merchants.

The dry, cracked ground and the long tufts of greenish-brown grass that stretched endlessly to the north and east gave no doubt as to their location. They were in the Halaraan Steppes now, one of the more arable areas, too, seeing as they weren't far from the river. Most of the land here was cultivated for wheat farming, and sometimes corn, but as you traveled away from the river, the land became hard and dry, poor for grazing and impossible for farming.

Iago decided to take their path closer to the river, intending to follow it northwest straight to Tyr, which sat on the east bank. They would see more people coming this way, and pass some small outposts and patrols, but that was no worry. This close to town they looked like nothing more than travelers seeking a place to stay, and if asked, they could simply claim they were refugees from the Outerlands, and no one would think twice. They still had a long day left before they actually reached the city or its outskirts, however. Iago figured that if their water held out and they ran into no trouble on the way, they would reach Tyr by evening, so they had to brave the perils of the steppes until then. He wasn't worried. They were getting close to the lands patrolled by the guards, and in the steppes, he would rather take his chances talking his way past curious soldiers than running from roving thugs working for bandit-kings in the area.

The first signs of settlements came shortly after midday. They passed a small collection of tents, home to roughly two dozen people herding a small pack of sheep and goats. A few chickens clucked in a pen,

and two herding dogs ran around the camp's edge, chased by four children wearing nothing more than rags for clothing. None of these people were Anzarin, though, and the adults looked tired and haggard, even scared, as the group passed by. When asked about it afterwards, Iago said that they were Outerland refugees, called kirfalla by the locals, escaping to the Lore Valley after losing their homes to the White Horsemen. He guessed that this group came from Neratos, or maybe Aberohn, but he couldn't be sure. A short time later they saw another camp, farther in the distance this time. It seemed to be set up the same as the first one, only twice as large.

Later that afternoon, they spotted a half-dozen riders on horseback, a guard patrol, Iago thought, headed south at a fast clip. Iago's heartbeat picked up when he first saw them on the horizon directly ahead, but they angled to the right and passed by, completely uninterested in them. Iago let out the breath he'd been holding, and as he did, he saw the same look of frantic relief on the face of everyone else in the group. Iago just raised his eyebrows, smiled weakly and kept walking.

After another half hour of staring aimlessly at the ground in front of him, Iago stopped when he noticed that the others in the group had slowed down. He glanced back to see everyone's gaze fixed on something off in the distance, and he turned to finally see the dark outline of the massive city ahead. Tyr, where tens of thousands of people dwelled, worked, slaved and fought. Iago frowned at the four, dark-brown spikes jutting up from the center, just barely visible over the walls - the towers of Ocasha Etyr, the Grand Palace of the Clerics. Just next to them, the reflection of the afternoon sun gleamed from the bronze dome of the Tyran Library. Those were the only structures in the city taller than the outer walls, which were said to be the height of twenty men. With Tyr finally in sight, each of the six men stared, either in awe at the great structure, or in fear of what would befall them inside. Iago felt his nervous energy, which came on shortly after midday, shoot up now that he could actually see the city. He looked at the others, who seemed to be waiting for him to make the first move. Saalis and Jonir had grim looks on their faces, while Galen and Margis gaped wide-eyed and

slack-jawed. Hal, though, just looked sad. Iago took a deep breath, trying his best to quell the apprehension in his stomach.

An hour of walking brought them almost upon the great city, which now stretched across the plains before them. Already the largest city in the known world, Tyr had become even more so with the recent influx of refugees. The walls were originally built to protect the city from the Galatae, fierce barbarians from the eastern hills who once roamed the steppes in large numbers. But, the increasing patrols of Tyran guards, and the rise of bandit-kings in the vast stretches between the cities had kept the Galatae from mounting any large scale raids near Tyr in almost a hundred years. As a result of the increased safety near the walls, small towns and villages had popped up all around, the best example being Harbortown.

Harbortown was the name for the collection of warehouses and inns that sprung up around the docks on the banks of the Mirken, just outside the city. Most of the main buildings had originally been guard towers and barracks, built to protect the merchants and shippers when loading or unloading their wares.

Once the threat of the Galatae became almost non-existent, though, all the guard barracks were turned into inns and taverns, and houses and huts appeared in between, behind or on top of the existing buildings, stretching from the docks all the way back to the main gates of Tyr.

The group reached the southern edge of Harbortown first, and they stayed near the river bank, moving between the docks on their left and the taverns and warehouses on their right. Very few people were out. A small group of sailors had gathered on the dock next to their ship, while a half-dozen more walked the road just ahead of the group, probably headed to the city. This late in the day, the taverns were already filling up, and the sound of laughing, shouting and music echoed through the thin walls of Harbortown's buildings. Eventually, they reached a cross road that turned to the right, back to Tyr. After passing by two stables, a smithy, and several plain, wooden warehouses, they reached the open area just in front of the city entrance.

Two massive, metal-framed, wooden doors stood before them, half the height of the walls, and easily an

arm's length in thickness. The doors were open, sticking straight out from the walls. Iago led them just past the edge of the right door, and as he did he looked down at the ground in front of it. Leaning up against the outside bottom edge of the huge door, near the back where it connected to the walls, were several large rocks. He never knew how they came to be there but every time he came to this city those rocks sat there, unmoving and untouched, signs that these doors had not moved in a very long time. They would be safe from external threats here, but those weren't the threats Iago worried about in this place.

Dozens of red and brown-clad members of the Tyran Guard could be seen wandering back and forth along the walls, watching the steady stream of people coming into and out of the city below them, or just chatting with the other guards nearby. Tyr had not been attacked by an army in decades, the last being a weak attempt by Otaro to show it wasn't afraid of its giant neighbor, so members of the Guard typically had little to do when manning the walls or guard posts around the city other than talk or look bored.

Just through the doors, on either side of the main road into the city, were four-story tall guard towers. The walled ground floor of each tower doubled as a barracks and guard station. On the roof of the barracks, a wide, wooden staircase extended up to the top of the walls, allowing guards to move up and down easily. These were the two biggest guard stations outside the Old City so guards constantly scurried in and out of the barracks, or up and down the stairs. A full squad of eight guardsmen stood lazily outside the ground entrance to the right side guard station.

Iago led the group through the doors and between the two towers, waiting the entire time for a pack of guards to swoop down and arrest them. That was paranoid thinking, he knew, but he couldn't help it as his heart seemed to be beating about ten times louder than normal. They passed without any notice from the guards, who all seemed more interested in their own conversation, and Iago allowed himself to breathe a cautious sigh of relief as they slowly disappeared into the crowd on the streets.

They'd done it. They'd reached Tyr, the grand city of the Anzarins, and the home of their enemies.

Now, all they had to do was get back out.

Chapter 6 - Old Friends

A wide, dirt road stretched out before the six of them, leading from the gates straight through the city to the Trade Market at the center of town. Known as Dyfin Way, this road was the hub of most traffic into, out of, or through the city. Throngs of people filled the street, as far as the eye could see, everyone moving past hawkers and merchant stalls on the side of the road, or around horses, mules and wagons in the middle. Most Tyrans dressed in the same style of clothing, men wearing sleeveless tunics with calf-length trousers and women in long, sleeveless dresses with very thin shawls. The main difference was in the colors. The wealthier classes wore bright colors – reds, yellows, and whites – while the poorer folk preferred shades of brown, orange or green. The effect created a river of muted colors that mirrored the land around them, with only occasional striking colors mixed in.

Iago led his five companions to a crossroads a few dozen yards ahead and stopped, considering his new route now that they'd made it inside.

“So now what, Cap'n?” Hal asked.

“Now we find a place to stay.” Iago took the path to his left. “This way.” The others followed in a tight line, weaving through the crowd, which moved in the opposite direction. The buildings on either side of the street were small and jammed together, an unruly mix of homes, shops, bakeries or craft stores with tables out front for selling wares or food. They passed a few open-air buildings, with no street-side outer walls, used as pens, forges or smiths. One concerned itself primarily with weaponry, based on the large array of swords, maces, axes and spears displayed on the back wall. Another conveyed a wider variety of products, with two of the blacksmiths inside working on hitches and rims for horse-drawn carts, along with other, unrecognizable items.

Iago kept his hood up, and his head down, careful to avoid too much attention. He looked straight ahead, avoiding eye contact, something that wasn't too difficult since Tyrans weren't known for their

cordiality. They were in Ohvro, the smallest of the city's five districts. It stretched from the main outer gates all the way down the road to the inner gates of the Old City, and extended several blocks east and west of Dyfin Way. Ohvro was mostly a market area, where most of the merchants and artisans in town set up shop to catch visitors to the city. The Trade Market, a large market center full of shops and goods, was located in a town square found outside the gates to the Old City, the walled center of Tyr where the Clerics resided. The Tyran Trade Market was renowned throughout the Valley for having nearly every possible item and service you could imagine for sale, no matter how obscure, as long as you knew whom to ask. Those who'd been there never really disputed that claim.

Once they reached the Avis district, though, which would be shortly, they would see a noticeable difference in the upkeep of the buildings and the quality of people. The Avis district was a haven for all manner of scoundrels in the steppes, including bounty hunters, assassins, thieves and murderers. The Cleric-Major of the Avis district was a man named

Maibro, a short, fat, troll of a man who cared for his money and nothing else. He'd run the Avis district like his own personal whorehouse for almost forty years now, overlooking criminal actions as long as he got something out of it. As a result, Avis provided a certain bit of protection the others didn't, if you could afford it.

The crowd of people steadily thinned out, the stragglers moving from shop to shop, buying what they needed, and then heading the opposite direction from Avis, towards Gotan, on the other side of Ohvro. Gotan was filled with sprawling neighborhoods of small houses stacked next to and on top of each other. Despite its overcrowded nature, however, Gotan provided a much better depiction of Anzarin life than the settlements outside, or the refugees huddled around fires, or even the city of rogues that Avis had become.

A guard station appeared ahead of them, on the left side of the road. A small, stout barracks stretched from the road all the way back to the outer wall, where a wooden staircase gave the guards access to the top of the walls. Four guards waited outside, two

sitting on a bench, and the other two lounging on the ground on either side. They chatted casually, barely paying attention to anything or anyone, although every so often they glanced up and down the street, making sure no one important caught them in their idle state. That guard station marked the border between Ohvro and Avis, not only physically, but symbolically. The guards here cared little about what happened on the other side of that line.

As they moved past the guards and into Avis, the atmosphere almost immediately became different. There were no more merchants hawking wares along the street, or kids running alongside their parents. The sun had set over the top edge of the walls long before they entered the city, and wide shadows stretched across the street and buildings, making dark corners seem even darker. Old homes filled the outer edges of Avis, with inns, warehouses, and taverns scattered about. Farther in, though, the taverns became more frequent and seedier. Avis did have a small market center, located deeper in the district, and the wares there were similar to anywhere else - the only

difference being the heavier focus on unadvertised services.

Almost every alleyway they passed held some sign of life. Dogs ran in small packs, rats scurried in the corners, beggars slept on the street, small groups of people huddled to talk quietly, away from prying ears. One alley in particular caught Iago's attention as three men stood at the entrance, wearing dusty black clothes that stood out markedly against the earthy Anzarin fashions. They all seemed short in comparison with Anzarin men, and wore their black hair long and unkempt, with similarly long black beards. Their faces were pale, punctuated by dark eyes, and they each had a long dagger sheathed prominently in their belts. It wasn't their appearance that caught Iago's attention, however - he saw strange people in town every time he visited. What he noticed was how intently they seemed to be watching him and his group. He almost wondered if they were thieves looking for easy prey, and as they passed by, he chanced a look behind him, still covering his face as best he could with the hood of his cloak. When he

looked back, though, they had disappeared back into the alley.

Iago chuckled to himself. They would be surprised if they tried anything on this group, and he almost welcomed the chance. He felt like he needed some sort of action to cover his unease, but then he cautioned himself, knowing that same urge had been the source of plenty of his prior troubles in this city. He'd never been at home here, and he was smart enough to know that's why he usually felt anxious on these streets. But today he knew better. A fight would invite attention they didn't need. Best to just find an inn, conduct their business and leave.

A short walk later and he finally reached his destination – an inn called The Major's Reward. The Reward was a decent sized place, two-story, and built of faded grey wood with a stable around the corner. Iago knew the barkeep, Eurbie, from some time ago, so he felt comfortable coming here first. He wasn't ready to trust his life to the man, but he at least considered Eurbie to be honest, and he owed Iago a favor. They walked through the open door and into the common room of the inn. Tables of all sizes were

scattered about, most of them at least half full of people talking, laughing, drinking or arguing. A bar covered the entire right wall of the room, a young man busily pouring drinks behind it, then handing them off to the serving maidens. Iago didn't recognize this barkeep; Eurbie was much older and fatter, so he decided to grab a table and wait to see if he showed up. Iago led the way through the maze of tables toward the back corner and found an empty one that would serve them just fine.

“We'll eat here and rest a bit. I don't know if we should stay the night, though,” Iago said over the din of thirty other conversations in the room. The others nodded and sat down, eager to get off their feet. Jonir waved a barmaid over who held up her hand, implying she would be a moment before she got there.

They'd barely settled into their seats before a very short, very thin man approached their table from the other side of the room. He had a long, gaunt face with a sloping forehead and a large, protruding, beak-shaped nose. His hair was long and white, and hung straight back. He did not look human.

“Great,” Iago groaned, curling his lips at the newcomer, “a ratman.”

The man cocked his head at Iago, “I am Liren, Anzarin, and I have a name. Perhaps you would care to use it instead of throwing insults around at people you do not know.” The Liren’s shrill voice and accent made it hard to tell if he was put off by Iago’s remark.

“Your people deserve every ill remark you get,” Iago said.

The Liren considered that for a moment. “Perhaps I am different.”

“Perhaps you should leave. Lirens are nothing more than liars and thieves.” Iago leaned forward. “I have never had an honorable dealing with a ratman.”

It was tough to be sure, but from the look on his face the Liren almost seemed amused. “Anzarins are not known for their kindness and generosity either, but you do not see me assuming that to be true of you as well. Maybe, since I am giving you the benefit of my doubt, you could give me the benefit of yours, before belittling the name of my people and my honor to your companions here.” The Liren pointed back and forth to himself and Iago with fingers so thin a

strong wind might break them. Iago leaned back and shook his head, looking around the common room, not even interested in discussing things further.

Galen leaned in now, “What is your name and what is it you wish to offer us?”

The Liren’s face brightened “Ahhh, a reasonable man. Perhaps it is because you seem to be Assarin and not Anzarin that you do not judge before hearing my proposal. My name is Ilem, and I can see you have come from some distance to reach Tyr. I would like to be your guide in this great city, and to help you with anything you may need.”

Iago interjected, “Everything he can provide would be illegal and dangerous.”

“Nonsense, faithless Anzarin.” The Liren hissed. “How long would I be in business here if I dealt with anything that was illegal or dangerous?”

“You would be surprised how many people I know here who deal in your trade, ratman, and have done so longer than I’ve been alive.”

Ilem suddenly became cautious. “Who is it you claim to know Anzarin? Or do you speak large?”

Everyone remained quiet for a moment, until Hal broke the silence.

“Speak large?” he asked, more to Iago than to the Liren.

“It means to lie, which I’m not.” Iago stared back at Ilem defiantly.

“What trade do you deal in, Ilem?” Galen asked.

“A little of everything, Assarin. I can get you women, fighters in the Pits, the smoking weeds,” Ilem turned to Iago, “none of which are illegal or dangerous. And I can certainly offer better prices than any of your friends, Anzarin.” Ilem turned back to Galen. “Perhaps you know that before the breaking of our nations the people of Lir and Assar once traded honorably.”

“Women?” Hal asked.

Jonir shook his head, “Not the type you want, Hal, or could afford.”

“You sell women and men? Are you a slave trader?” Galen asked, no longer amused by this exchange.

“No, I am not a slaver, but I can offer good deals from them. There are many in the city who trust me.”

“We have no need for a guide,” Iago said. “I know the city.”

The Liren paused for a moment, glancing at the others but finding no help from them. “So be it, Anzarin. Have an excellent stay and remember me should you find yourself in need.” The Liren’s smile as he turned and walked away seemed more like a smirk to Iago.

“What was that about?” asked Galen.

Iago waited a moment, watching Ilem walk back to the other side of the room. “We don’t need a Liren anywhere near us unless you want your clothes stolen right off your backs. They’re liars and cheats, and all of you would do well to avoid them.” Iago frowned.

“Surely they’re not all bad,” Hal said, smiling.

“They eavesdrop, they gossip like old women, and they’ve turned thievery into an art. No good can come from dealings with any you find in Avis. Even with the ones in the Market you must be careful. In fact, I’d check your belongings right now, just to be sure.”

“Good eve, gentlemen.” The arrival of the barmaid interrupted everyone’s sudden unease. She

was an older woman, Anzarin, probably around her fortieth year, with long, dark hair hanging straight down her back. She looked like she had little time to deal with the six of them right now. “What do you need tonight?”

“Women,” Hal said, eliciting a laugh from Saalis and Jonir.

Iago shook his head. “A round of ales for the table, and some dinner if we can.” The barmaid almost walked off before Iago stopped her. “Is Eurbie around tonight?”

“He’s been gone a few days now, sire. Last I was told he went north for a couple weeks.” Iago nodded and she left. He wondered what business Eurbie could possibly have out of Tyr. He never left the city the whole time he’d known him. This could be a small problem, because now he’d have to work his way down the list of people he could reliably approach, a list that was unfortunately very short. He sighed. He would have to take risks, now.

“Who is Eurbie?” asked Hal.

“An old friend of mine. I came here thinking he could help us,” Iago said, tapping the table in thought.

“Apparently not,” Galen replied. “Who else can we go to?”

“I still have people I can talk to. I just need to be careful about it. We shouldn’t discuss it here, though.”

They said nothing more about their mission that night. Dinner and ales were served, and they ate and drank enough to make up for the rigors of their trip and then some. Eventually Iago told Galen they could stay here tonight, but it would be best to find a new place in the morning. Staying in one place too long would invite people to notice them.

After Galen and Iago spoke with the Barkeep about lodgings, the six of them went to the back to three rooms. Galen and Margis took the first room, Hal and Jonir the second, and Iago and Saalis the last. They entered their small rooms and found two beds set up on either wall. Saalis dropped his bags and almost fell down into his bed, ready to sleep for days. Iago was more deliberate. He set his bag down but kept his cloak on and his sword close.

“I’ll be out a bit. I’m not sure how long.”

“You need me to come?” asked Saalis.

Iago shook his head. “I need to find someone. If anyone else is with me when I do, he might get scared off.”

Saalis nodded. “How long should I wait?”

“Go to sleep. I may be a while.” Iago rummaged through his pack, finding a few coins. He pocketed them, and threw his hood back over his head. “But if I’m not back by morning, get the others and leave this inn, and the city for that matter.”

“Aye.” The fatigue left Saalis’ face, replaced by obvious unease. “Be careful, Captain.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Iago said as he left the room. He walked back down the hallway and into the common room. He kept his head low as always, hoping no one here thought to watch him too closely. He stepped out on the street and looked around in the darkness. The only light came from torches outside the inns and a few in posts placed every fifty or so paces. Iago pulled back his hood a bit, confident he could walk around in the dark without worrying too much about being recognized. He would be spending his time in the back alleys anyway, looking for the one other person who could help him and his friends.

* * * * *

Galen awoke in the darkness to the sound of creaking. He'd fallen asleep quickly, almost as soon as he laid his head down, but he wasn't sure how much time had passed since then. It was still pitch dark save for a little torch light from the street coming through the window, so he knew morning hadn't come yet. He lay still in his bed, his eyes half open, his back to the door. The creaking noise stopped as soon as he heard it, and he waited to see if it came again. He'd never stayed in an inn, or any other large building like this, but he knew the sound of footsteps on wood. He'd spent enough time on a Karawan to recognize that, at least.

Another creak, and this time he could tell it came from inside the room, near the door. He turned over and found the door slightly ajar and Margis' bed empty, the sheets pulled back. He sat up on the edge of his bed and leaned forward, looking through the crack in the door, trying to see any movement but he saw nothing. No movement, no sound, not even

shadows from the candlelight in the hallway. He stood and walked to the door, then peered out slowly, looking both ways. A small lamp sat on a table at one end of the hall, right next to the entrance to the common room. The low din of conversation coming from that direction told him a few patrons still hadn't left.

Galen closed the door and double checked his bags, still on the ground where he left them. He pushed them under the bed, hoping that would be enough to deter any would-be thieves, and then crawled back under his covers. He wasn't sure where Margis had gone, and he hoped the door was open only because he'd been careless while leaving. He figured he might be getting a drink, or maybe even out back where the barkeep had mentioned they could go to wash up, or relieve themselves. Regardless, he didn't think he could get back to sleep unless he knew everyone was safely in their rooms.

He had already decided he hated this city and everything about it. There were too many people crammed into too small a space for his liking, and the streets and buildings seemed designed solely to herd

people around from one place to the next, like sheep trapped by a fence. It sickened him and he wanted out as soon as possible. Unfortunately, they were stuck here for a few days at least, possibly longer. He knew it would take time to find the people they could trust to help them with their problem, and he grudgingly accepted that.

What he didn't accept was that he was totally dependent on Iago to do this. He had been put in charge of this mission, but he'd taken no active part in leading since leaving the camp. And now he was forced to sit around and wait some more until Iago did his part and found his contacts. Which brought up an entirely new set of worries. How could he handle the negotiations if he would be talking to Iago's friends? He was supposed to lay out the terms, but technically Iago could do that by himself and not even involve Galen. And if he could do that, why send anyone else along? Sending Iago back here by himself would have been easier and safer for them all.

Galen closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep. He was tired and uncomfortable here, and he knew getting all worked up would solve nothing. He

would wait until tomorrow and talk to Iago about who exactly they would be meeting. It was time for him to prove that he deserved to be on this mission.

* * * * *

Iago walked briskly down the dark, empty street, only slowing when he approached the intersection ahead. Three different streets met in a large, circular plaza with a stone platform in the center. On top of the platform stood a statue of a man, built twice normal size, who wore flowing robes with his hand outstretched in front of him. This was Miyr Kopan, a particularly disreputable part of the Avis district, named after the man whose likeness stood in the center, a powerful Cleric from the early days of the city named Toah Miyr. Most of the buildings that surrounded the statue were bars and whorehouses, those that were safe to even enter, that is. This was a very old, very used part of the city, and as such, several of the buildings were derelict, missing doors, windows, even entire walls.

Iago waited at the edge of the Kopan, leaning against the corner of the building next to him, watching as a few late-niters left the taverns, as even the seediest of places kicked people out eventually. Some slept at the base of the statue, drunks who had migrated to whatever was directly in front of them as they left a tavern. One man walked out of a building across the way that Iago recognized as a whorehouse. He saw no guards yet, but he figured they would be by shortly. They made regular patrols of this area throughout the night in case of fights, brawls or other problems.

Iago had come here as a last resort. Somewhere in this district was a beggar named Beneschal, and unfortunately for Iago, this unreliable man was the only person he felt comfortable trusting right now. He'd been unable to find Ben at any of his other haunts, though, and now he had no other place to look. The old man was known to occasionally frequent Miyr Kopan, but Iago liked to avoid the area when possible, so he'd saved it for last, hoping to avoid the late-night skirmishes, thefts, and even the occasional murder this place seemed to attract. Iago moved to his

right, checking the alleys and passageways between the buildings. Those were the types of places Ben preferred to stay, places where anyone would have a tough time sneaking up on him. So far, though, all the alleys had been clear.

As he reached the street, his heartbeat picked up at the sight of a small group of people approaching, a couple of them carrying torches. They were too far away to notice him, but he could tell by their outline that they were guards, following their patrol route back to the Kopan. Iago hurried across the street, looking for a place to duck into until they passed by. He found a rundown old building with no front door and he darted inside, waiting on the other side of the entrance, listening for the sound of footsteps and voices. He heard a noise, but it came from inside, and he nearly jumped and pulled his sword. Someone else was in here with him, so he froze and listened carefully, his eyes scanning every corner and shadow for movement. He heard it again, the sound of someone's arm or leg sliding on the floor, followed by a grumble or maybe a snore. Iago slowly let his breath out, realizing he'd been holding it. Some drunk

had found his way in here and fallen asleep. Iago stayed immobile for as long as he could, hoping he hadn't woken his new roommate. Several long moments later, Iago heard only steady breathing coming from the back of the room. He relaxed, and carefully moved towards the window in the front wall, so he could see out.

The guards had reached the edge of the Kopan and started their circuit, moving around the circle and checking each establishment. Their normal routine was to stop outside each door while one or two of the guards went inside to make sure no troubles were about, then move on to the next one. They would skip this building, since they knew it was empty, but it would still take a while for them to make their way around and leave the Kopan. Iago felt the floor just below the window, making sure it was clear of anything, and then sat down quietly. The window was just low enough that he could see out the bottom of it while sitting, so he pulled up his legs, rested his arms on his knees and waited, ignoring the faint snoring emanating from the darkness.

A short time later, Iago finally saw something that raised his spirits. The guards had moved around to the right side, just out of Iago's vision, when an old man left a bar across the Kopan. He couldn't see the man's face from this distance, but he did recognize his slow, drunken gait. The man ambled towards the statue first, then made his way across the Kopan and down this very street. Iago waited, watching as he came closer, and he smiled when Ben's face passed by the window.

Iago stood up carefully, and then peered out of the doorway, looking to his right. The guards were at the whorehouse now, all of them focused intently on something just inside the front door. Iago took his chance and stepped out, moving as quickly as he could without garnering attention. He saw Ben move down an alley to his left, a block ahead, and Iago followed. When he reached the alley he saw the old man already halfway down. He watched as Ben stopped, sat down and leaned his back against the wall. Iago stepped into the alley.

"Hey, old man," Iago said in a low voice. "You drunk?"

“Wha!” the man jumped, startled by the words.

“It’s okay, Ben.” Iago held his hands up as he approached.

“Who’s there?” Ben leaned towards Iago and squinted in the darkness. He was dressed in a ragged shirt and pants that were frayed at the ends. He had thin grey hair and a scraggly beard that looked like it had never been combed. His eyes were deep and dark, though, and wildly alert. “I got no money, and I carry a knife!”

“It’s me, old friend. Iago.” Iago knelt down next to the old man, who held up his hand, as if to make sure Iago was real.

“Iago?”

“Aye.”

“Irah burn me, I thought you was dead!” He said in a gravelly voice. “They said you was caught and killed in Deep Hold.”

“Not me.” Iago smiled. “Well, they caught me, but I got away.”

“From Deep Hold?”

“No, from Lobishr. Deep Hold would be a little tough, even for a snake like me.”

“Damn right you’re a snake, sneaking up on me in the dark like this. What do you want?” Ben glanced up and down the alley uneasily.

“I need a favor. Are you drunk?”

“I ain’t drinkin’ tonight.” Ben’s breath seemed to discount that, but Iago decided he was at least sober enough to recognize him. That should be good enough for what he needed. “And why should I do you any favors?”

Iago held up a single gold coin. “Because I will pay for it.”

Ben eyed the coin carefully. He looked Iago in the eye, glanced up and down the alley, then resumed his stare. “That be real?”

Iago nodded. “And it’s easy coin, too. All I need is for you to pass on a message.”

“To who?” Caution underlined Ben’s words.

“You know where Cyara or Ballok are? Have you seen them lately?”

“That I have, milord. Seen ‘em two days ago, in fact.”

“Good.” Iago put the coin in Ben’s hand. “Find them, tell them I’m in town, and I need to talk to Oln.

Ask Cyara first. I don't think Ballok likes me too much."

"That's all ya' need?" Ben asked carefully.

"That's all I need. It has to be done tomorrow, though. I'm in a hurry."

Ben looked at the coin, to make sure it was really in his hand, then he pocketed it quickly. "Then consider it done, boy. I'll sure as sunset find 'em for ya."

"Good. Thank you, Ben. Tell them to meet me tomorrow night at the place we last did business. Remember that." Ben nodded, and Iago stood up. "I have to go. Be safe, old man. Don't use that coin on ale." Iago smiled as he walked back down the alley towards the street.

He heard Ben call out behind him. "Don't tell me about bein' safe boy. You're the trouble maker here." Iago chuckled as he walked out into the street. Ben was a good man and would do his best to live up to his end of a bargain. And if nothing hampered him, he'd be able to set up a meeting with Nentini Oln soon, one of the only people in Tyr with the resources

and money to help them out, and one of the only ones he could trust.

At least Iago hoped so, because if this didn't work, he didn't have any other options.

Chapter 7 - Nentini Oln

Galen awoke the next morning feeling more refreshed than he'd expected. He'd slept in beds before but not recently, and he expected to wake up with all sorts of pains in his back and neck. But he felt good this morning, which seemed to him to be a good omen. He sat up and glanced over to see Margis, in bed this time, still asleep. Sunlight poured in through the window, and Galen stretched as he got out of bed. He dressed quietly and slipped out of the room, hoping the door wouldn't creak as it had last night. It did, but not enough to wake his Second. Galen stepped out and went down the hall to Iago's room. After a few quick raps, Saalis opened the door.

"Mornin' Pilot," he said, stepping aside to let Galen through. Iago still lay in his bed, but the knocking had woken him up. He rolled over and rubbed his face.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to wake you," Galen said.

“No worries, Pilot. It’s time to get up anyway.” Iago sat up and rolled his neck around, stretching.

“Good. Saalis, I need to speak with Iago. Do you mind waiting in one of the other rooms?”

Saalis raised a questioning eyebrow. “Sure. I’ll go drop in on Jonir and Hal. If they ain’t up yet, then they should be.”

“Thank you.” Saalis nodded as he stepped out, closing the door behind him. Galen sat on the edge of Saalis’ bed while Iago grabbed his shirt off the floor and put it on.

Galen hesitated, making sure he knew what needed to be said before he started. He took a breath, and then launched into his concerns. “I need to know what our plan is now that we’re here, and I don’t mean in general terms. I know you have friends who can help us, but I need to know how you’re going to contact them and how you will arrange for us to meet about what appears to be a very dangerous topic.”

Iago looked at Galen for a moment. “You want to know who I’m trying to set up a meeting with?”

“To begin with, yes.”

Iago nodded slowly. “Ok. Tonight, if we’re lucky, we will meet with some people who work for a man named Nentini Oln. He’s kirza, which means he runs a merchant guild, and he also owns some warehouses here in Avis and another outside in Harbortown. He gets a lot of timber and fur shipments from Kirn merchants up north and sells ‘em here. He’s a very wealthy man.”

“How can he help us?” asked Galen.

“Well, he also has other interests, like slaving, fighting, and a few other trades. That means he knows a lot of people who can do a lot of things. I can’t say for sure he has dealings with crystals, but I’d bet he does. And if he deals in crystals, then he has to know purifiers.”

“You want us to make a deal with a slaver?” Galen asked, appalled.

Iago shrugged. “If you have any other suggestions Pilot, let me know. Crystals are not to be taken lightly here. Any dealings with them that aren’t approved by the Clerics can get you killed real fast. So unless you want to go ask the Clerics if we can

borrow a few of their purifiers then we have to take what we can get.”

“I don’t think that tone is necessary.” Galen said, trying to sound important. “And I certainly know we can’t go to Clerics. But I don’t think a slaver is much better.”

Iago paused for a moment. “I apologize. But you have to understand, this is how things work in this city. You and I may not like what goes on here, but there’s nothing we can do about it. The only thing that will help us, in the short term, is getting crystal purifiers, any way we can. And Nentini Oln is our best chance at that.”

Galen cursed himself. He'd known deep down to expect this; that they would be dealing with their enemies in some fashion no matter what. He resigned himself to the notion of negotiating with someone who traded living people for money because he knew that Iago was right. Once they had purifiers they could continue their war against this evil. It seemed no one in this city was blameless for what happened beyond these walls.

“Yes, I know. I... realize that what is best for us now is to get our ships flying no matter what. Now, how do we set up this meeting?”

“It’s already done, I think,” Iago said as he started picking up his things and putting them back in his bag.

“What? How?”

“I went out last night and found a friend who could set up the meeting. He’s going to try and do it today.”

“Last night? When?”

“After we got to our rooms.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? Who went with you?” Galen was agitated now. He tried not to show it, but the fact that he’d been caught off-guard by this information upset him.

Iago shrugged and stuffed his cloak into his pack. “Some people don’t take kindly to being approached by a friend with five strangers. I thought it best to find him on my own.”

Galen paused. He didn’t know if he should be angry at Iago for doing this without him, or at ease that the meeting they needed was set up already. He

remembered that he wanted out of this city anyway, so he decided not to burn any bridges just yet.

“Was anyone with you?” Galen asked, wondering if this explained Margis' disappearance last night.

“No. I went alone. Why?”

“No reason.” Galen decided to keep some secrets for himself. “But this is good. We have a meeting set up now, and we can get this done quickly, I hope.”

“I think so. When they find out what we're offering, they'll be more than happy to deal with us.”

“Does this meeting tonight require everyone but you to be absent again?” Galen said dryly.

Iago smiled. “No, Pilot. We need everyone at this meeting. If it's just me they might think I'm trying to cheat them, but with all six of us there, they'll take it more seriously.”

“Good.” Galen took a deep breath. Tonight would be his first real test at negotiations. He needed to make sure he was ready to bargain. “When is it?”

“Sundown at the Honest Soldier Inn. It's a few blocks from here, but we need to take our packs with us. We should stay there a night or two.”

Galen agreed, and then excused himself so that he could gather his own things. He returned to his room to find Margis still sleeping. He nudged him on the shoulder.

“Margis. It’s morning, get up.” Margis groaned a bit and rolled over, glancing at Galen with half-closed eyes, while Galen grabbed his pack and threw it on his own bed. “You need to get your things together. We’re moving to another inn,” he said.

“We’re what?” Margis sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“We’re going to some other inn, to meet with one of Iago’s friends. We’ll be staying there a while.”

“Why are we moving? We just got here.”

Galen paused, considering his answer before saying it. “We have to keep moving to make sure we don’t attract attention. Also, Iago has past troubles here so we have to hope he isn’t recognized by someone who could cause us trouble.” He hoped that sounded like this was his decision.

Margis sat still for a moment, either considering Galen’s reasoning or just waiting for his body to acclimate to a waking state. Finally, he leaned over

and grabbed his own pack. “I wonder what got him in trouble here. He’s never said yet has he?”

“That’s his business. If he wants to tell us then he can. But there’s no need to pry into the personal affairs of someone if they don’t ask for it.” Margis nodded in resigned agreement, but Galen, despite meaning every word he said, also wanted to know a bit more about Iago’s history here. For a brief moment, Galen felt that if Iago couldn’t trust them with the reasons why he was wanted here, then maybe he shouldn’t trust Iago. But that feeling passed quickly.

* * * * *

At first glance, the Honest Soldier seemed to be a slightly smaller, but more respectable place than most of the other inns in this district. It was only a short walk from their current inn, and when Iago led the group inside, they found themselves in a large common room, with a bar, and several large tables spread out, very similar to the Major’s Reward. However, this place sparkled in comparison. There

was no ever-present smell of smoke and sweat, and also no blood-stains on the floor, something the Reward could not claim.

The common room was empty, except for the innkeeper standing behind the bar to the right. Iago saw two other doors besides the one they entered through, one behind the bar, probably for storage, and another on the back wall next to windows that showed a small courtyard outside. Stairs next to the back door led up to the second floor, presumably where the actual rooms were located. The place seemed quiet enough, so Iago walked up to the innkeeper, who was busy flipping through the pages of a large, leather-bound book lying on the counter. He looked up as the group approached him.

“Good day, sirs,” he said.

“We need a few rooms, if you have them,” Iago said.

“That I do. How many do you need?”

“Three.”

The innkeeper flipped through his ledger until he reached an empty page. He marked off three numbers

on the blank page and then looked back up. “What name will these rooms be under?”

Iago glanced back at Galen, who stepped forward. “Galen Corovin,” he said.

The innkeeper jotted down the name with a practiced hand. “Very good. My name is Jonn and the Honest Soldier is my Inn. Let me know if you have need of anything while you’re here.”

“Well met, Jonn,” Galen said. Jonn proceeded to take the group upstairs and show them to their rooms. They split up just as before, and once they spent a few moments getting settled they all returned to the common room and found a table where they could relax for a while. As nervous as everyone felt, no one was eager to wander around the city, so they decided to spend the day entertaining themselves at the inn.

The Landers occupied their time with dice and card games, or telling stories, doing whatever they could to alleviate the boredom. Margis and Galen stayed with them for a short time before moving back upstairs to study their Air Magic notes in seclusion. Iago took part in the games briefly before retiring back to his room for some rest. The trip had taken its

toll on him, both physically and mentally, and he was so overcome with worry that sleep became difficult. He hoped he could sneak in a nap before the meeting tonight so he would at least have all his wits about him, in case of any troubles.

He remembered his last encounter with Oln, over a year ago, when Oln needed him to look into a trading partner. He remembered Jonn still being here back then, but since he'd only been inside the Honest Soldier about 3 times now including today, he didn't think Jonn recognized him. He'd always liked this place, though, and he wondered why he didn't think of it as soon as he came into town. He figured he only thought of it as the 'meeting spot' and decided that actually staying there somehow lessened its importance. Regardless, under different circumstances, he could enjoy relaxing here for a week or so, even though there were far better inns to be found in other districts.

It wasn't long after he lay down in his bed that he finally did drift off to sleep, and when he woke up, the shadows from the sunlight told him it was late afternoon already. He felt rested, a feeling he'd

forgotten existed, and he was tempted to stay in bed a while longer. Another hour or two and sunset would arrive, however, bringing Oln's people with it, so he reluctantly pulled himself out of bed and went downstairs, seeing Saalis and Hal at the table where he'd left them.

"Finally woke up, eh?" Saalis said.

Iago nodded and took a seat next to them. "Have you two been here all day?"

"Saalis slept after you did, Cap'n, but he woke up before ya'. I've been wanderin' around a bit, but I never went too far. And I didn't buy anything," Hal replied, eagerly.

"The others upstairs?" asked Iago.

"Yeah," said Saalis.

"Jonir's asleep, too. The Pilots," Hal caught himself quickly, looking around to make sure the room was still empty, then continued, "the other... people are in their room writin' some stuff."

"Well, I guess we wait around a couple more hours. You got those dice still?"

Hal smiled and pulled them out of his pocket. The three played some simple dice games, mostly just

games of chance to pass the time since they had no money to bet. As the afternoon turned to evening, a few more people entered the room, mostly men, and went upstairs to their rooms, except for two older men who took a table at the other end of the common room. Jonn showed up immediately to get them food and ale, then took his usual spot behind the bar.

Iago asked Hal to bring the others downstairs. The meeting would happen soon and he wanted all six of them present when it did. He needed a good showing, to ensure he was taken seriously, plus he felt more comfortable with everyone at his back, just in case something happened. He didn't expect Oln or his people to turn on him without at least hearing his proposal, but it never hurt to be too safe around here.

Hal returned with Galen, Margis and Jonir, and they all took a spot at the table. They ordered food, deciding to pass the time eating. Once the food was served Galen leaned over to Iago.

“We're meeting here?”

“Aye.”

“Is it safe to talk about this here, in public?”

Galen seemed unusually worried.

Iago nodded. “It’s always been safe before. I think Oln and his people have an agreement with Jonn. When they show up for a meeting, everyone else sort of clears out.”

Galen nodded and returned to his food, although he didn’t eat much. Iago’s appetite had disappeared, too. It was hard to eat with your stomach churning from worry. He pushed his plate away and rested his elbows on the edge of the table. He laid his head in his hands and tried to think. He wanted to make sure he was prepared for anything. Galen would be able to handle the specifics of the deal, but it was up to Iago to make sure they were safe. He only hoped his trust in Beneschal and Oln were well-founded.

Saalis nudged his arm, and Iago looked up to see four people entering the Inn, a woman and three men. He straightened up, recognizing Cyara and Ballok, along with two others he didn’t know. All four stared directly back at him.

This is it, Iago thought, suddenly uncomfortable in his chair.

Cyara and Ballok came to their table while the other two took seats at a table nearby. Cyara, a pretty,

middle-aged woman with long brown hair and a still-youthful face took the lead. She stopped at the edge of the table and looked everyone over carefully. Ballok, a slightly younger, well-built man, with a face that seemed frozen into a sneer, stood behind her.

“Cyara,” Iago bowed his head. “Good evening.”

Cyara smiled. “Iago. I haven’t seen you in some time.”

“I’m back for a few days. Why don’t you sit down?” Iago stood and offered her a chair at the end of the table. Cyara nodded her head in thanks and sat down. Iago motioned to another empty spot at the table and looked at Ballok. “Would you like to join us, Ballok?” Ballok walked over and took a seat, though he didn’t seem interested in being friendly.

“So, who are your friends?” Cyara asked. Iago introduced everyone else at the table in turn, starting with Galen. He gave only names though, and offered no other information. Each offered a small wave of their hand or nodded their head, but other than that no one said a word.

“Well. Now that we’ve made our introductions, perhaps you could tell us what you need? It’s been

some time, but that ridiculous old beggar made this seem important.” Cyara wore a typical Anzarin long dress, light brown with yellow trim and a red shawl. She continually adjusted the shawl around her shoulders as she talked.

Iago lowered his voice. Jonn stood at the bar, but he kept his eyes down. The other two patrons ate quietly on the other side of the room, out of hearing range as long as no one talked loudly. “I need some help, Cyara, and Oln is the only one who can do it. We have a large supply of some very valuable items. Very powerful items, and highly illegal.”

Cyara furrowed her brow. “What are you speaking of?”

Iago leaned in close and lowered his voice to just over a whisper. “Mergoran crystals. Barrels of them.”

Cyara’s eyes opened wide and she leaned back in her chair. The sneer on Ballok’s face turned into shock as his mouth dropped open. He quickly regained his composure and leaned in. “Are you here to mock us?” he asked.

“Not at all. We have a lot of crystals but they’re untreated, and we don’t have anyone to purify them. I

know Oln knows people who can do that, and if he can agree to help us here, then we can be agreeable to some kind of deal.”

Cyara and Ballok looked at each other, speechless. Finally, Cyara turned to Iago. “You know just talking about this can get us all killed. This had better be real or you’ll end up in even more trouble than you already are.”

Iago nodded. “Like I said, I’m serious. Get us a meeting with Oln, and we’ll make him very happy. But it needs to be fast.”

Cyara took a deep breath and paused for a long moment. Finally, she nodded. “Stay here, we’ll find you tomorrow and let you know. And like I said, if this is some kind of trick, then you better not show your face in this city again.”

Iago shook his head. “No trick, Cyara. This is real.”

Cyara stood up. “I hope so. Good eve to the rest of you. I hope to see you all tomorrow.” Cyara did her best to seem as cordial as possible, and she was probably one of a few people who could do it as well

as she did. Ballok stood up, as did the two men at the next table.

“As do I,” Galen said. Cyara, Ballok, and their two companions left the Inn. Galen turned to Iago. “Is that it? We just wait until tomorrow?”

“That’s all we can do. If he’s interested, then they’ll come to us. But trust me, he will be interested.”

* * * * *

Galen woke early the next morning and rounded up a small blade, some cloth, and a basin of hot water from Jonn, so he could finally shave off the week of stubble on his face. For some reason, he felt compelled to look as presentable as possible when dealing with criminals, even though he still loathed the idea of meeting with Oln. He hadn’t been sure what to expect last night when Cyara and Ballok showed up, and to be honest, they weren’t the type of people he thought he would see. He thought slavers and such would be dirtier, or uglier, but those two weren’t. In fact, he found Cyara to be an elegant,

graceful woman and he wasn't sure how someone like that ended up working for a slaver. He wondered if Oln would end up surprising him as well.

After shaving, he decided he would eat breakfast first, and then work on his journal. He'd managed to write down all the events from the trip so far, though the incident at Duren Olan had been difficult to recount, even on paper. He needed to keep writing though, because it helped him relax. This city made him anxious, and being stuck inside of it was enough to completely fray his nerves if he stopped long enough to think about it. He could only pray that the meeting with Oln went through today without a hitch. If they could agree on a deal, then maybe, if they were lucky, they could leave tomorrow, or even tonight. If they were lucky.

Galen went downstairs to find the common room just as empty as it had been half an hour ago when he woke up. He caught Jonn wandering through and he asked him about breakfast. Jonn politely told him to wait a few moments while he rounded up some food from the back. Galen took a seat at the same table they had used yesterday and waited patiently, trying

to not to let the anxiety in his stomach ruin his appetite.

Two men entered the common room from the street. They were short, with long, grimy, black hair and beards. They wore pants and shirts that were entirely black, and each carried a long, ornately designed dagger, sheathed through their wide black belts. Normally, Galen would have ignored them, being as preoccupied with his thoughts as he was this morning, but their behavior made him uncomfortable. From the moment they walked in, they watched him like they recognized him. They sat at a table near the entrance and looked around, giving the room a cursory glance, but every few moments, at least one of the two would glance over at him, as if to make sure he hadn't run off.

Galen turned sideways in his chair to avoid looking directly at them. He wondered if their actions were normal here, or if they knew they were being incredibly rude. Thankfully, Jonn entered the room, bringing breakfast with him – a plate of bread, cheese and ham, along with milk. Galen thanked him for the

food and began devouring the meal, desperate for the distraction.

Hal and Jonir came down, and ordered the same for themselves. Galen greeted them, eager to have others nearby in case the two strangers were unfriendly. He never had a chance to find out, though, because they quickly stood up and left the inn, not even looking back. Galen watched them leave warily, but decided to leave well enough alone. He had more important things to worry about today.

By the time he finished eating, all six of them sat at the table, either arranging for their own food, or nervously chatting. Cyara or Ballok could be back at any time, so again they were stuck waiting, killing time anyway they could. Eventually the dice and cards made a showing, and this time Galen and Margis stayed downstairs.

They didn't have to wait too long. Ballok entered the inn around mid-morning, alone. He approached the table with the same sneer he'd had on his face last night.

"Let's go," he said. "You've got your meeting."

Galen's stomach dropped. He nodded to Ballok, hoping no one saw the blood drain from his face. "I need to grab a few things from my room, first."

Ballok grunted and Galen tried to steady his legs as he walked upstairs. Once in his room he reached for his pack and pulled out one of the bags of crystals. He didn't know if taking both bags would be prudent, so he decided to bring only one for now, and leave the other in case something happened. He tried to hold the bag as casually as he could, fearing that somehow anyone who saw it would know it was filled with highly illegal Mergoran crystals, but he didn't know how to do that. So he just kept the bag close to his body, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and went back downstairs.

"We're ready," Iago said when Galen returned, and Ballok walked outside. Iago followed him and the rest of the group fell in line, Galen staying as close to Iago as he could. Ballok led them down the street, and then took a left through an alley between two small houses. They crossed through to another smaller street and walked about four blocks, before he led them through a second alley. Galen studied everyone

who passed them, looking for any sign of an ambush, or even guards surprising them. But all he saw were people doing their best to walk by without interference, grimy kids playing in front of some houses, and a pack of dogs barking at anyone who came near. Luckily, it wasn't long before Ballok led them to a doorway behind a large, crumbling building. Two men with short swords waited outside the door, one sitting on a barrel next to the wall, and the other leaning against the closed door. They both stood up as Ballok approached and the second guard opened the door for the group. Ballok walked in first, with Iago, Galen and the others close behind.

A large, empty room greeted them, with two doors at the back. Ballok ignored the doors, sliding his fingers into the crease between two wooden planks in the wall to his left. When he pulled, a section of the wall opened, revealing a hidden passage. He motioned them in, and they followed him down a short hallway, and then through another door. This one opened up to a much larger room than the first, although this one wasn't empty. Stacks of wooden crates lined all four walls, leaving space only

for the two doors in the room, the one they entered and another to the right. Four armed thugs watched them warily from the back of the room, a few paces behind a long, rectangular table.

Cyara waited at one end of the table, arms crossed, staring at Iago intently, and tapping her foot impatiently. In the middle of the table sat a very large man, almost as wide as he was tall. He wore a brightly colored red and yellow patterned tunic, brown leather pants, an expensive-looking gold chain around his neck, and what seemed to be gold bracelets around his wrists. He was naturally bald, rather than shaved as Iago was, though this man was at least 20 years older than anyone in their group.

Ballok motioned them to stand in front of the table, and Galen moved next to Iago, who waited in the center, directly opposite the man Galen assumed to be Nentini Oln. The other four fell in line a step or two behind them. After a brief moment, the fat man stood up, walked around the table and approached Iago, who remained still as a statue the entire time. The fat man, quite a few inches shorter than Iago,

stood right in front of him and looked up at his face with a calculating stare. Finally, he spoke.

“Why aren’t you dead yet?”

Chapter 8 - The Group Splits

Iago smiled. “Should I be?”

The fat man smiled back, shaking his head. “You cheat death more times than anyone has a right to.” He walked back to the table, and leaned on the edge. “And now you come to me with some deal involving crystals? You want me dead also, boy?”

Iago lost his jovial expression. “We need a favor. And we can make it worth your while.”

Galen stared at Nentini Oln, a slaver, a man who made money from the suffering that happened in this part of the Valley. Like last night when he met Cyara and Ballok, he was taken aback at what the man looked like. He’d expected someone gruff, and hard, like Ballok only taller and meaner, but what surprised him more than Oln’s appearance was the comforting feeling he exuded, almost grandfatherly. He waited for something to happen to make him hate the man like he should.

“Tell me, then. I can’t promise anything, but let’s at least find out what you want.”

Iago motioned to Galen. “This is Galen Corovin. He has all the authority to make a deal with you... on behalf of our supplier.” Galen waited a moment, unsure if he was supposed to talk. A gesture from Iago told him he was.

Galen took a deep breath, and then began. “We have a large supply of untreated Mergoran crystals, sire, but we have lost our means to purify them. We seek to find some kind of arrangement where, in exchange for purified crystals, we could either provide a bulk sum of raw crystals, or split the purified ones.” Galen could feel his hand shaking as he recited the proposal. He had practiced it over and over during the last week and was surprised he remembered it all.

“Who is ‘we’, son?” asked Oln.

Galen was taken aback by this question. He hadn’t expected it, and he wasn’t sure if that information should be shared, yet. Frantic, he tried to decide whether he should tell him who they were, or

make up something else. In the panic that ensued, however, all he could manage to say was, “Um...”

“The Wind Riders,” Iago said calmly, saving Galen from having to make the decision. He saw Oln’s eyes widen, the expression on his face turning into genuine astonishment.

“The Wind Raiders?” said Oln, talking to Iago now. “How did you manage to get involved in that?”

“That would be a long story. And I don’t think now is the best time to tell it,” Iago replied. Oln nodded slowly, watching Iago carefully, then he turned to Galen and paused for a long moment. Galen wondered if he should break the silence but he remained quiet, hoping Oln would say something soon.

Finally, “So, you want me to get you a crystal purifier, and in exchange I would get either raw crystals or a split of the purified ones?”

“Yes, sire.” Galen hoped he was being polite to the man. He knew of no other proper title to give him.

“Where would this happen?” Oln asked.

“We can bring the raw crystals to a location we both choose, somewhere in the foothills most likely,

and do all the purification there. We would need to meet there once every month or so, I think, and we would be able to pay you each time.”

“How many crystals are you talking about? Per month?”

Galen stopped to think. Previously they would be able to bring more, but now, with only two working ships, and a Tyran airship flying around as well, they would end up capturing far less crystals. He tried to think of a safe number. “About two barrels or so, maybe three. Every month.”

Oln’s jaw almost dropped to the floor when he said that. He wondered if the number was too low.

“Three barrels!” Oln exclaimed. He looked around at Cyara, then at Ballok, both who remained somewhat expressionless. “Are you serious?”

Galen hesitated. “Yes, sire. Maybe more, but I can only promise three for sure.”

Oln looked at Iago, his eyes wide. “How do I know this is real?”

“Give him the bag,” Iago said, and Galen held out the small bag of crystals he had clenched in his hand. Oln took it from him and opened it. After

peering inside, he closed the bag and gaped at Galen, then at Iago.

“You ask a lot from me, Iago. This is quite a favor you need.”

“Aye. It’s dangerous, but also profitable.” Iago pointed to the bag of crystals. “That bag alone could make a poor man wealthy for life. Think what a share of three barrels a month could bring.”

Galen realized just then the value of what they were dealing with. These crystals were the only source of magic in the world. They were prized, and expensive, but it never occurred to him just how precious that made them, especially given how easy it was for him to get crystals as a Wind Rider. A successful raid on a mining caravan could round up twenty or thirty barrels, more than enough to last, even with Pilots continually using them up on training. But here in the city, they were priceless.

Iago continued. “And before you try to get even more out of this deal, remember that I could have gone to Azris or Krolt. They both have better means of doing this. But I trust you more.” Iago smiled.

Oln chuckled back. “Do you now?” He walked over to Cyara and gave her a few crystals from the bag. “Take those to Havrin. See if they’re real.” Cyara left the room through the right side door, clutching the crystals in her hand. “I tell you what. Give me a day to check on these. I’ll meet you tomorrow night at the six bell, next to my docks in Harbortown. If they’re good, I’ll have a purifier with me and I’ll send a group with you then to find a spot to make the deal. Ballok will take them. I’ll take half of any purified crystals as payment, just so you know you’re not getting cheated. That’s a fair deal if you ask me and you won’t get better from anyone else.”

Galen glanced at Iago, who nodded back at him. “Agreed,” Galen said. “Tomorrow night, then.”

Oln laughed out loud. “Excellent!” He walked up and shook Galen’s hand, then grasped Iago in a bear hug. “I look forward to a long relationship with the Wind Raiders then.”

“So do we,” Iago said. “And it’s Wind Riders.”

Oln chuckled. “Ballok. Show them out.” Ballok walked towards the door and opened it as Oln retreated back to the far side of the table. “Well met,

Galen Corovin.” Oln called out after them as they filed down the hallway. “Don’t let me down now!” Galen looked back at Oln and gave him a polite nod, then continued on down the hall and through the first room.

Galen sighed in relief as they left, feeling the weight of this mission lift from his shoulders. Tomorrow night they would be out of the city and on their way back with a deal in place. He’d done it. The Pilot’s Council very nearly dared him to fail, but he’d succeeded. He took a deep breath and realized he felt normal again. No more churning in his stomach, or shaking hands, or sweating. Just blissful weightlessness. Everything could go back to normal.

Ballok stopped outside the doorway and watched the group leave. Iago took the lead, heading back the way they came, crossing up through alleys and down streets. Galen barely paid attention to their route, though. They could be walking right into the palace of the Clerics and he wouldn’t have noticed. He was lost in elation. Until Margis snapped him back out it.

“Shouldn’t we send someone back to tell the Council?”

Galen turned to see Margis walking next to him.

“What?”

“If we send someone back early to tell the Council, they can get a party formed up to start moving the crystals out of camp and towards the meeting spot. That way we don’t have to take Oln’s men with us back to our camp.”

“Take them back to the camp? Why would we do that?” Galen asked.

“The deal you just made. His men will travel with us tomorrow night. Rather than leave them at the meeting spot, or taking them with us back to camp while we announce the deal, why not just send someone ahead to let the Council know, so they can have people moving the crystals to the meeting spot already?”

Galen finally saw the point Margis was trying to make, and he groaned. He had forgotten they would be taking Oln’s men with them once they left. It would be incredibly disrespectful of them to ask Oln’s men to wait in the mountains for several days while they went back to camp to round up people and crystals.

Iago pursed his lips, having overheard the conversation. "That's a good point." He stopped and looked at the others. "So who's going back?"

"I will," Margis said, eagerly.

Galen nodded. "I would have to stay anyway, so I can't go."

Iago looked at Margis for a second. "You'll need help getting back."

"I remember the path. I can get back just fine. I'll avoid the Cliffs this time. And those Happaran buildings."

Iago shook his head again. "No. It's not safe to go alone." Margis turned to Galen for support but found none. He was foolish to think he could make the trip back by himself, Galen thought. Why would he even want to?

"Saalis, Hal, you two want to go back with him?" asked Iago.

"Aye," Saalis said. "I'm not too eager to stay here any longer than I need to." Hal nodded in agreement.

"Good." Iago said. "We split in half then, one Pilot to two Landers. You three should be safe

enough traveling back if you're careful. Just avoid any large groups."

"So we're leaving now?" asked Hal, a hint of sadness in his voice. Everyone became quiet, realizing that after all this time together, they were about to go their separate ways.

"We should go back to the inn and gather our packs. The sooner we leave the better," Margis replied.

"Agreed," Galen said. "I guess we can all go back and see them off, then?"

Iago nodded. "Let's go. It's time to pass on some good news for once."

* * * * *

After reaching the inn and waiting for Margis, Saalis and Hal to pack, Iago led them back through the Avis district into Ohvro until they reached Dyfin Way. They reached the intersection just inside the entrance to the city, where they stopped to make their goodbyes. Iago gave Saalis a few more tips on avoiding trouble spots on the way back while Galen

told Margis what exactly to tell the Council. After several minutes of chatting, reminiscing and well wishes, the group split and Iago, Jonir and Galen stood on the side of the road, watching as Margis, Saalis and Hal stepped through the city gates. A moment later the three of them turned left through the crowd of people returning from Harbortown, and then they disappeared past the walls, and out of sight.

It was a bittersweet moment for Iago. Seeing the three of them out of the city and headed back to camp where they would be safe made him feel like he'd accomplished something. He had no doubt that they could get back without any problems; Hal and Saalis were more than capable of avoiding any danger on the way back. But it also made him sad to watch them leave. He'd grown used to spending so much time with them, after feeling so alone for so long. Working together like this, for a common purpose and for so many days, had created a bond. He'd known these people for a year, but the last nine days had cemented their friendships.

“Back to the Inn?” Jonir asked.

Iago shrugged. “No point just standing out here.”

“One more day,” said Galen as turned to go back the way they came.

“Will be nice to get back, and get out of this city,” replied Jonir. “I never liked it here.”

“I lived here maybe ten years, and not once was I ever happy to call it home,” Iago said. “Not one time.”

“How can you stand all the people? I feel like I’m being caged no matter where I go.”

“You get used to it,” Jonir said.

Iago chuckled. “You want to see a lot of people? You should see the Trade Market. That’s a mess of Anzarins you don’t ever want to find yourself stuck in.”

“Yeah, that’s an image you won’t forget.” Jonir laughed. “You’ve never seen so many desperate and loud people in one spot.”

Galen frowned. “I’d rather not.”

“Well, we do have the rest of today and tomorrow to get through,” Jonir said. “We should find something to do to pass the time.”

Iago sighed. Wandering around the city aimlessly was risky, especially when he could run into people

who didn't need to know he was back, but he also had to admit that they couldn't just sit in the inn until tomorrow night. They would go crazy from boredom. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to find something to keep us busy. We might need to find another place to stay tonight anyway. Can't hurt to keep moving."

He had a notion to stay outside the city tonight, in Harbortown, which would ease their minds a bit. He felt like being a little more relaxed today than normal, and since they weren't pressed for time, he didn't take a direct route back to the Honest Soldier, instead cutting across a few streets on the way, just to see how time had treated some of the places he remembered.

This had been a far better trip to Tyr than his last one. Making this deal didn't entirely redeem him, but he was proud of the fact that he'd taken these men to Tyr and struck a deal with Oln that made both sides happy in the process. Oln would make a fortune, probably making him wealthier than anyone else in the city other than the Clerics, provided he kept it a secret, and he would owe it all to Iago. He hoped that favor would come back to help him someday. And

with purified crystals the Wind Riders could fly again without fear. They still had to do something about this powerful new Tyran airship that now roamed their skies but he knew the Pilot's Council could figure something out, especially now that their lifeblood had been restored.

Iago stopped. He'd turned down a side street, moving back towards one of the main roads, but a crowd of people lined up along either side of the road ahead of him, blocking the way. The three of them approached carefully and Iago looked over their shoulders to see what the commotion was about. Most of the crowd stared off to the left so he glanced down the road in that direction, then groaned in annoyance.

"What's going on?" asked Jonir.

Iago pointed down the left road, at the rows of horses and chariots approaching. "It's a Cleric procession."

Jonir sighed and shook his head. "Should we go back around another way?"

"It's almost here. Might as well wait it out, now."

"What's a Cleric procession?" asked Galen.

“It’s when a Cleric-Major gathers his Clerics and guards, and marches them up and down the roads, to remind everyone in his district how powerful and important he is,” Jonir said, not really hiding his disdain very well.

“I don’t think this is a Cleric-Major,” Iago said, squinting at the oncoming carts and wagons. He turned to Jonir. “This is a procession for Dahral.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jonir, surprised.

“Look at the third cart coming up.”

Galen watched the scene with great interest now. “Isn’t Dahral the Cleric-Justicier?” Iago and Jonir both nodded. “So we’re about to see the ruler of Tyr?”

Jonir stared down the road, trying to verify Iago’s claim. Suddenly, he froze, and opened his mouth in astonishment. “That’s Girkax,” he said, barely getting the entire word out. Iago nodded in quiet fascination.

The first cart was an open topped chariot with some green-robed women standing in it, throwing red and yellow petals out towards the throngs of people on either side of the street. The second was a covered chariot, with several Clerics seated inside. Clad in

their gold-colored robes, they did nothing save watch everyone they passed with dour looks. None of them seemed too interested in catering to the masses today. But it was the third cart, which actually was a cart, that caught everyone's attention, and their cheers.

A huge metal cage sat snugly in the cart, easily ten feet tall and six feet wide in both directions, holding a strange and fearsome creature. It stood upright on thick, muscular legs that protruded out from either side of a broad, scaled body, and it had four arms, two on either side of a torso that looked human, except for the light-brown scaled skin, from the waist up. Below the waist however, right where the legs began, the torso turned into a huge tail, making the bottom half of the creature look like a snake with two powerful legs. The head was smooth and hairless, and the face resembled a mix between a human and snake. Two small, black eyes were lodged under a smooth, sloped forehead. There were holes where the ears should be, and the creature's mouth was wide, and curved into an expression resembling a frown. It stood about seven feet tall, around the same size as a Garn, only much more menacing and lethal.

Its head slouched down, making it appear to be sad, if it was possible for the beast to feel that way, but it turned every so often to watch the people on the street cheering at it. Its hands grasped the bars of the cage but it didn't seem to be trying very hard to break free.

“What is that?” asked Galen, completely in awe.

“That’s a Malsohn,” Iago explained. “They live in the Baran Desert.”

“I’ve never seen one before.”

“Not many have. They’re almost mythical because they live underground. This one is Girkax. Its Dahral’s pet. He uses it to fight in the Pits sometimes, and it’s never lost. I’ve heard it tears people apart without even trying.”

“It’s a fearsome looking beast,” Jonir added.

“Aye. The only one ever captured, too.” They watched the cart pass by as the spectators yelled wildly. They seemed to revere the creature as a city treasure more than a spectacle. This wasn’t the first time Iago had seen the beast. He had been to the Pits before to see fights, and Girkax was brought out to liven up the crowds by tearing up pigs and cows, but he’d never seen it in an actual match. From what he

heard, though, a Malsohn was a savage and cunning opponent, not the mindless beast some would have you believe.

After Girkax passed by, another chariot came, with more Clerics inside, each looking bored as usual. However, the fifth one, larger than the others, got the most cheers of all. Several high-ranking members of the Tyran Guard walked alongside, each wearing a gold sash over their normal red and brown tunics. Seated in the back of the chariot, waving at the crowds as he passed, was the Cleric-Justicier of Tyr, Dahral, one of the most powerful people not only in the Lore Valley, but the entire land of Leranon. The crowds were likely more excited to see the Malsohn, but they cheered nonetheless at their ruler, an old man who was still healthy and spirited. He smiled at his people, turning and waving to either side of the throng. He wore the gold robes of the Clerics but his had several dark blue sashes.

Iago stared at Dahral as the chariot passed by. He had never met the Cleric-Justicier, but he knew things about him, and many other Clerics, that would disgust most of the people here. How happy would they be to

know about the torture and mutilation happening in the dungeons hidden below their feet? Or that the Clerics rounded up beggars and madmen to practice their Magics on? Dahral himself was known to enjoy particularly gruesome experiments on the very same Tyrans he'd been chosen to rule. Iago loved his people, but he hated the Clerics, and he only hoped Dahral was alive to see his own demise when the Wind Riders brought it about.

“So he just rides by with his pet to get everyone excited?” asked Galen, interrupting Iago’s thoughts.

Jonir nodded. A man standing just next to them, who had heard Galen’s question, leaned over. “The Clerics are rallying the people. They announced this morning that they’re sending the airship out again, to finish off the Wind Raiders.”

Galen, Jonir and Iago all stared at the man, then at each other, trying to cover their sudden surprise.

“When?” asked Jonir.

“It’s flying in two days,” the man called out over the crowd noise. Iago struggled to keep himself calm. The Wind Riders would be safe, he assured himself. There was no better place to hide than in the Lore

Mountains, an area they knew better than anyone. The Tyrans found them once, when they weren't expecting it, but the Wind Riders were more careful in their camp sites now. The Tyrans would have to be terribly lucky to stumble upon them again.

Iago stepped back down the cross street, away from the crowd. Jonir and Galen followed with solemn looks on their faces. "They'll be safe," he said.

Galen nodded. "Only from the disfavor of the Basarah would they find the camp again."

"Aye," Iago nodded in agreement. "Exactly what I was thinking. Let them wander all over the mountains for weeks, or even months. Let them use up their crystals while we rebuild our supply. We'll be fine."

"Let's go back," Jonir said. "I'm starting to get tired of these crowds." Iago nodded and led them away from the procession. He would take the long way around back to the inn, then get them out of the city and find a place in Harbortown. He decided he'd had enough of Tyr to last him the rest of his life.

Chapter 9 - Betrayal at the Honest Soldier Inn

Iago stepped through the main door of the Honest Soldier Inn, followed by Jonir and Galen, and the three of them moved between the tables of the common room to the stairs. Except for two older men sitting at a table in the front corner, and another at the bar, talking with Jonn, the room was empty.

“You two go on up,” Iago said. “I need to talk to the Innkeep.”

“What about?” asked Galen.

“I need to settle our money due. And I want to see if anyone’s been asking about us.” Iago whispered the last part.

Galen nodded and left with Jonir, while Iago walked back to the bar. He sat on a stool at the opposite end from the other patron and raised his hand, trying to signal Jonn. The innkeeper looked over briefly and paused for a moment, almost as if considering whether or not to acknowledge him. That

was strange, Iago thought. Jonn had always been courteous. Had they offended him somehow in the last two days? Bumping noises from the second floor distracted him, and he raised his eyebrow at the racket coming through the ceiling. That annoyance flitted away, however, when Jonn finally approached.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I need to settle up for our time here, we’ll be leaving today.”

“Of course.” Beads of sweat covered Jonn’s forehead, making Iago wonder if he’d been working outside all morning. “Will do, friend. Give me a few to take care of a couple things first, if you don’t mind?”

Iago nodded his head. “Take your time. But I do have another question for you.”

“What would that be?” Jonn grabbed a small towel from the bar and wiped his brow with it. The man was sweating like he’d run around the city.

Iago leaned closer. “Has anyone been asking about your tenants?”

Jonn glanced over Iago’s shoulder, presumably towards the staircase, as he shook his head. “No sir.

Let me find my ledger real quick and I'll be right back." Jonn, towel in hand, moved to the other end of the bar and through the door to the back, rather hurriedly, Iago thought. He wondered if the man might be sick. He frowned, turning to look out the front windows when his eyes found a thick, leather-bound book sitting on the bar to his right, wide open. It was the ledger for the Inn.

Iago was about to call out after Jonn, to let him know he left the book here on the bar. Then realization set in and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He turned around and looked at the staircase. No one was there. The two men sitting at the table seemed unaware of anything except for their vigorous conversation, while the man at the other end of the bar stared blankly at the wall next to him, a mug firmly in his grip. Iago left his stool and walked back to the staircase, trying to casually grab the hilt of his sword. He kept his eyes on both the corner at the top of the steps, and the main doors in the common room. He moved up the stairs one slow step at a time, which caused the talker sitting at the corner table to watch him with a bemused look on his face.

He reached the top step and waited, listening. He didn't know for sure that something was wrong, but his instincts were usually good, and they were telling him to be wary right now. He thought he heard movement down the hall and to the left but it sounded like normal footsteps, nothing out of the ordinary. He gripped his sword tightly and stepped into the hallway leading to the upstairs rooms. The hall turned to his left just ahead and he watched that corner intently, hoping a regular patron would appear, assuaging his fears that anything was wrong. In fact, he focused so much on the corner that he didn't see the slightly ajar door to his right, the one that opened as he passed it.

Iago heard the footsteps first. He spun to see two guardsmen charge at him through the doorway. Before he could even get his sword out they grabbed him and all three went crashing into the wall. They each tried to grab an arm and bring him down, and the larger guard on his left got a solid grip on him. Iago managed to break his right arm free and swing it around to punch that guard in the face, but he didn't have enough room to get any real force into the hit. He did make the next one count, though, bringing the

elbow of his arm back, right into the other guard's chin, who stumbled back, clutching his jaw.

Iago turned and grabbed the neck of the larger guard with his free right hand, trying to push him back until he could maneuver his left arm free. He couldn't, though, because this guard seemed to be as strong as he was, and had his own free hand on Iago's right shoulder, trying to push him off. The two struggled while the other guard regained his senses and pulled out his sword. Iago saw him out of the corner of his eye and twisted back to his right, letting go of the larger guard's throat, and grabbing the sword hand of the other before he could get a swing off. With one arm still tied up, and the other holding the smaller one's wrist, Iago was defenseless now, and the large guard took advantage of it. He punched Iago in the stomach, doubling him over. Another punch came, dropping him to his knees. Then another to his face sent him sprawling.

Iago lay there for a moment dazed, cursing himself for getting caught unaware.

They're not going to get me... not again...

He lifted his head and saw the top of the staircase not too far off. He thought he might be able to crawl there and roll down the stairs, maybe buy him an extra moment to gather his senses. As he pulled himself up off the ground, though, he never saw the guard with the sword get behind him, and raise the hilt up over Iago's head.

Come on, don't fail again... don't fail again...

Blackness took Iago in one swift blow.

* * * * *

Galen bounded up the stairs, followed close behind by Jonir. He was still anxious, but this was a freer and more purposeful feeling, one that made him speed up everything he did. With the deal now made, all that was left was to move to yet another inn, wait around until tomorrow, then get out of Tyr as fast as they could. The unease he felt in this city ate away at him every moment he walked within its walls. In fact, he hadn't been comfortable since the moment they left the Wind Riders camp. He wanted to get out of

here and back to his own environment, where he could stop hiding and start being a Pilot again.

Galen was so caught up in his thoughts, however, that he failed to be ready for what waited around the corner. As Jonir and Galen turned into the hallway at the top of the stairs, they found six men standing there. Galen's first instinct was to move to the side, thinking they were just patrons of the inn, trying to get through. But a split second too late he realized they weren't moving through, and they weren't patrons. The four in front were Tyran guards, while the two standing behind were younger men, wearing blue robes. Galen froze, realizing only too late that he'd walked right into an ambush. He had little chance to run, though, because he immediately felt the air around him harden, wrapping his ankles together, trapping his arms against his body and covering his mouth to keep any sound from escaping.

When his feet stopped moving, his momentum continued to carry him forward, and he would have fallen to the ground if the guardsmen hadn't caught him. They dragged him down the hall as his thoughts finally caught up with everything that had just

happened. The two men in robes were Clerics, using Air Magic to trap them. But how did the Tyrans know to find them here? He looked back to see Jonir being dragged behind, bound exactly the same way, only struggling much more. The Lander even managed to swing his feet out and kick the side wall twice, before the guardsmen subdued him with a few quick punches to the gut.

The two of them were taken to a room at the far end of the hall, where three empty chairs waited, arrayed in a line facing the door. The four guards, two to each captive, sat Galen in the leftmost chair, and Jonir in the middle. They held them to the chairs with death grips, not easing up for a second. One Guardsman had his hand dug so deeply into his shoulder that Galen would be crying out if not for the binding on his mouth. The two Clerics stepped inside, neither of whom were much older than Galen. They must be in training, he thought, since the Pilots borrowed a lot of their teaching methods from their old Cleric upbringing. They each stood in front of one of the captives.

“Hold them still,” one of the Clerics muttered.

The Cleric began chanting a mantra of the Ilarahan though Galen didn't recognize it right away. He was holding his hand outstretched, with a large, flat, polished stone in his palm. A shudder went down Galen's spine as he recognized the object. A tether stone.

Tether stones worked just like the masts of a Karawan. They were technically precursors to the mast, and they inspired a similar design when the first Karawan was invented. Using crystals, tether stones were enchanted with magic, usually of a specific type of spell, and they held that spell until the magic dissipated. This stone would be used to remember the Air Magic spell holding their bodies. Galen felt the air move, almost releasing him before it re-hardened, binding him to the chair, arms to the arms, legs to the legs, and torso to the back. When the Air stopped moving, the Cleric stopped chanting and went back outside. He looked at the other Cleric, stone in hand, who was in the process of doing the same to Jonir. When he finished, he too walked out. The guardsmen rattled them around some, tipping them over a bit to

see if they really were held to the chairs. After they were satisfied, they left.

Galen looked at Jonir, who watched him back. Galen shook his head, his worry matching the concern that showed on his face. He tried to think for a moment, to see if there was any way out of here. The room had two beds behind them, one on either side of the room, and a window in the middle. But bound to the chairs they couldn't do much, and they would stay bound to the chairs as long as the tether stones were near. Galen assumed they were just outside the door, so they couldn't get to them. Of course, four guardsmen and two Clerics were out there, too.

Galen heard bumping noises coming from down the hall. He thought about Iago, and wondered if they'd caught him downstairs, or if he was safe and would be able to manage a rescue somehow. Any hope of that was dashed, though, when two more guards dragged the Lander-Captain inside the room, unconscious. He was not bound except at the mouth, with a cloth binding, but the Cleric who followed them into the room would fix that. The guards sat

Iago upright in the third chair and bound him to it at the chest, arms and legs, just like Galen and Jonir. The cloth binding was kept in place, though.

“This one should go to the Pits. He’s got too much fight in ‘im,” said the taller Guard.

“Aye. Damn near busted my jaw up,” the other replied.

The Cleric finally spoke. “Find Marten and tell him the captives are ready.”

Each of the guards gave a slight bow before leaving the room. The Cleric stayed a moment, catching Galen’s eye. He stepped close, looking Galen up and down. He reached for Galen’s collar, feeling inside the shirt around his neck. Galen pulled away from the Cleric as best he could, a bit startled, but also grateful he had not been wearing his chain inside the city, since he presumed that’s what the Cleric had been looking for.

“Smart man,” the Cleric said. “Having crystals on your person is a death sentence. Not like you would ever see the outside of a cell, though. It will be useful having another of you ‘Pilots’ to interrogate.” He said the word scornfully, but Galen was more

shocked that the Cleric knew exactly who he was. Not necessarily his name, but what he did. How did anyone in the city know that?

The Cleric glanced at Jonir, who stared back angrily, then left the room. Galen realized he'd been holding his breath, so he slowly let the air out through his nose and steadied his breathing. He saw Jonir turn his head left and right, scanning the room the same as he had done earlier. Then the Lander started to rock his chair slightly. Jonir glanced over at him, and then rocked his chair again from back to front, a bit harder this time. Then he leaned farther back, probably as far as he dared, and threw himself forward causing the legs of the chair to leave the ground, but Jonir, still stuck to the chair, was now on his own feet.

He stood there for a moment, hunched over by the chair, and unsure what to do next. He glanced back at Galen, who did not think this was the best way for them to escape the situation, then he shuffled his feet slowly, moving towards the door. The door swung open and a Guard came through. Jonir dropped his chair back to the ground, but the Guard had obviously seen what he was trying to do.

The guard laughed. “Whaddya think yer doin’ boy? Tryin’ to tippy-toe outta here?” The guard chuckled and shook his head, then left again, slamming the door closed. They could hear him laughing outside, telling the others about what he saw.

The sound of the door closing caused Iago to stir. His head, leaning forward lifelessly at first, started lolling around. A moment later he managed to lift his head and open his eyes. After blinking about twenty times, he kept his eyes open and stared at the ground in front of him. He squinted, then looked up at the door, then back down at himself. He twisted his body, realizing he was bound somehow, then he turned and saw Jonir and Galen, watching him helplessly.

Iago seemed to be trying to focus on them, then he shook his head and looked at himself. His chin moved as he struggled with the mouth binding, but then he stopped and looked at Jonir’s chair. He stared at it for several moments, then back at his own. He looked at Jonir, then motioned down at his own chair, his arm muscles bulging as he strained against the wooden arms. Galen realized what they were trying to do. The Air Magic bound them to the chair and

nothing else. If they broke the chair into pieces they could get up and move around, albeit with parts still bound to their arms, legs and backs. But he wondered what would be accomplished. The guards would hear them and come back in immediately, assuming they weren't completely foolish and had wandered off. It became a moot point, however, as heavy footsteps approached from down the hall. Iago stopped struggling, and stared at the door.

A few whispers from outside, another set of softer footsteps moving away, and then the door opened. A tall man entered, but instead of the garb of a Cleric or guardsman, he wore more modest clothes, a tunic, pants and jacket, all different shades of dark brown. He wore a sword at his side, and a dagger stuck out of his rugged leather boots. Galen thought he might be a tracker, since he dressed like Iago did when he first came to camp. The man had shoulder-length brown hair, and scary-looking grey eyes. Galen decided this must be the man the Cleric spoke of. Marten.

He closed the door behind him and studied his three captives intently, pacing back and forth in front

of them as he did, wringing his hands together constantly. Finally, he stopped in front of Iago and smirked.

“Iago.” Marten shook his head. “Not even a month and you’re back in my city.”

Galen looked over at Iago, surprised. He knew Iago had been gone recently but he had no idea he'd been here. What reason did he possibly have to come to Tyr? Iago stared hatefully back at Marten, who just smiled.

“Of course, I had those two louts who were guarding you sold off to the pits. They certainly aren't capable of doing anything that requires thought.” He leaned over and looked at Iago eye to eye, then shook his head. “What a waste. You know what I have to do this time. You’re going to Deep Hold, where you will die young and miserable. It’s your own fault, too. I gave you so many chances, but you just turned your nose up at me.”

Iago’s face twisted in rage, but Marten just smiled and began pacing back and forth again, looking at each captive in turn.

He looked at Galen. “You’re the Pilot?” Galen did not respond in any way. Marten nodded, then looked at Jonir. “You’re what they call a Lander, right? I suppose that’s what Iago here is, too?” Jonir remained similarly quiet, so Marten leaned over and rapped on the door. A Cleric appeared, and Marten pointed at Galen. “I want to talk to this one.” The Cleric nodded and stepped back out, leaning over to grab something off the ground. When he came back in he had one of the tether stones in his hand. The Cleric silently mouthed another chant, and the air around Galen’s mouth loosened. Galen opened his mouth, stretching his jaw while Marten motioned the Cleric back out of the room.

“Six of you came here, Pilot. Where are the others?”

Galen said nothing, not wanting to betray the lives of his friends by giving up their location. Even though they were out of town by now, surely this man had the resources to chase them down and find them. Clerics, even though these were young, took orders from him as if he were running the city.

“Where are the others?” Marten moved to stand directly in front of Galen. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“I don’t know. We split up earlier today. They could be anywhere by now.”

Marten nodded, then thought for a moment. “Perhaps I should explain something to you, Pilot. Within an hour, an entire troop of guardsmen and Clerics will be here to take you and your two friends to the Old City. When you get there, you will probably be jailed by the Clerics and tortured for information the rest of your life. Your two friends will be taken to Deep Hold, a prison built so far under the city that it’s saved only for those who should never expect to get out.”

Beads of sweat formed on Galen’s brow, and he couldn’t resist the urge to blink incessantly as Marten moved closer and closer to his face.

“Now, that’s what you can expect if you don’t help me. But, if you decide to be helpful, and I really suggest that you do, then things will be better. A little easier for you. Iago here has used up any favors he

has in this town, but what about you? What about your other friend here? What's his name?"

Galen hesitated, breathing heavily. If he didn't know Jonir's name, then maybe they didn't know as much as he was afraid they did. Maybe he could think of a fake name, someone from camp. Maybe he could-

Galen's head snapped to the right as Marten wickedly slapped his face.

"You were thinking, Pilot. Don't think, just say. What is your friend's name?"

Galen's left cheek burned. The force of the blow surprised him so much that he didn't even try to be crafty with his reply.

"Jonir," he muttered.

Marten nodded, then turned to the Lander. "Jonir." He looked back at Galen. "Now, what about you? What's your name, Pilot?"

Galen looked up at Marten, hesitating again. He saw Marten bring his hand up again, barely an inch, and he cursed himself for being so weak as to blurt out his name. "Galen."

Marten stood up and smiled. “Very good, Pilot. I knew your name already, of course, I just wanted to make sure we started this conversation off with honesty.” He began pacing again. “Iago, Jonir, Galen, and the three others. And you say you don’t know where they are?”

“No,” replied Galen.

Marten nodded for a second. “That may be true. But what about their destination? Surely you don’t go your separate ways with no intention of finding each other again?”

“Why are you holding us?” asked Galen.

Marten stopped, considering that question, probably deciding whether or not to answer, ignore or respond with more violence. He eventually decided on the first one. “Surely you know that you’re all enemies of the great city of Tyr? Wind Raiders do not come and go as they please here.”

“Why do you think we’re Wind Raiders?”

Marten smiled, broadly this time. “Pilot, I’ve known you were coming for a while now. Don’t insult me by trying to pretend you’re some refugee.”

It was clear now. They had a spy in camp. Someone set this up from the beginning, and he walked right into it. The only question was who.

“Remember that blow to your face, Pilot. That is nothing compared to what will happen once the Clerics have you. You know the power of Air Magics I assume, so you also know what they can do to people.”

Galen thought of the Garn at Duren Olan and he suppressed a shudder while wondering what it would feel like to die in such a way.

“And why protect your friends? Jonir maybe, but Iago? How can you possibly call him a friend after what he’s done?”

Iago’s head jerked up slightly, but Galen caught it. What had he done? He looked at Iago, who stared back at Marten with an expression that betrayed... panic?

Marten stopped as realization came over him. Then he laughed. He walked to Iago, a huge smile on his face. “They don’t know, do they?”

Know what, Galen thought. Was Iago the traitor? Had he disappeared last month to set this whole thing

up? Galen's mind worked frantically now, remembering every little detail about Iago that struck him odd. But one thing stuck out more than anything else. Iago's trip to Tyr, which he had kept a secret, had kept him away from camp while the Tyrans attacked. During their darkest day, Iago was in the city of their enemies. It could still just be chance but it was enough to cloud his mind.

“How is it possible that they don't know what you've done? Maybe I should tell them.” Marten smiled wickedly. “It's best they know, don't you think?”

Galen's eyes flicked back and forth between Marten and Iago, watching both of them carefully.

“Do you remember the name Nasimir?” Galen's stomach dropped at the mention of their missing Pilot. Nasimir disappeared from their camp over a year ago. He was an old man, and after no search parties could find him, everyone assumed he'd been lost to the wilds of the Lore Mountains. He liked to wander off every so often, just to take a walk, so even though losing him was tragic, no one suspected anything sinister. At least, not until this very moment.

“Iago and I were hired, along with many other trackers, to find your camp,” Marten continued. “We knew you moved around so our only job was to bring back someone the Clerics could use for information. We spent almost a year searching those hills, all of us, but in the end it was your friend Iago here who finally did it. He found your camp, and captured one of your Pilots. An amazing feat. It’s only too bad that I took credit for it.”

Galen felt dizzy as everything he thought he knew turned upside down. He almost couldn’t believe what Marten was saying, yet something told him it was all true. Iago, who had lived and worked with them for a year now, had betrayed them like no one else possibly could. And worse, he had traveled with him to Tyr, the city of their enemies. He’d trusted him, even when he set up a deal with a slaver. He never for a moment thought that one of their own was responsible for what happened in the mountains four weeks ago. But it was true. He saw it now; they had been betrayed from the inside all along.

“Your Pilot, Nasimir, has been a prisoner of the Clerics for the last year. They’ve been holding him in

Ocasha where he's been teaching the Clerics all he knows about building and flying airships. You can thank him for the one that found your camp a few weeks ago." Marten could barely contain his delight now.

This was too much to handle. Nasimir was alive. He'd been a prisoner of the Tyrans this entire time, and Iago was the one responsible. He turned to the Lander-Captain, desperate to see any sign of defiance towards Marten's words, but all he saw was a man whose secret had been revealed. Iago stared at the floor, his shoulders slumped, despair in his eyes. And right at that moment, Galen knew it was all true. He'd betrayed them. Hundreds of people were dead or injured because of him, including his own cousin, and Tyr could now finish them off at their leisure.

Iago had destroyed the Wind Riders.

TO BE CONTINUED IN...

THE MONTSERNAN AGREEMENT

Excerpts from the History of Iador by Autilus

On the History of the Lore Valley...

Let me now focus on the Lore Valley, where I spent a great deal of my time. The Lore Valley is a large U-shaped region in the center of the continent of Leranon. At the north end of the valley is the Marenon Bay, and the coastal home of the Himmittes, the sea-faring merchants that much of the Valley relies upon for outside trade. To the west are the desolate, treacherous Rhavidan Mountains, which separate the Lore Valley from the neighboring Senin Valley. Nothing lives in the Rhavidan Mountains and its foothills except for myths and legends of dangerous creatures and old cities. Those tales I will come to later. To the east are the Rhokan Mountains, home of the nomadic Halstatt Berians in the north and the barbaric Galatae Berians in the south. Closing off

the southern end of the valley are the majestic Lore Mountains, home to Anzarins, Assarins and Happarans. The ring of mountains to the south, east and west, and the ocean to the north, effectively separate the Lore Valley from the rest of the continent, except for sea travel.

On the White Horsemen...

The wars started in the nation of Irsay, east of the Rhokan Mountains, an Outerland kingdom as the people of the Lore Valley would call it. Refugees from Irsay began arriving in Himmitte towns and cities by boat. A small trickle came at first, then boatload after boatload arrived, first from Irsay, then the neighboring kingdom of Neratos. They all came to the Valley seeking refuge from the mysterious arrival of people they called the White Horsemen.

All the refugees spoke of tall men wearing black armor that covered every inch of their skin, and riding white horses and wearing white cloaks or capes. These White Horsemen had appeared suddenly in

Irsay, in small numbers at first but they grew in size quickly. They captured village after village, forcing some people into slavery while others would disappear to never be seen again. Eventually their numbers grew large enough to capture the capital city of Irsay and then move south into Neratos and begin a new conquest there. The strength and skill with weapons of the White Horsemen was incredible. It was said it took three men to even come close to defeating one of the invaders. The strangest thing of all about the White Horsemen was that no one knew where they had come from, and no one had ever seen one of them without their armor on. The people of the Outerlands concocted a huge number of stories to explain it. Some said they were an invasion force from lands across the sea no one had even known about. Some speculated that they were dark and evil men, corrupted by the Magic of some terrible Magician, and that sunlight would kill them. Others wondered if they were even human at all.

Slowly but surely the White Horsemen moved along the Outerlands of Leranon, conquering every nation they came to, and the people who managed to

escape all fled to the Lore Valley, or the neighboring Senin Valley. The large cities of the Lore became flooded with people. Nations made new alliances with each other and armies became ready for war, should the White Horsemen ever make it into the Valley. People from all nations and all classes were on edge, wondering if the world was ending as these mysterious invaders defeated every army laid before them.

On Mergoran crystals...

Magic at this time, though, was primitive and weak, and the only way to use it was to have a power source. That power came from Mergoran crystals, which were discovered and mined in the Lore Mountains, just south of the Anzarin cities in the Halaraan Steppes. The Anzarins, after throwing off their Trohman overlords, mercilessly took over the mining operations of Mergoran crystals, and held a stranglehold over every facet of their use. As a result, the Anzarin leaders in each city, called Clerics, were

by far the most powerful and wealthy people in all of Leranon. And power and wealth soon led to corruption, greed and tyranny, all of which the Anzarin Clerics were famous for.

On the Wind Riders...

The Wind Riders story starts with a small group of Clerics from the Anzarin city of Elbasa. Around the time the White Horsemen began showing up in Irsay, these noble Clerics, tired of the corruption and the brutality, had been secretly meeting to overthrow the current Cleric-Justicier of the city. Unfortunately, they were discovered, and forced to flee the city. They went into hiding in the foothills south of the city of Tyr, where they made a discovery that would allow them to create objects that could fly through the air.

The discovery led to the creation of ships that these former Clerics could use to soar over the mountains and foothills, easily out of reach of their enemies. They decided to use this discovery to change things in the foothills, attacking Anzarin

mining caravans and outposts and freeing hundreds of the slaves used to mine the crystals. A number of these slaves came back with them and joined the Clerics, who named their new following the Wind Riders.

For almost fifteen years the Wind Riders owned the skies and wreaked havoc with Anzarin mining and slave trading. They constantly moved around, making themselves impossible to find, and when they attacked, they hit hard and fast, with Clerics-in-training, now called Pilots, flying the ships or attacking slavers and guards from above, while soldiers, called Landers, dropped from the vessels on ropes to fight on the ground, free the slaves, and capture crystals and other equipment. They were denounced as evil pirates in the Anzarin cities, where they were called Wind Raiders, but in reality the Wind Riders became a source of hope for all subjugated Anzarins.

The tides of battle changed abruptly, however, and the Wind Riders were woefully unprepared for it. Tyr, who bore most of the brunt of Wind Rider attacks, was rumored to have captured a Wind Rider

Pilot. A year later Tyr built a massive airship and sent it out into the Lore Mountains to find the Wind Riders, which they ultimately did. The Tyrans found the Wind Rider camp and attacked immediately, destroying more than half the Wind Rider ships and killing or capturing dozens of people. Only a handful managed to escape on a few ships, and the current leader or Pilot-Captain of the Wind Riders, Idaris, was killed in the attack, along with most of their capable Pilots. The surviving Wind Riders were beaten and wounded, with little hope of continuing on...

On the Anzarin people ...

The Anzarins were easily the most dominant race in the Lore Valley at this time. The Anzarin people settled mostly in two places - the harsh Halaraan Steppes in the southeast corner of the Lore, and on the fertile lands surrounding the Trin Lake in the southwest. It was the Anzarins of the Steppes that had the most influence, though.

These were the Anzarins who ruthlessly mined, purified and sold Mergoran crystals to the rest of the world, at exorbitantly high prices, mind you. The Clerics who ran each of the giant, walled Anzarin cities were wealthy, power-hungry, and corrupt, and spent their days enslaving more and more of their population for the crystal mines or for the ever popular Pits, underground arenas where slaves fought to the death.

The largest of the cities was Tyr, formerly called Eleril during the Trohman Domination. Tyr was built on the banks of the Mirken River, which allowed it an easy trading route to the Kirn and the Himmittes in the northern lowlands. Although each Anzarin city ran itself separately from the others, Tyr was the most populous, most wealthy, and most powerful, by far.

On the Assarin people...

The people of Assar are unlike any other in the world. They are known throughout Leranon for one thing, tattooing themselves with symbols that

represent major life events. You can sometimes find elderly Assarins with every last part of their skin covered with these markings, each of which tells a captivating story. It's an amazing trait, and I am to this day fascinated by the effort they put into it.

Of course, Assarins have more than their share of stories to tell. When the White Horsemen came to their nation, they put up a tremendous fight. Even though they were outmatched, they battled for days in their capital city of Assar, fighting from building to building as they retreated. They finally had to surrender the city, but the majority of the survivors regrouped in the northern part of the country and moved en masse across the Lore Mountains, a trek later called the Great Journey, hoping to find a place to settle on the other side.

They lost a large number of their people on that trek, and when they reached the lands near the Trin Lake on the north side of the mountains, they were greeted with hostility from the Anzarins in the area, and were attacked. The Assarins were scattered and driven back into the mountains, an event in Assarin lore that came to be called the Breaking.

Again, the Assarins faced the end of their nation and their people, but again, it was not to be. Young Maradin Dumon, the son of the former great general Andurain, began rallying his people. He spent three years roving the hills and mountains, attacking the Anzarins in small, easily winnable battles. He eventually gathered so many of his people that they were able to attack and conquer the Anzarin cities around the Trin. They captured the largest city, Keramos, and renamed it Assar, remaking the former Assarin kingdom into an empire, though one now sitting on borrowed Anzarin lands.

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Maradin Dumon came to be known as “the Ghost” in the fighting against the Anzarins because in all his battles, he never once suffered so much as a scratch.

On Magic and Religion...

Magic and religion are closely intertwined in Leranon. The vast majority of people believe in a system of gods called the Basarah, four gods each responsible for an element of life – Fire, Earth, Air and Water. Each god controlled one of the elements and although each was powerful in his own right, it was when they combined their powers that spectacular things would happen.

There was no single god of right or wrong, though, or good and evil. Instead, good and evil were represented by the duality of each god. For example, a pleased Irah, the God of Fire, could create warmth, while a displeased Irah could burn down towns or forests. Angering Majah, the God of Water, and Ilah, the God of Air, could create a hurricane or typhoon, wrecking the coastline. Kohju, the God of Earth, could either bring down the mountains with an avalanche, or make the gardens and forests grow. Of course, given the history of Iador before this time period, the system makes perfect sense.

Magic, though incredibly weak and raw at the time, was considered an extension of the power of the Basarah. Those who studied Fire Magic were called

Irahdan, Earth Magic users were Kohjuhan, Air Magic were Ilarahan, and Water Magic disciples were Majahan. Strangely, the magical disciplines rarely overlapped...

On Happarans and Garns...

The Lore Mountains are home to two notable indigenous peoples, the Happarans in the East and the Garns in the West.

Happarans are short, stout people, with dark hair. They stand chest-high to a human and live in small towns built into the sides of the mountains or hills, or sometimes even in the caverns below. Happarans are known throughout the continent as excellent stonemasons and woodworkers, and are frequently called upon to build large, ornate structures for rulers of many nations. They're also incredible weapon smiths, though they seem to frown on work of that type.

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While most Happarans are only tall enough to stare at a normal human's navel, a human would unfortunately do the same to a Garn. Garns are large, primitive, tribal people who live in the caverns of the western Lore Mountains. They hunt in packs, using large clubs as weapons, or large axes or hammers taken from humans they've killed. They have no notable skills as a people, other than incredible strength and a voracious appetite. Garns are known to eat anything with meat on it, animal or human.

On the City of Tyr...

The city of Tyr, known as Eleril during the Trohman Domination, eventually became so large over time that a former ruler of the city, the Cleric-Major known as Rohannan, divided it into five districts for easier management. The center portion of the city, which was actually the original city of Eleril, became the Old City. The outer sections became the four districts of Avis, Agor, Gotan, and Ohvro. Rohannan appointed four new Clerics-Major to run

those districts, and then created a new rank for himself, the Cleric-Justicier, to whom the Majors would report, a system which still exists today. As time passed, a sixth section of the city appeared, called Harbortown, a motley collection of buildings and huts that stretched from outside the western wall to the eastern bank of the nearby Mirken River, however it was not run as the other districts were. It was merely patrolled like any other camp or village outside the walls of Tyr. The actual administration of Harbortown is left to an elected position amongst the Kirza, the merchant class of Harbortown, called the Dockmaster.

On the people of Lir...

The people of Lir are a strange folk, indeed. They stand at least a foot shorter than a human, similar in stature to a Happarann actually, but nowhere near as stout. Liren people are thin, reed thin, their extremities only marginally thicker than bone. In addition, their foreheads slope back slightly, and that,

in conjunction with their large noses, has earned them the nickname of ‘ratmen’; that and the fact that they have a reputation for incredibly fraudulent business dealings.

Before the White Horsemen uprooted them, the small nation of Lir could be found nestled in the hills southwest of Neratos, where the Lirens herded goats and sheep. Lirens are dexterous people and had a well-deserved reputation as excellent cloth workers and sewers. Liren cloth was by far the finest material to be found anywhere in Leranon.

On the History of the Senin Valley...

I’ve spent very little time in the Senin Valley, despite my long life, but I shall surely return there one day. The Senin Valley is quite a different place than the Lore Valley, even the Outerlands. The lands of the Senin aren’t as open as the Lore, it’s much more mountainous and rugged, and there are entire nations there that are separated by impassable terrain, making the people of the Senin Valley much more

secluded and isolated. As such, you can find strange customs there that have survived for centuries, and whole cities of people who have never seen an Outerlander.

Don't get me wrong, the people of the Senin Valley aren't cut off from the rest of the world. The Trohmans still control port cities there and pass on goods and news to the nations of the Senin, but the difficulty of movement keeps the people there confined more than anywhere else in Leranon.

On the Baran Desert...

The entire western portion of the Lore Valley, the area that edges up against the Rhavidan Mountains, is known as the Baran Desert. Divided into the Upper Baran in the south, which was a little north of the Trin Lake, and the Lower Baran in the north, which edged up against Himmitte lands, this desert and the mountains next to it, were home to creatures and places that had born legends for centuries. I could spend the rest of my life chronicling the assortment of

animals you would find only in this area, and perhaps I should considering my age already, but I say that only to give my readers an idea of just how fascinating the desert is.

Unfortunately, unless you are incredibly well-prepared and supplied, or already a creature of the Baran, you would not survive long there. Once you entered the desert, you would find no water above ground until you reached the Rhavidan Mountains, which is why most of the indigenous life lives underground in caves and tunnels. Food is scarce for humans, and the heat alone could kill a weak man.

But anyone with the time and resources to explore the Baran would find magical places beyond recount. The landscape in some areas is dotted with the ruins of the great cities that once stood there, before time and nature took its toll.

On Tyrann Prisons...

Tyr was widely known for its Pits, the many underground arenas built under the Old City where

slaves, criminals, or even professional fighters would kill each other for sport. Some were small, where only a few dozen spectators could gather around a cage while two captives would fight for survival, while a few were much larger, hosting up to several hundred people and numerous small or large-scale battles.

* * * * *

What was less widely known, was the existence of the Tyran prison of Deep Hold. Built even farther below ground than the Pits, Deep Hold was a dungeon of the most ruthless sort. The worst of criminals were brought here and tortured, or just jailed and forgotten. Though everyone speculated on whether it was a real place, with parents using its name to scare little children, most Tyrans had never seen it, since the only people who ever went to Deep Hold, never came back.

Note from the Author

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