

KNIGHTS
— of —
ARALIA

Book III: The Conquest

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KNIGHTS
— of —
ARALIA

Book III: The Conquest

J. S. Allen

*In loving memory of Elizabeth Jane Allen-Simmons.
You were the best.*

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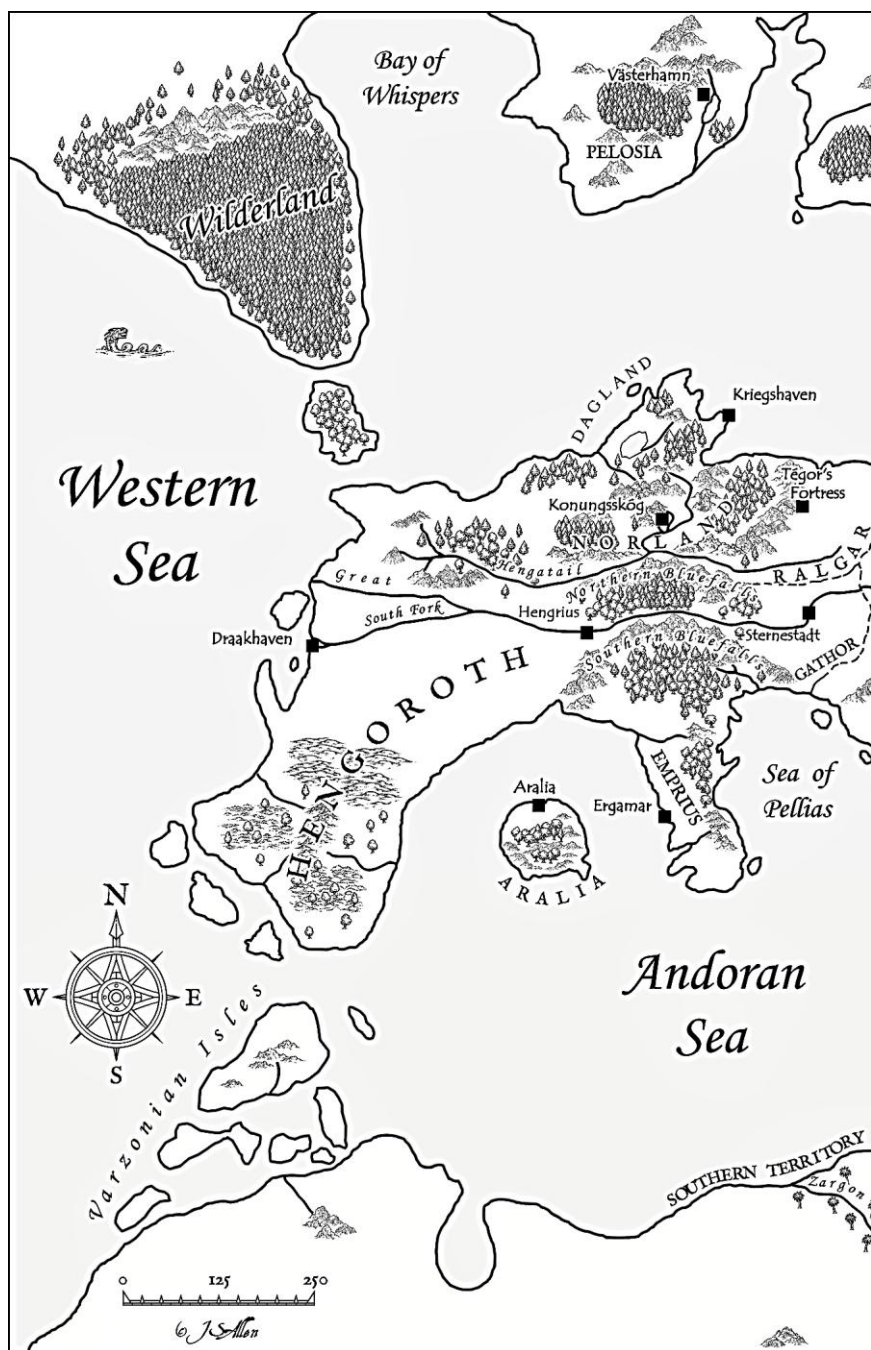
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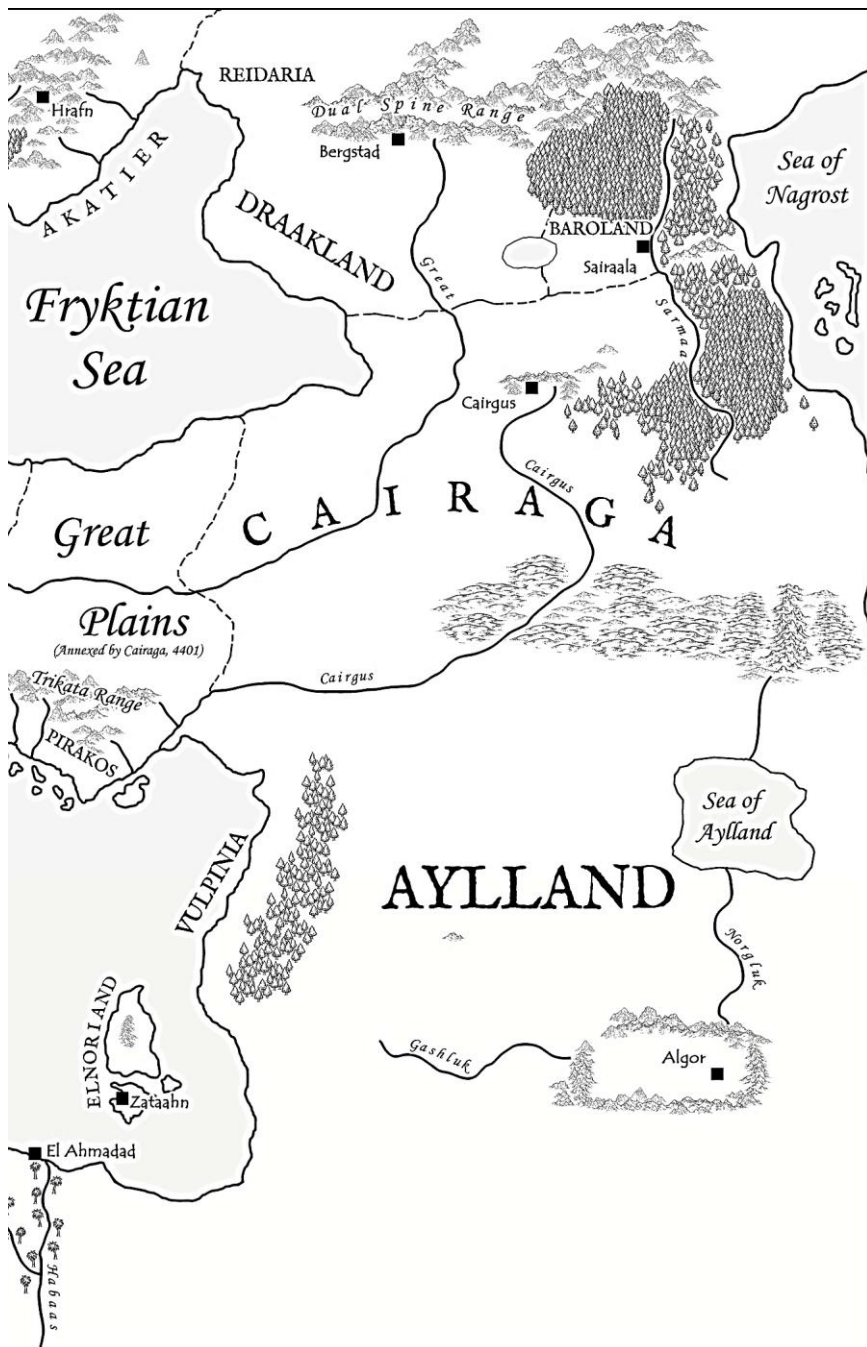
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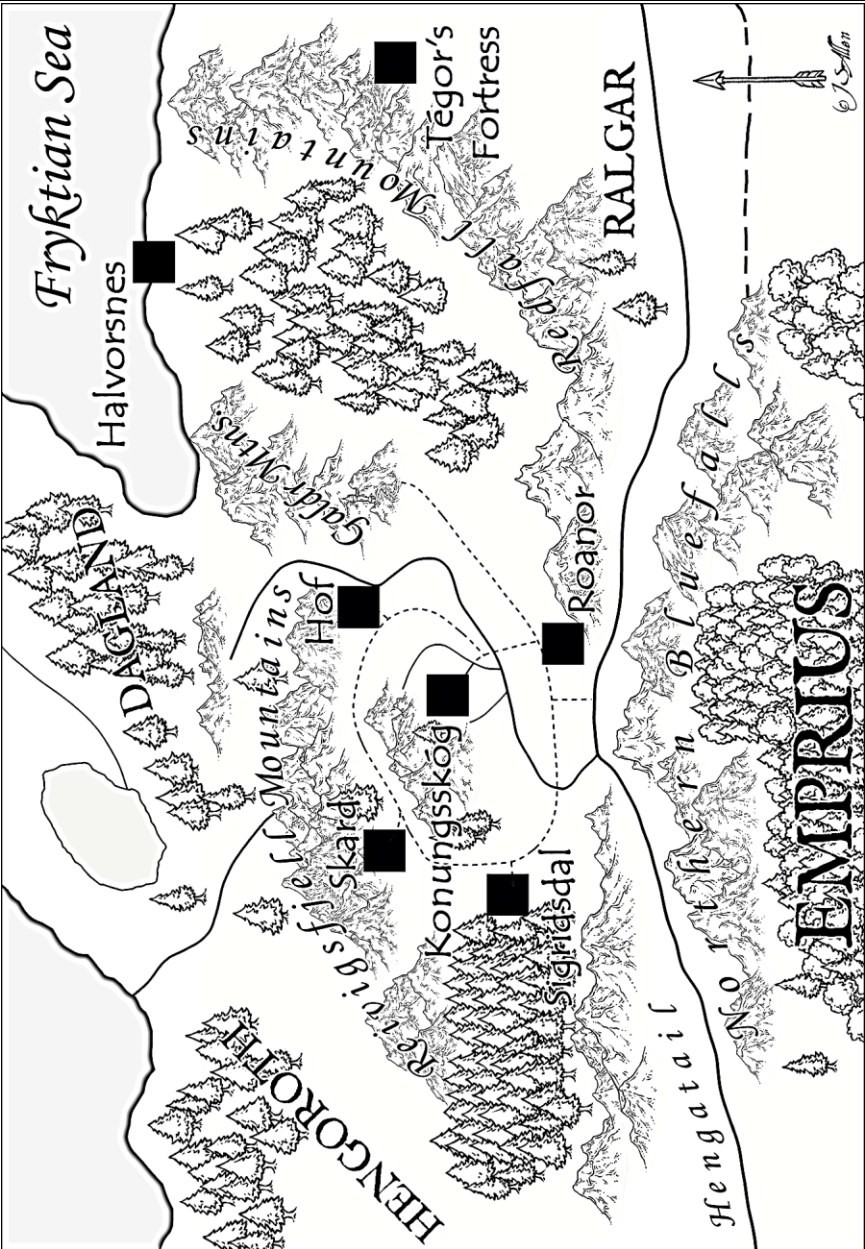
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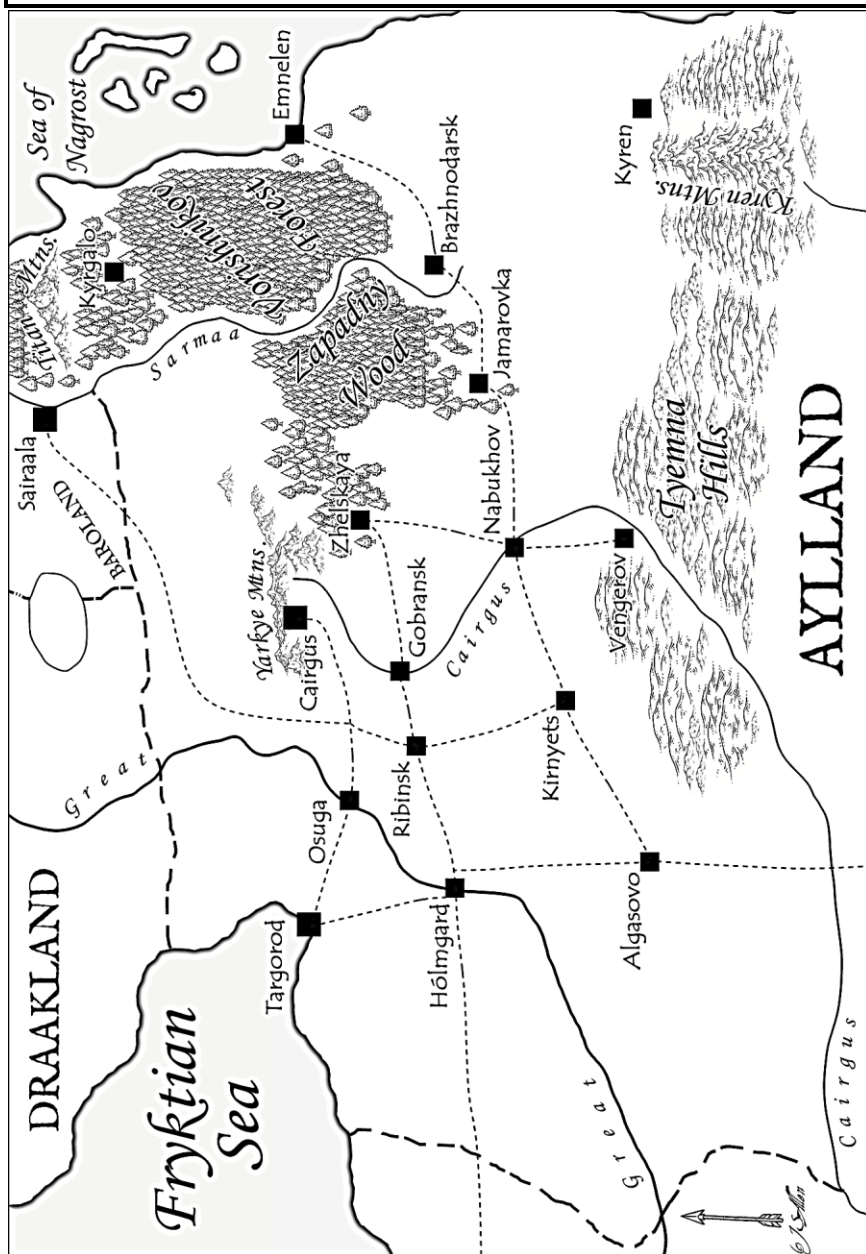




THE KINGDOM OF NORLAND



THE KINGDOM OF CAIRAGA



Chapter I

The Gathering Storm

A grey haze hovered low over the fields near the city of Draakhaven. The chill winds of an ever-deepening autumn swept across the last of the ripening crops that would soon be harvested. Nevertheless, a steady stream of travellers braved the elements on their way to and from the busy capital of Hengoroth. Aside from these merchants, soldiers and dignitaries, two more figures rode along a ridge to the south. They travelled at an easy pace, eyes roving this way and that, yet always returning to the distant horizon where a solid grey tower moved slowly across the sky.

“Looks like we’re in for a storm,” said the first, a young woman with golden hair and pale blue eyes.

“So it does,” agreed the other, a solid-looking young warrior wearing the armour of a Drakonic officer with a great ash tree encircled by stars engraved upon it. He gathered up his reins in one hand and rested the other upon the hilt of his exquisite sword, *Eerstekling* as he remarked, “But the wind’s not blowing our way this time, sister. I think this one’s headed east.”

A flash in the clouds and the long, low roll of thunder that followed sent chills down their spines. They quietly watched for a moment as nature gathered her awesome might to unleash upon the distant floodplain, silently praying for those who dwelled there. Ingrid eventually turned her gaze to the northern road, where a long column of Draga marched toward the gathering storm on their way to the faraway city of Hengrius and the war that raged beyond.

“Looks like a whole regiment this time,” remarked Ingrid.

“The first of several leaving today,” replied Bérageon. “The entire Fourth Division is supposed to be on its way east by sunset.” They watched for a moment as Bérageon turned his horse away. “Come now, let’s get back to the barracks, or else they’ll start supper without us.”

“I understand Drakor has decided to try his hand at cooking this evening,” stated Ingrid as they rode toward the city’s main gate.

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Well, be prepared to lend him your expertise.”

“Come now, brother, you’ve no way of knowing whether he’s any good or not.”

“Warriors are seldom chefs, sister, as I can attest to myself. The better the warrior, the worse the cook. A scrapper as skilled as Drakor has spent more of his life sharpening swords than kitchen knives.”

“We shall see.”

They passed through the gate under the watchful eye of several guardsdrakes, then into the bustling city streets beyond. No war had yet touched Draakhaven, and the populace went about their daily lives as though it never could. The two young knights earnestly hoped they were right as they rounded the corner onto a side street. They stopped beside the door of a tall greyish building where a young man with long, dark hair stood waiting.

“Ah, good!” he exclaimed. “You’re here.”

“Is something wrong, Wavae?” asked Ingrid.

“Not in the least,” replied their younger brother. “But the others said someone ought to stay behind to tell you.”

“Tell us what?” pressed Bérageon.

“We’re to dine with Elder Vargon this evening.”

“The Elder has invited us to supper?” Ingrid was at once

surprised and thrilled at the news.

“That’s right,” replied Wavae. “Says he’s looking forward to seeing us again.”

“And we him,” said Béragon. “It’s about time we did, considering we are here to serve as his escort.”

“Don’t be so ungracious, brother,” said Ingred. “You know he’s kept very busy by his office. I’m sure if time had allowed, he would have come to us much sooner.”

“Perhaps we should get on with it then,” spoke Wavae as he mounted his horse. “No need to keep the good dragon waiting.”

Thus, the three knights trotted through the wide, heavily congested streets of Hengoroth on their way to the Elder’s Tower, which lay near the city centre. Along the way, Béragon spotted a caravan of tough-looking Draga and nudged his sister.

“Looks like we’ve got some more Independents headed out,” he commented.

Independents were warriors who fought for one side or another completely of their own accord without owing allegiance to any nation or kingdom. They were considered very dangerous, and seldom got along well with others. Thus, groups travelling together like these were rare. There had been a time when, wandering in the wilderness of Northern Emprius, Ingred and her companions had briefly considered becoming Independents themselves. Their friend Drakor had been one before joining them, but his foster brother Elagor had brought him around.

“Well, let’s be glad they’re on our side,” replied Ingred as they passed the party.

At last they arrived in the main square, which was surrounded by the most important buildings in the city. To the left was the Draakhlin, the assembly point of Hengoroth’s

governing body, and beside it the Library of Rangor. In the heart of the square stood an enormous statue of the first Draga, Drakor, in full armour with a helmet tucked under one arm. His other arm was raised to the heavens along with his gaze, as though thanking the Arden above for turning this beautiful seaside locale into the beating heart of Drakonic civilization. It was a highly romanticized portrayal, of course. The real Drakor had never set foot in the land now called Hengoroth, nor had he worn a scrap of clothing in his life, much less armour. Nevertheless, its message was clear: the Draga of this city took great pride in their heritage, and woe unto any who threatened their beloved home.

Equally spectacular in both height and design was the structure standing directly across the square from the Draakhlin: the magnificent Elder's Tower. It was, in fact, an identical twin to the one that stood many miles to the southeast on the site of the original Draakhlin, and had been built around the same time. It was truly a splendid piece of Reptilian architecture, from the wing-shaped peaks at its top to the ornate carving upon its door.

The four climbed the short staircase to the entrance, where a young Draga with greenish grey scales awaited them.

"Morning sirs. Milady," he said, bowing to them in a gesture of respect among his people.

"Good day, Ralor," replied Wavae. "Were you waiting on us?"

"Yes, actually," answered Ralor cheerily. "The Elder told me to watch for you. Do come inside. The others are assembled in the parlour."

The drake opened and held the door for them as they went in. Once they were inside, Ralor entered, then took the lead.

"This way, please."

"Thank you, Ralor," said Ingred. She had always liked

Ralor. The youth was shy and quiet, but exceptionally well mannered, which was little surprise considering he was the ward of Elder Vargon. He had been taken in by the kindly old Draga after his parents had been killed in service to Aralia, though they did not know the details. It was not a subject Ralor liked to talk about. Soon he led them across the main entryway to another open door. Sounds of laughter and conversation were coming from within, and Ralor stepped aside to let them through.

Upon entering they found the rest of their old fellowship strewn about the room, chatting or simply reposing in the warm comfort of Elder Vargon's parlour. Seated in the centre of the room were the philosophical Evander, the scholarly but hardy Morgan, the sea-loving Lampolo, and the unparalleled swordsman Dèscar. In the far corner they saw the red-scaled Drakor and his childhood friend Elagor in conversation with their elder brother Égor. And standing alone beside the mantle, deep in thought as always, was none other than the stoic leader of this brave band, Lieutenant Fordain Abendroth. The rest of the Fifteenth Aralian Wolf Section promptly turned to greet their companions as they walked in.

"Ow was your little patrol, then?" asked Lampolo. "Anythin' new out there?"

"Not yet," replied Béragon curtly. "More columns heading out, but nothing else."

"A beautiful sight, isn't it?" remarked Wavae. "Who would have thought the Draga would ever get themselves organized for war at the rate they were going?"

"Well, we've certainly given them long enough, haven't we?" spoke Drakor, shaking his head impatiently. "Bout time those lazy sots got their tails motivated to fight." Although he was himself from Hengoroth, Drakor felt no special allegiance to his countrymen as a general rule. "Though I'll be damned if

they get back into it before we do.”

“What’s the matter, Drakor?” spoke Morgan. “Don’t you consider our rest well deserved?”

“Not hardly! A short respite, maybe, but not a full rest. Only when Algoron’s dead and his empire in ruins will I consider it time to rest. As it is, we’ve gone a month and more now without any action at all!”

“And Heaven knows you can’t go that long without a fight,” said Wavae.

“Not without killing something, anyway,” muttered Drakor.

No one replied. They knew the drake’s bloodlust in battle—they had all witnessed it first hand.

“I agree heartily,” said Elagor with his slightly rasping voice. “The hunting is no good here. This is farm country for miles around.”

“Mayhap not,” said Evander, “but this city’s certainly got plenty else t’offer. I can’t see no reason t’rush back to the fray too quickly.”

“Yes, but just remember, the war is still going on out there,” Dèscar spoke up. “And if we do not ride out to meet it of our own accord, it will find its way to us.”

“Always the spoilsport, eh, Dèscar?” remarked Wavae.

“Nevertheless, he is right, Wavae,” spoke Fordain at last. “We’re knights; not sightseers. A week or two for recovery is good, but too much of this easy living can soften the body and dull the mind.”

They could not argue with that, mainly because Ralor now re-entered, having left the guests for a moment to check on things upstairs.

“Pardon me, knights, but Elder Vargon awaits you all in the dining chamber,” he announced. “If you’d just follow me, I’ll show you up.”

“Lead on, Ralor,” spoke Fordain. “Now we’re all here, there’s no need to keep the Elder waiting.”

So, up they went, ascending the zig-zagged staircase to the second storey, where the doors stood wide open. Ralor once more entered ahead to announce their presence, after which he gave a sign that it was all right for the knights to come in. Before them stood the Elder himself wearing his long, formal dinner robes.

“Welcome, Aralians, to my humble table,” he said.

Elder Vargon was an impressive specimen of a Draga. He was ancient, even by his own kind’s standards. But despite the wrinkles in his fading grey scales, he leaned very little on his trusty oaken staff. He was a well-built Draga, rivalling even Drakor in size, though his toothy smile was that of a youthful innocent. The only real sign of his age that Fordain could ever detect was in his eyes. The deep wisdom tucked behind those pale grey orbs bespoke one who had seen much sorrow in his life, but who had refused to let that sorrow keep him from experiencing the many joys it had to offer.

“Thank you for inviting us, Elder,” replied Fordain as they all bowed respectfully. “It is good to see you again.”

“Indeed! It has been far too long, Lieutenant Abendroth. I am sorry I did not ask to see you sooner. But I have been quite busy of late, and truth be told, I was unaware of your presence in town until just a few days ago.” He paused. “Well now, I do believe there are some of us who’ve not met before.” His gaze rested on Dèscar. “What is your name, sir?”

“I am Dèscar Dagion of the Kingdom of Cairaga,” replied the dark-haired young knight with a courtly bow and a flick of the cloak hem.

“Aah yes, the famed sword master of Aralia.” Vargon nodded sagely. “I am honoured indeed.”

“As am I, sir.”

“And you, my lad?”

“My brother Éogor, sir,” Ingred responded for the reserved young man.

“I thought he had the bearing of a de Haas. So pleased to see your family united once more, Captain.”

“Thank you, Elder,” said Éogor.

“Lampolo Terentius Aretto of Emprius, sir,” spoke the next knight when asked.

“Do I detect a native of the Coral Coast?”

“Aye, sir. I was raised in the village o’ Sole near Lutra.”

“Beautiful country, the Coral Coast. Would that I could have done more boating in my time, but alas.”

Drakor then stepped forward without waiting to be asked.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m...”

“No, don’t tell me! You’re Krakon Vos’s boy, aren’t you? Drakor, is it?”

“That’s right,” replied the drake, astonished at the Elder’s astuteness.

“I thought you looked familiar. Something in the curve of your horns, I think. I knew your parents quite well in the old days,” explained the Elder. “Alas, I was sorely aggrieved to hear of their passing last year. Though, I daresay their spirit lives on in their remaining son.”

“Thank you, Elder Vargon,” said Drakor, bowing his head.

“Well! Now that our introductions are made, please be seated and partake of this sumptuous array that Ralor and I have made.”

He stepped aside, revealing the fully decked dining table. It was a marvellous sight to the young Aralians, who relished the thought of digging into every fine, savoury morsel.

“You made all of this by yourselves?” exclaimed Wavae.

“Well, of course,” said the Elder as they took their places. “We are the only ones here, so naturally we are the ones who

do the cooking.”

“But you are the Draga Elder,” said Dèscar. “Surely one of your station would find it a bit...degrading to do such menial work.”

“Hm. I find it neither menial nor degrading,” replied Vargon. “There is no shame in honest labour, whatever it may be.”

“I am sorry, sir. I meant no offence.”

“None at all taken, dear boy.” Elder Vargon smiled broadly. “And of course there are those who would gladly perform all my services for me merely on account of the prestige they would find in such work. But then, what would that leave an old dragon and his ward to do with themselves, hmm?”

No one had a suitable answer, so they began eating at a wave from the Elder. The food was absolutely spot on, as the knights were sure to tell Vargon and Ralor on several occasions. Drakor’s earlier disappointment at not getting to show off his own cooking skills soon dissipated as he realized anything he made could not possibly compare. Conversation was lively throughout as Elder Vargon got to know his new guests better. When at last they had finished, he invited the Aralians up to his den for afternoon tea. They heartily accepted, and joined him after they had assisted Ralor in clearing the table.

“Do make yourselves at home,” the Elder instructed as soon as they had closed the door behind them. “I shall go and get the tea ready.”

So, the eleven knights keenly explored their new surroundings. Elagor, ever the scholar, investigated the many volumes that lined the den’s walls. He selected an old tome about the Vildegraad of the High North—his ancestors—and seated himself next to Evander, who had engaged himself in the first of a six-volume series titled *A History of the Reptilian*

Races, penned by none other than Elder Vargon himself.

Morgan and Dèscar stood by the window gazing onto the streets far below and talking softly to one another. The rest sat around the central table and waited for the Elder to appear, bearing a wide metal tray with twelve teacups and a pair of full carafes on it. He set the platter down on the table and nodded toward it.

“Do partake, one and all,” he said. Nevertheless, they waited for him to take the first sip.

“This is quite good,” spoke Ingrid for the rest. “Where did it come from?”

“The eastern reaches of Cairaga, if I’m not mistaken,” replied Dèscar. “But how on earth did you manage to obtain such a luxury?”

“I’ve been keeping this batch for a couple of years now,” replied Vargon. “It is among my favourite variety, but this is the last of my store. I doubt I will be able to get any more for a long time to come, what with Lord Caritus’s cessation of all commerce with the West.”

“Caritus no longer feels the need to bargain for that which he can simply take,” said Dèscar. “As I recall, before he severed ties with us, Cairaga was the West’s main source of tea.”

“Quite so, quite so. Lord Caritus has diverted much of his labour force from other sources to sustain his war effort. The kingdom does not produce as many luxury goods as it once did, and certainly not for the purpose of sending abroad.” He sipped his tea and added, “Even if he had not turned his might against us, I doubt we would see much of this coming through.”

“Caritus has always wanted to conquer the West. This war was inevitable from the moment he took the throne.”

“Hm. Indeed,” said the Elder with a grim look. “This young upstart is a far different man than his predecessors. There is

no denying that he has accomplished astonishing feats in his short reign. Terribly destructive, of course, but nonetheless astounding.”

“But how strong are the Cairagan forces?” asked Fordain. “Do you think we’ve truly made an impact on their war effort yet?”

The Elder took another sip as everyone looked to him for the answer.

“There is no doubt that our many victories over the Cairaga have had an effect,” he replied with great certainty. “Yet, Algoron continues to grow stronger every day his ally holds us at bay. It is *his* power that drives the war effort against us; not that of his Human protégé.”

“What are you saying?” pressed Morgan.

“I am saying that if we do not act now, all we have gained so far may still be lost forever and more besides.”

“You speak truth, Elder Vargon,” said Dèscar. “We must do something soon.”

“I agree,” said Drakor.

“As do I,” spoke Morgan. “But what course are we to take?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” continued Dèscar. “We must strike with all our might against the Cairaga while they are reeling from their losses. If we hit them hard enough, we may just knock them out of the war entirely. Then the initiative will be all ours.”

The Elder smiled at Dèscar’s enthusiastic outburst and nodded sharply.

“Quite so, young knight,” he said. “Mind, it would have to be a very decisive blow indeed to accomplish all of that. The Cairaga are shaken, but far from beaten, as a native like you must surely know. Nevertheless, you have the right idea. They are the lesser of the two, and we should focus our efforts on stopping them first.”

"I agree," said Morgan. "But we're nearing the end of the year—an important consideration if you know anything about Cairagan winters. We couldn't possibly achieve such a victory in so little time."

"Couldn't we?" spoke a disappointed Drakor.

"No, we could not," spoke Vargon. "However, if we act swiftly and decisively, we may yet be able to strike back at them by next spring."

They listened carefully as he continued:

"There are several uncertainties, but if done correctly, we could turn the tide in this war within a year."

"What hast tha got in mind, sir?" asked Evander.

"Direct assault is the only way across the open steppes of western Cairaga. However, such an undertaking would take a great deal of coordination and above all strength. Exactly how much depends on how well the Cairagans are led."

"I think the answer to that is pretty obvious."

Vargon gave Dèscar an admonishing look.

"Do not let your hatred of Lord Caritus blind you to his abilities, young knight. He is still a very dangerous foe, and save for Hansenburg, his record of victories remains spotless." He paused. "Though by some accounts he was severely wounded there, and so even that may not entirely count against him."

"I believe we have the strength," said Fordain. "We have almost the entire West united against the Cairaga now, save perhaps the Varzonian Isles. And now that Hengoroth has entered the war..."

"Very true, Lieutenant Abendroth, very true indeed. However, most of the Western nations have been tested and wearied in combat over the past several years, and will take some time to recover their strength. Though we may indeed achieve victory with such combined might, I believe the

addition of fresh troops could only further guarantee our success.”

“Where would they come from?” asked Ingrid. “The Far South?”

“Dagland, perhaps?” added Elagor.

“Fine guesses, my friends. But they, too, have already tasted the sting of war. No. I do not speak of those who are already known to be our allies, but rather those who have not yet declared their allegiances to one side or the other.”

“But you can’t mean Norland?” said Lampolo in disbelief.

“I can indeed.”

Lampolo, Fordain, and Evander exchanged uneasy looks. They had been raised in the Republic of Emprius, which had invaded Norland many years before. It had been a bloody affair for both sides, and neither had truly forgiven the other.

“Them Norlanders’d never fight for us,” stated Evander flatly. “Not after what we done to ‘em.”

“They are a very provincial lot,” added Fordain. “It would take some convincing to make them look beyond their own borders.”

“It would indeed,” spoke the Elder. “But King Svenn is a wise man, and I am certain he realizes that Algoron is just as much a threat to him as to us. He would no doubt be willing to hear us out, even if his people are not.”

“Then we must at least try to obtain his support,” stated Fordain definitively. “It’ll take months to gather together for a united assault. Perhaps all winter. Meanwhile, we could send some emissaries to Norland and have their answer by the time we’re ready to attack.”

“Sound reasoning, young knight. And I believe you may be just the ones to carry such a message. Some of you, at least. As you say, Norlanders are a very insular people, and not particularly fond of strangers. Not even Aralians like

yourselves. I cannot imagine how you would be received once you arrive there.

“But this is all purely conjectural right now,” concluded the Elder rather abruptly. “And at any rate, that is not the reason I invited you all here.”

The young knights regarded each other in wonder. Was this not enough to ponder for one night? What else could the old dragon have possibly called them here for? Vargon did not leave them in suspense for long.

“You see, I have recently come across something that could have significant implications for the history of Aralia, as well as that of the Draga. Or rather, young Ralor found it while he was dusting the upper shelves of my library.”

“What is it, Elder?” asked Evander.

“And to think! In all the time I’ve spent in this very room throughout the centuries!”

“Please do tell on, sir,” pressed Ingrid, trying to mask her impatience.

“Of course, of course.”

The Elder quickly rose from his seat. He disappeared into his private chamber for a moment. There was a good deal of shuffling and the sliding of a drawer. The knights found themselves puzzled and excited at once. Elder Vargon soon emerged with a very large, very old tome tucked under his arm. He staggered over to a side table and slammed it down, raising a small cloud of dust and causing the other items on it to shake. He waved them over.

“This ancient volume is perhaps the most valuable book in my library,” he said as they gathered round. “It was written by an Imperial scholar at the height of the Western Empire, so the text is in the Old Imperial used in that age. I would say it is approximately eight hundred years old, not that you’d ever know from a mere glance. The Imperials always knew their

binding." He opened it up to where he had placed a strip of birch bark.

"Quite useful, these," he remarked, tossing it aside. He then followed the lines of text, which were hand-written and nearly illegible upon the brittle yellow pages. However, the Elder seemed to have no trouble deciphering it as he squinted at the old parchment. "Ah! Here it is. Now, I have gone over these pages numerous times since discovering them and tried out every possible translation. And every translation I try points to only one conclusion." He paused dramatically for effect, then spoke very slowly to allow his words to sink in. "This is the first clue I have discovered in a long time regarding the exact whereabouts of the *Tome of Alenius*."

The Aralians were stunned into silence. They could hardly believe what they were hearing, and even those among them who had no idea what the *Tome of Alenius* was could feel the significance of the words. It took Drakor a moment to remark, "A very interesting discovery I'm sure, but exactly what interest is this tome to us?"

"None at all, quite possibly," answered the Elder. "On the other hand, the implications of this discovery could be massive. For scholars like myself, if no one else, this would be an item of immeasurable interest. For in case you are not aware, my young friend, the Tome is the only written account of Alenius's life ever made in his own hand. It has long been lost and sought after for the history it holds, as well as the numerous secrets it is rumoured to possess."

"What sort o' secrets?" asked Lampolo.

"Arden only knows. The fact is, through this single passage by a virtually unknown author, we are closer to finding it than ever we have been before, and I do not think we should waste the opportunity that fate has presented to us."

"And how far away is it, exactly?" pressed Drakor.

“Very far from here, I’m afraid. According to this, after Alenius’s death, the Tome fell to his best friend, a scholarly Draga named Toron. He eventually retired to the Far South, where he lived out the rest of his days writing about his experiences and King Alenius. The vast majority of his writings were housed in the Library of Kharangul where he set up residence.”

“Kharangul,” echoed Morgan. “The name sounds familiar for some reason.”

“As well it should to a learned mind. Its destruction is one of the most spectacular in history. But a few decades after Toron’s death, a massive earthquake devastated the city, killing many within. The ruins of the city were further ravaged by looters looking for rare and expensive items to sell in the years afterward. But according to this author, the Tome was not among the items taken. And so, as far as we can tell, the *Tome of Alenius* still remains somewhere buried deep within those ruins where Toron kept it.”

He replaced the birch strip and shut the book with another puff of dust. The Aralians regarded each other for a moment before Fordain spoke.

“This is indeed a revelation, Elder. But how are we to know that the Tome hasn’t been found in the centuries since this account was written? Or else destroyed along with the city?”

“We cannot know for certain,” said Vargon simply. “I daresay this author was attempting to incite interest in finding it by writing this work. However, he lived in a time of strife when the words of an unknown writer regarding long-dead kings stirred very little interest.” He paused. “A pity, really. So often such men receive due recognition for their labours only after they’ve long departed.”

He paused again for a long time. Several knights were on the verge of saying something when he resumed.

“Anyway, the location of the ruins has long since been forgotten by all but a few locals, though even they do not often go near it from what I gather. And it seems to me that were the Tome found, its discovery would not long remain a secret. Thus, I shall foolishly assume that either it has not yet been recovered, or it was indeed destroyed long ago.”

“But how do we find out for sure?” spoke Dèscar.

“There is only one way.”

“An expedition.”

The Elder gave a toothy grin. “You read me all too well, young master Dagion. Yes, I was hoping that you of the famed Fifteenth Aralian Wolves might be able to assist me in my scholarly endeavours. It is part of the reason I requested you to be among my escort in the first place.”

“We would be glad to help, Elder,” said Fordain. “But I don’t know that we can. Doubtless our swords will be needed elsewhere before too long.”

“I’m sure,” remarked the Elder. “Nor would I expect you to simply head out on these expeditions to Norland or the Far South without consulting your commanding officers first. I need only your assurance that, were I to convince them that such expeditions were necessary, you would be willing to go.”

Fordain looked to each of his friends and, seeing their complete confidence in him, replied, “Of course we would.”

“Very good. I shall consult King Frolin and Queen Falin when we reach Hengrius, and we shall make our final decisions at that time.”

“And have you any idea when we might be leaving, sir?” asked Drakor.

“In fact, my business in Draakhaven is concluded as of today,” replied the Elder. “I will be departing in the company of General Arion on the morrow. Therefore, I recommend you all get some rest, for we will want to be in tip-top shape for our

journey.”

“Wise words,” replied Éogor with a bow to the Elder. “We had best retire immediately, then. It is a long way back to the eastern end of town.”

“Oh, you needn’t go all the way back there tonight,” spoke the Elder as they prepared to leave. “I’ve plenty of rooms to spare here within the tower.”

“Thank you, Elder,” spoke Fordain with a bow.

“Not at all, young knight. Ralor!” He called the drake into the room. “Show our guests to their quarters for the night, if you would.”

Ralor nodded.

“Certainly, sir. This way, if you please.”

As he led the rest away, Fordain paused to admire the Draga Elder’s library, which was even more extensive than that in the country tower. Vargon noticed this, and could not help but comment.

“Anything in particular you seek?”

“Not really. I haven’t had much time for such things lately.”

“You and I both, dear lad.”

“Well, good night, sir,” said the young knight after a moment. Then he took his leave.

“Good night, Lieutenant Abendroth. Arden watch over you all tonight.”



Many hundreds of miles to the east where midnight had already come and gone, three young men sat around a table in a cold, cramped cellar. The emblem of a diamond atop a stick embossed on their brooches marked them as officers of Lord Caritus’s finest. The third, whose seal had downward-sloping wings appending the stem and head, seemed particularly pensive. He gazed out the window while the other two sat in uneasy silence. Each was trying hard not to think about why

they were there, or what they were waiting for. It was something none of them liked to talk about too much.

The door to the dark but dry little room cracked open and a fourth officer entered, closing the door behind with nary a sound. The others turned as he saluted the ringleader.

"Anyone behind you?" asked the one by the window.

"No," came the reply.

"Then take a seat."

He sat in the remaining chair, and they huddled close together.

"Now then, straight to business," spoke the ringleader. Nevertheless, he paused thoughtfully before continuing. "How do you all find the situation?"

"Good," replied the one to his left.

"Good," repeated the next.

"Not as well as it could be had we been successful this summer, but not yet irretrievable," replied the third.

The leader nodded very slowly.

"I agree." He paused a moment. "So why are we here?"

The others exchanged looks with each other for a moment as though they knew the answer, but could not quite put it into words. The young ringleader then proceeded:

"I'll tell you why we are here, gentlemen. Because a time may soon be approaching when our outlook is not as hopeful. The road we are on is rough and exhausting. It's only a matter of time before we end up getting ourselves into something we can't get out of. And I fear that all of Cairaga may suffer for it."

"What do you propose we do about it?" asked the nearest one. "We're not the king. We're not even senior officers."

"No Sasha, we're not. And frankly I don't think any of us are fit to be such things yet. But we are not here to discuss our suitability to rule, as you know."

The others exchanged uneasy looks, but nodded just the

same.

“Twice now we have nearly been led to ruin. This latest Northern venture may be our death knell if it should fail. But even in victory we are lost. For we are Cairaga, are we not? And yet, for some, we are not good enough.” He paused to let his words sink in. “There are those who claim to love this country and all who dwell within it. Yet those self-same men espouse the virtues of the Scaly races and seek to supplant men born and bred in this land with abominations from the South. These honorable men would have us conquer the West only to make its inhabitants part of our own. To dilute that most precious title of Cairagan citizen by handing it out freely. Tell me, friends, how can such men truly claim to love this country?”

The others said nothing, but were nodding enthusiastically now, their zeal aroused by their leader’s passionate words.

“We, however, have learnt our history and learnt it well. The very pluralism that brought the Western Empire to its knees is what our gracious masters would have for us. And what do we loyal Cairagans get for our efforts? We get thrown into prison cells, forced to work in the fields like slaves, or simply murdered outright for even insinuating that our ideals might differ from those of more honourable men.”

“We must do something!” Sasha practically shouted.

“Quiet! Someone may hear us!” spoke the late arrival.

“Do not silence him, Mika,” directed the young colonel. “He is not afraid to speak the truth.”

“When do we move?” asked Sasha a little quieter.

“Not yet. As with all things we must be patient and wait for our moment to strike. Mind you, I would rather not resort to bloodshed if possible. But we are in desperate times, and our range of options grows narrow indeed.”

“Perhaps over the winter, then?” suggested the middle

conspirator.

“Perhaps. But whenever we move, it must be with the greatest care. Elsewise things may turn out even worse for the Cairaga than if the Westerners were to win this war. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open for any opportunities. Should any of us learn something useful, we’ll let each other know, agreed?”

“Agreed,” said the rest in unison.

Thereafter they dispersed, extinguishing the candles before leaving the cellar as quietly as possible. They crept out discreetly, one by one, leaving a small beetle scaling the wall as the only witness to their treason.

Chapter II

Taking the Offensive

Fordain lingered for a moment at the water's edge, savouring the scent of the hot, steamy air. Finally, he began to ease himself in. He sucked in his breath sharply as his feet touched the surface, then very slowly let it out as the rest of his body followed. Drakor slid slowly in across from him until they were both standing up to their shoulders in the pool.

"They really laid on the heat today," said Fordain.

"Yeah. Just the way I like it. Now if only they'd lighten up on the incense..."

Fordain and Drakor had decided to pay one more visit to the Baths of Draakhaven before their departure. It would be a long time before they had another chance to properly wash themselves, and as cleanliness was a virtue among Aralians, they did not wish to miss it. They had already been in the cooler waters of the previous chambers, and now soaked themselves in the heated waters of the *caldarium*.

"I have to say," spoke Fordain, "I never thought you would be the kind to enjoy the luxuries of a bathhouse."

"Oh yeah, they're great. Granted, I usually avoid these really fancy ones, but I have to admit, this..." He sank down to his lower jaw and sighed. "This is pretty nice. Only one thing that could make it feel even better, eh?" He winked.

"You wouldn't in here, surely!"

Drakor chuckled. "Nah, not really. But maybe afterward."

Fordain shook his head and tried not to grin at his friend's banter. Maybe it was wrong for an officer to indulge such bawdy conversation from a subordinate, but he could hardly fault Drakor for his honesty.

They allowed themselves to relax for a little while as the water went to work on their skin. They chatted quietly and watched the occasional attendant go by. Drakor seemed to take particular notice of the other bathers, cautious type that he was. There weren't that many this early in the morning. Most were Draga and all were male. Like Imperial bathhouses, this one contained separate but identical facilities for both sexes.

"Well, best head back to the *tepidarium*," spoke Fordain, hauling himself out. "I reckon we'll have to hurry if we don't want to miss out on breakfast."

"Hmm, we'll have to make a couple quick dips, then." Drakor slipped out and shook himself off before following Fordain into the next room. Here the water was kept at room temperature, though compared to the *caldarium*, it felt positively freezing to the two at first.

"Amazing what the body can adjust to," remarked Drakor.

They cleaned themselves off quickly and efficiently using the tools given to them on entering the baths. They were about to leave when they noticed a group of three drakes—the only others in the room—pointing at them and whispering together.

"What do you suppose they're on about?" asked Drakor.

"I don't know. Just ignore them."

But as they made their way across the pool toward the other side, one of the drakes called out:

"Oy, mate, what's a Fleshy like you doin' in 'ere?"

Fordain stopped and replied, "Just starting the day off right, same as yourselves."

"Aye, but don't you Imperials have your own baths you can visit?" spoke another.

Fordain was not quite sure how to reply. These drakes were obviously a bit tipsy, and he didn't wish to start anything. So, he shrugged and carried on. But Drakor would not let the

insult lie.

“Isn’t it past you hatchlings’ bedtime?”

They giggled at his jibe, then the first one spoke up:

“What’s a Draga like you doin’ associatin’ with Fleshies anyway? Don’t you know this war’s all his kind’s fault?” He pointed at Fordain.

“Like you spoiled brats would know the first thing about war!” said Drakor, his ire building. “Sitting back here safe at home getting drunk on your daddy’s purse while real warrior’s fight your battles for you.” He shook his head. “Disgusting.”

They regarded one another in confusion, as though not expecting such a sharp retort, but the second carried on anyway.

“Save your breath, mates,” he told them loudly enough that Fordain and Drakor could hear. “There’s no reasoning with Fleishy lovers.”

Drakor started wading toward them, but was stopped by Fordain.

“Leave them be, Drakor. They’re just trying to get at you.”

“Ooh, look lads!” spoke the first with a grin. “Looks like ‘is boyfriend’s scared.”

“Yeah!” said another. “In fact, didn’t I see you going into Brand’s the other day?”

That did it for Drakor, who broke free of Fordain’s grasp and waded toward the youths with absolute fury in his eyes.

“You sorry little sots! You think you’ve got the whole world figured out because you’ve spent a few years in your fancy little institute gazing at stars, eh? Well let me tell you something. Lieutenant Abendroth here is a damn fine man, and he’s done a lot more for this country than the three of you lazy Scalies combined! So if you want to sit there and hurl insults at lesser Fleshies, go right ahead. But don’t blame me for what happens next.”

Dead silence filled the chamber. Even the attendant who had walked in halfway through Drakor's tirade stood stock still. Nothing stirred save the water until at last Fordain sighed and waded over to Drakor.

"Let's go, mate," he said quietly.

Drakor heeded his friend, but continued to shoot a glare at the three delinquents icier than any of the pools. When the two had passed into the *frigidarium*, they paused by the pool. Drakor shook his head in a distinctly Drakonic manner, twitching his tiny pointed ears with agitation. Fordain placed a hand on his arm and asked with concern, "Are you all right, mate?"

"Yeah," replied Drakor. "I just can't stand being in the presence of such blatant stupidity."

"I know, Drakor. I've seen it the other way around, too. Some people just aren't taught better."

"Or don't want to be taught."

"That too." He paused. "What's Brand's?"

"Nothing. Just a tavern of sorts."

"That's where you've been staying on the nights you weren't in the barracks?"

Drakor swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah."

Fordain could tell his questions were making Drakor uncomfortable, but he ventured one more. "By the way, all that you said in there. Is it true?"

Drakor perked up and met his gaze straight on.

"Every word," he replied, then hopped into the pool with a great splash. Fordain took this to mean the end of the conversation, and hopped down into the frigid water beside the drake.



The Aralians breakfasted with the Elder and set out before sunrise along with a host of armed Draga. They travelled

directly east for the first stretch, taking a sharp southward jag just as the sun began to creep into the sky ahead. They rode all day with as few stops as possible, halting only when they felt the Elder needed a rest. Though Vargon did not complain about the lengthy ride, he did not object when they stopped.

The next day they journeyed into the rising sun again, and the day after that and so on, always staying the night in towns or cities where it was possible for the Elder to sleep in a proper bed.

“I find it a bit harder to use the earth as a pillow than I did in my youth,” he admitted ruefully. He offered to hire rooms for his entourage as well, but most objected, or else insisted on paying their own way.

“I do have the means,” he objected at first.

“Aye,” spoke Fordain. “But we are your escort, sir. It is we who are here to serve you, not the other way around.”

Vargon muttered something to himself and shook his head, though he ceased complaining afterward.

For a fortnight they travelled thus, arriving at their destination by mid-November as planned. From the hills just to the west they could view the city in all its majesty.

Firmly situated in the fertile Dolorian Vale, Hengrius spanned both banks of the Great River at the exact point where its waters passed from Emprius into Hengoroth. Once, as capital of the Western Empire, it had been the largest city in the world, and it certainly remained a contender for the title. For centuries, Humans and Draga alike had gathered here from all over the West and even farther afield to partake of this unique crossroads between their two unrelated yet uncannily similar races. Every facet of its culture was a fusion of Imperial and Drakonic influences. Several buildings had Ergamarian columns on the front, but carvings of legendary Draga adorning the tops.

The convoy descended into the valley and soon neared the city walls. Their approach had been detected by the watch long before, and the great city bell tolled within. Crowds of soldiers and civilians alike came out to welcome them as they passed into the city streets, and to see with their own eyes the great Draga Elder.

Among the spectators as they neared the main square were none other than Frolin and Falin, the King and Queen of Aralia. Beside them stood Lord Elezier, the seniormost member of the Aralian Council. Generals Barro and Alexander of Emprius were present as well, indicating the presence of the First and Fourth Imperial Legions in the area. Coming to the city centre, the column halted. Vargon and his escort rode on to the front where a couple of city officials stood ready to greet them.

“On behalf of the people of Hengrius, welcome my lords,” said the Draga mayor with an elaborate bow. “If there’s anything at all you need, please let us know.”

“Why thank you!” replied the Elder. “We will be sure to do that, Lord Atticus.”

They dismounted and exchanged greetings with other old friends and acquaintances, then gestured towards a few subordinate officers. The column promptly dispersed to find the quarters reserved for them. They had not been certain that there would be room for them among the residents of Hengrius, and so had brought all the materials needed to build their own encampment outside the city. However, their Drakonic brethren had anticipated their arrival and made space within their own barracks to take them in.

The leaders were then invited inside to take refreshments and discuss recent events. Seeing this, the young knights prepared to depart with the rest, but Vargon called them back.

“Actually, I was hoping you might join us,” he said. “If that

suits you, King Frolin.”

“But of course,” said Frolin. “They are among the most trusted knights in the Order. Though, I confess, I have not had the honour of meeting this one,” he added, eying Drakor.

“I’m Drakor, sir. Drakor Vos,” spoke the drake, stepping forward and saluting sharply.

“Son of Krakon, yes. We’ve heard much about you from your foster brother, as well as the reports from the summer campaign. If half of it is true, then Aralia has gained a valuable new warrior indeed, and it is an honour to meet you at last.”

“Likewise, Your Majesties,” said Drakor with an awkward attempt at a bow—a gesture he was clearly not used to making.

“If you desire the presence of these knights and this drake, Elder, then I shall not stand in your way.”

“If King Frolin trusts them, then I’m sure we’ve no objection,” answered one Drakonic officer with bronze scales and a heavy brow line.

“Very good,” spoke the Elder. “Then let us proceed.”

And so, the party headed into one of the large, official-looking buildings lining the street. They walked down a central corridor, then down a side corridor. At the end, they entered a small gathering room, barely noticeable among the more elaborate administrative offices all around. The knights waited outside at the Elder’s request, finding accommodations in a similar room just next door. When the senior leaders were settled in, Ralor served them tea and took his leave at a nod from Vargon.

“Now then, Elder,” King Frolin spoke first, “what is it you wish to tell us that requires the presence of my knights?”

“I have a proposal to put forth, which they have heard and fully support.”

The other leaders exchanged consternated looks.

“Do continue, Elder,” Frolin urged, leaning forward

slightly.

"It is, simply put, a mission of diplomacy. One which I believe these knights are well suited to take on."

"Oh, but you can be most maddening at times, Vargon," spoke the bronze dragon gruffly. "Get on with it, please."

"I propose sending an offer of friendship to the Kingdom of Norland," said Vargon quite simply.

Even the Aralian monarchs could not entirely hide their surprise at the proposal, and the bronze grunted sharply.

"It is a bit late in the year to consider such a journey, Elder," spoke Frolin. "And even if our emissaries made it to Konungsskóg before winter, it is not an endeavour with great prospects."

"I know it may seem folly, King Frolin. But we must have help in this struggle if we are to take the fight to the enemy. Defensive victories alone do not win wars."

"We agree with you heartily, old friend," said Lord Elezier, the haggard-looking General of Aralian Forces with his Northern inflections. "But I believe if we are to seek reinforcements for the much-anticipated action, then they must come from other sources."

"And where can we turn to for assistance on such short notice, I ask you?" argued the Elder. "They are the closest untapped reserve of manpower we've got. And if I know the mind of our enemy as I have cause to believe I do, then they shall consider such an alliance just as unlikely. Thus, it would come as that much more of a shock to the East if the Norlanders were to appear at our side on the battlefield."

"That's assuming an awful lot, Elder," said the bronze. "Why should King Svern favour an alliance with us after our previous dealings? His people would rebel at the very idea!"

"By us, of course, you mean the Western Alliance as a whole," continued Vargon, unwavering. "And more

specifically we of Hengoroth and Emprius. But, if my memory serves me correctly, Aralia wanted nothing to do with the invasion of Norland. Therefore, an alliance with the renowned Golden Order cannot be all that objectionable to them. In fact, the Norlanders have some distant ties of kinship with the people of Ralgar, Gathor, and Northern Emprius, all of whom have linked their fate to ours."

"Norlanders feel no kinship with any but their own, Elder," spoke General Barro in a most definite manner. "The whole idea is folly, plain and simple."

"Perhaps not entirely, General," spoke Falin. All eyes turned on the previously silent Queen of Aralia as she made her opinion known. "I was present during the negotiations in that war, and I know for certain that King Svenn is a reasonable man. Perhaps it would not be as difficult as we imagine."

"Precisely!" Vargon pressed. "At any rate, what have we got to lose by trying, Frolin? Especially when the campaign season is practically at an end?"

"Nothing," Frolin was quick to admit. "Who did you have in mind for this expedition?"

"As I stated earlier, I believe it must be a party representative of Aralia."

"I had guessed as much by the presence of my knights here. Who among them did you wish to send?"

"Well, I thought it best to leave that up to you, King Frolin. However, as this party from Aralia is to be speaking on the behalf of the entire Western Alliance, I must request that Drakor be sent along as representative of his race."

"But as you said yourself, Elder, Norlanders bear no love for Hengoroth either," said the bronze dragon pointedly. "The inclusion of a Draga among the party could easily hurt our cause as much as help it."

"I must disagree, Admiral Bendrikson. For although this

party is to be Aralian, the Norlanders would be allying themselves to all of us, Hengoroth included. If the presence of a single drake disturbs them now, then the idea of cooperating with an army of them will be put down straight away.”

“Very well,” spoke King Frolin. “Drakor it is. But who else?”

“What of Lieutenant Abendroth?” offered Falin.

“A wise choice, Falin. But might we not need him in the meantime for other matters?”

“I cannot imagine what,” said Lord Elezier. “And as a Noronir, he may have an easier time getting through to the Norlanders than most. By all means, send Fordain, my king.”

“Fordain and Drakor then. Surely we ought to have a couple more?”

“Of course,” replied the Elder. “But I think it only fitting that Lieutenant Abendroth select the rest of his companions for himself.”

“A wise idea. Let us call them in now.”

“In a moment, King Frolin. First, there is another important matter we need to discuss.”

Without further ado, the Elder drew forth the great volume, which he had brought all the way from Draakhaven in anticipation of this meeting, and opened it up. He related his discussion with the knights, and told of their willingness to go seeking the Tome. Lords Frolin and Elezier read over the text to reaffirm Vargon’s words. Having been trained at the finest military academies in the High North, they were both well versed in Old Imperial, and worked through it with ease once it finally came back to them. When they were satisfied that he had not been mistaken, they closed the book and regarded him closely.

“Then you are suggesting that we send our knights to seek this out in a time of war?” spoke Frolin.

The Elder nodded vigorously. "Indeed I am, and with good reason. You must be as well acquainted as I with the current state of affairs in the Far South. It now seems to be only a matter of time before Algoron achieves his breakthrough. Perhaps a matter of weeks. When he does, it will mean his dominion over the entire region of which we speak, and with it a complete end to any searches we may launch in the area for a long time. I do not want even the slightest risk of his finding the Tome before us, especially if it does indeed contain the secrets it is reputed to hold.

"I implore you, King Frolin, if you cannot spare these, your finest, then send someone else. The Tome must be found!"

"I know, Elder," said Frolin. "And that is why they shall go. Those not chosen to journey to Norland, that is. Bring them in now, and let us put these matters to rest."

So, Fordain and his companions were sent for. Presented with the question of who to bring along, Fordain made his selections without the least hesitation.

"Ingred, Elagor, and Evander," he said simply. These were his closest companions from the days before his coming to Aralia. They had endured countless trials by his side and formed one of the most efficient fighting units in all of Aralia. He felt no desire to part ways with them now.

"That is enough," said Frolin. "I do not think any more need accompany you. It is a mission of peace, after all."

"Very good," spoke Vargon. "And so, if you are willing, the rest of you shall go on the expedition to recover the *Tome of Alenius*."

"We are, sir," said Morgan.

"That is good to know, Lieutenant," spoke Frolin. "As you are Lieutenant Abendroth's second, I would normally have you lead. However, in this case I believe Dèscar should be in charge. Only he and Lampolo have been to the Far South

before, and so have some familiarity with the region, is that correct?”

“It is, King Frolin,” replied Dèscar. “I will not let you down.”

“Then it is settled. You shall depart on your missions first thing tomorrow.”

“Why delay so long, if I may ask, King Frolin?” asked Elder Vargon.

“Why indeed?” spoke Elezier. “We’ve nothing to gain by sitting around here, and the day is yet young. They could get a good start on their journeys today, if they were to set out right away.”

King Frolin turned to Fordain. “What say you, Lieutenant? Are you and your section ready now, or do you need to rest first?”

“We can go now, I think,” replied Fordain, looking to his companions. “Our horses are still saddled and we have all our gear. We need only to replenish our provisions and we’ll be on our way.”

Frolin reflected a moment, then nodded.

“Very well. Let it be done.”



Thus, a short while later, the knights had reassembled in the square before the tower to say their farewells. It was a familiar scenario for the Fifteenth Aralian Wolves by now, for they very seldom went anywhere as a single unit. The senior commanders watched them saddle up with high hopes. These were two very important missions they were about to embark upon, and they were confident that if any could succeed, it would be these young warriors. They had both youth and experience on their side, and an array of abilities that were the envy of many senior knights. Even as they watched, however, they spotted another figure approaching from the direction of

the stables with a horse in tow. Fordain heard the approach of hooves on the pavement and looked up.

“Ralor! What on earth are you up to?”

“I wanted to come along with you, sir,” said the drake without prelude. “To help you if I can.”

“Out of the question,” spoke Drakor, securing his saddlebags. “This is Aralian business. Now get lost.”

“Please, sir, may I come along?” Ralor pleaded with Fordain.

“Does the Elder know you wish to come?” asked Fordain, not wanting to turn him down right away.

“No sir, but I thought...”

“Then you must stay here, Ralor. You’re not an official part of this mission, and your presence would only be a distraction.”

Elder Vargon had come halfway down the stairs on seeing Ralor, and was calling to him:

“Ralor! Put that horse back immediately, young drake!”

“Stay here, Ralor,” said Ingrid a little more gently. “Elder Vargon needs you far more than we do. Besides, this is hardly the kind of adventuring you’d be interested in, I’m sure. Go on now.”

And so, with a heavy heart, Ralor retreated to the stables to return the horse to its pen. It wasn’t really his anyway, but he had the Elder’s permission to use it when necessary. As he unfastened the straps and reins on the creature, he watched Elder Vargon give the knights a last bit of advice. Then, with a final salute to their commanders, the Aralians split into their separate groups: one headed for the southern gate and the other for the northern. Ralor’s eyes glistened with unshed tears as he watched his best chance to escape the Elder’s Tower slip away into the distance.

“I will find my own path,” he uttered to himself. “One way or the other, I swear it!”