

## TARRARIAN PLIGHT

### PART- I: CLASH OF THE COURTS

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

*Damn that mage, where is he?* The sailor thought as he clung to the rigging on the aft-mast with steady tanned hands. He checked the angle of the two Laserfican suns and then the aft-deck below. The mage was not there, just the ship's officers. The cargo ship swayed gently on the waves, pushed by a steady twelve-knot wind. The sailor waited.

The Yomafer-Koerin was a typical Tarrarian mid-size cargo vessel of the royal fleet. The ship was wide, with a deep keel and three masts holding large triangular lateen sails dyed in a dark blue. The hull, masts and yardarms were painted black with forest green trim, as were most royal naval vessels. The black Tarrarian flag emblazed with a gold war galley without sails below overlapping gold rings, representing the two Laserfican suns, flew high on the stern mast. The center mast held the house flag of the Jhodu family who operated the ship, emblazoned with three blue crescent moons, one over two, on a red field. Long ribbons fluttered high on the yardarms marking the number of trips and places they had been. No military honors were flying, but it was still a colorful display.

Below deck, Oermdaeya complimented his student. “Good,” said the middle-aged man of medium stature and slender build. His light complexion contrasted dark brown hair falling past his shoulders accented by double braids down each temple. He looked out over the water through the small open stained glass window, pulling on his trimmed beard, his other arm crossed his chest. The garb he wore was common in Tarrarian, a style that had been around for hundreds of years, deep green open front caftan over a dark brown brocade tunic and two layers of fine linen skirts. What set Oermdaeya’s clothes apart was the caftan’s trim, embroidered with the purple and black designating the Royal Order of Taerimjhae, a large gathering of magic casters within the royal house of the Empire. Additional symbols emblazoned in gold thread indicated that the mage was of seventh-circle. This was considered respectable, with much to teach an apprentice.

The mage’s quarters were on the first lower deck to the starboard side just before the Captain’s cabin. Thick dark blue drapes hung on all the walls from ceiling to floor, allowing for the door, window and a single unlit oil lamp mounted near the door.

Yifura, the mage’s student, was a young plump woman. She sat at a small wall table, opposite two bunks. She gazed into a small crystal ball about the size of one hand clasped over a fist.

“Now figure distance and bearing,” the mage instructed his apprentice, who had been scrying a ship not far from them, beyond the horizon.

“Yes, master,” she said, brushing her long black hair back over her shoulders. She concentrated on pulling back the view of the pursuing ship, scrying more from the rear of the craft. Holding the image, the woman reached her mind out psychically, sensing the northern polar direction and the Antaeree Marker, a huge stone that sat in a temple on Mount Stuerodka within the Zizzamoer Province of Pontinoera, a nation northwest of them.

Pain shot through Yifura’s head as she lost contact with the ship. “Sorry, Master,” she said, massaging the temples of her round face.

“That’s fine. Doing several tasks at the same time is difficult.” The mage continued to look out the window breathing in the warm summer air. He observed the two Laserfican suns, one yellow and one red, climbing higher into the sky behind scattered clouds. He had felt something odd for a couple of days, but the foreign ship was the first sign that something was amiss. The Yomafer-Koerin y had been at sea from Swattara for fifteen days and would hold their northeasterly course for another three weeks, until they reached the Tarrarian islands.

The mage turned to the plump woman. “Take a couple of breaths and relocate the ship.”

Yifura said nothing as she slowly inhaled, her abundant bosom pressing the thin light blue gown under a similar caftan to her mage-master. Being an apprentice, she had no gold stitching on the black and purple trim.

Deepening her concentration and ignoring the pain from her latest failure, she peered into the crystal. There had been many failures and her mentor kept her working at the task. *I will become good at this*, she thought stubbornly.

Slowly the ship came into focus. It was a large three-mast schooner at full sail from Fraelar, a nation west of Swattara, both on the continent behind them. Again, Yifura reached out to the Antaeree Marker and the compass direction. *There*, she thought triumphantly as she sensed them and held the image.

“Very good. You are doing fine. I’ve had students learn faster, but none with more dedication. You have a great desire to do it correctly, which is more important than learning quickly.” Oermdaeya was smiling and his apprentice could sense it. “Alright,” he continued, “which direction is the ship, how far, which direction does it travels and how fast?”

For Yifura, this was the hardest part. “Distance of thirty nautical miles, hmmm, no, thirty five.”

In a low relaxed voice, the mentor said, “You can be more precise. The Captain will expect accurate information. To give him less or to sound hesitant would allow him to question what we provide him.”

“Of course, master. The schooner is at thirty-seven nautical miles distance, in the direction of one-nine-five.”

“Very good. Now course direction and speed.”

She smiled. “Speed, thirteen knots and heading of zero-one-five.” The woman looked up startled. “They’re heading straight for us.”

“Yes they are. I wonder what they’re up to?” The mage sat on the edge of the lower bunk. “Get a closer look.”

Yifura did so. Oermdaeya looked into her mind again, as he had been doing the entire lesson. This time he paid greater attention to details. The pursuing ship was longer, more slender and doing six knots faster than their weighted down cargo vessel. At that rate, it would only be a few hours before the pursuers would be upon them. Not that it mattered, for over four hundred years no single or small number of foreign vessels had been able to attack a Tarrarian ship and survive. Even though the approaching ship was larger and better equipped for battle, the Tarrarian mage always tipped the balance.

Very few nations used mages. Magic casters were greatly feared by most people in the world, for good reason. Unscrupulous casters were extremely dangerous and hard to control. It was much easier to kill them.

A closer look at the Fraelaran ship revealed about ninety armed men on the deck in addition to the deck crew. A few were sharpening swords and archers were setting their arrows and bows on platforms anchored high on the masts.

“Do you sense any mages or witches?” Oermdaeya asked.

“No, master.”

“Neither do I,” he said, rising from the bed. “I’m going topside. Keep an eye on them and take note of the number of soldiers and weapons.” The mage departed.

The apprentice scanned the decks of the other ship. She counted seventy-eight soldiers and fourteen archers on the main deck and another fifty or so below. It was harder to get an accurate count of those on the lower decks with them milling around and she having to scan several areas.

After Yifura becoming comfortable with the numbers, she shifted her view to the deck above her. The mage was talking to Captain Dremit on the aft quarter. The First and Second Officers accompanied them. All looked stern, slightly starboard, not that any save the mage could see the approaching ship at its present distance. Oermdaeya could show the Captain through his mind, but for now they just talked. The apprentice waited for a break in the conversation so she could give her report to her mentor mentally.

*That's odd, he doesn't sense me,* Yifura thought. *He always looked when I scry on him.* Something caught her attention. Shifting the view again, she saw one of the sailors in the rigging aiming a small blowgun. *Master,* she projected her thoughts at the mage. Oermdaeya turned suddenly, but too late. The dart struck his shoulder.

Yifura jumped up and ran out the door, up the stairs and to the aft of the ship where the Captain and officers were. The Captain stood over the mage's body, but looked to the rigging shouting orders for the sailor who shot the bolt to be brought down. With tears in her eyes, the pupil knelt by her master. He was already dead. The poison had worked quickly.

"Sorry, Yifura," the Captain said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "He attempted to heal himself, but there was not enough time." Yifura knew Oermdaeya was not proficient at healing poisons.

There was a thud on the deck. Yifura looked and saw the sailor who killed the mage laid a few yards away, another dart a couple of feet from him. A marine soldier went to the body and verified the obvious. The poison had worked rapidly on him as well.

Captain Dremit, a shorter man than most wearing the officer's grayish red tunic and leggings, with dark yellow markings, looked at the dead sailor, wondering how one of his own crew could do

such a thing. The crew's loyalty had never been questioned. But obviously, this one should have been. He turned towards Aerill, his taller and thinner second officer, saying, "See to that traitor and be careful of those darts."

The third rank officer directed Oermdaeya's body to be carried to the mage's quarters. The crew set about the tasks and Aerill examined the dead sailor.

Dremitt moved to the rail and peered over the water to the distant ship, still out of sight. "Yifura. Can you affect the winds?" he asked before she could leave with the mage.

"I've not learned to control weather. Not yet at least." The woman thought of the few spells she knew, none of them particularly useful in their situation. "I'll get help."

The Captain turned and watched the woman go below. *Poor girl.*

Aerill stepped to the Captain's side. "Besides the blowgun and darts, we found this." He handed a small silver pendent on a thin silver chain to the skipper.

The Captain took the item and looked carefully. The pendent was a little over an inch round and felt about two ounces. There was a symbol inscribed on one side. "I don't recognize this."

"Neither do I, nor the others who have seen it," said Aerill. The First Officer, Tarjhed, shook his head in agreement.

"All right, collect all his belongings and stow them." He handed the pendent back to the Second Officer, "Place this and the weapon in my quarters."

"Aye, sir." Aerill moved back to the dead sailor.

Below deck, Yifura went to the cabin she had shared with the mage, tears flowing. Four sailors stepped out of her cabin. Inside, Yifura saw her master lying on the lower bunk as though he was sleeping. More tears welled. The woman went to the table, sat and wiped her eyes free of tears.

Looking into the clear crystal ball, Yifura concentrated on the Tarrarian Mage Tower, a large structure at the heart of the Tarrarian islands. She received an immediate response. The apprentice

felt another mind mystically touch hers. *\*Greetings, young one,\** the thoughts of the other mage pushed gently into her mind. *\*You seem to be stressed.\** There was a pause, then, *\*I see.\**

The apprentice felt the mind look into hers, feeling, hearing and seeing what had happened. The events played out for the mage. *\*What shall I do?\** Yifura asked mentally.

Behind Yifura came a slight rustling of shifting clothes and a voice that said, “Nothing at the moment. Relax for now.” Yifura turned to face a mature man. He and two others stood in the room, having magically transferred to the cabin with a spell Yifura would likely not learn for years.

“Yes, master,” Yifura replied, as she looked at the three mages. The stitching on their caftans indicated one of the two men was eighth circle and the other, the eldest, was eleventh and also a druid priest. The third mage was a woman of ninth circle.

The older man, Doerenzar, was tall and stout, with bushy eyebrows, large chin and loose brown hair draped around his shoulders. He turned to the mature woman, Hanya, and said, “Stay with Yifura. When she relaxes, bring her topside.” With that, Doerenzar and Flaklin, the younger, shorter chunky man, left the room.

Hanya moved to Yifura and held her tight. The older woman was a couple inches shorter, heavier and, like most Tarrarian women, had an exaggerated feminine figure. Also common was her round face, black eyes and nearly black hair tied to the middle of her back with ribbons interlaced, producing a striking contrast to her light skin.

The two held each other for a while and then Hanya guided the apprentice to the bunk. Sitting side by side on the edge with the dead mage, Hanya said, “It’s not often we lose one of our own by the hands of another.” She placed a hand on Oermdaeya’s arm, still warm to the touch, attempting to sense the spirit. She could not. The woman was not highly skilled in channeling, but knew he had past beyond the veil. “Oermdaeya will be brought to the Tower for cremation. I’ll take you there when it’s time.”

Yifura nodded, tears streaming down her face, her breathing erratic.

Doerenzar and Flaklin reached the top of the stairs, as the First Mate arrived at the entrance to the deck. Seeing the mages coming out of the angled hatch off the steep stairs, Aerill stood aside and thought, *this must be the help Yifura promised.*

The mages passed the officer and Aerill started down the steps.

“One moment,” Doerenzar turned and look at the officer. “Come here, please.”

“Yes, sir?” Aerill said, stepping back onto the deck.

“What’s wrong,” Flaklin asked.

“Do you sense something?” the elder mage asked in response.

The junior mage thought for a second, examining Aerill. “No, nothing,” he said, not knowing what his comrade referred to.

“That’s the problem,” Doerenzar stated. He then asked the First Officer, “Where were you going?”

“To the Captain’s quarters.”

Cocking his head. “For what purpose?”

“The Captain wished these to be placed there.” Aerill showed a small bag.

The mage held out an open hand and the officer set the bag in it. Doerenzar looked inside, took the pendent and returned the bag. “Proceed.”

The officer nodded to the pendent. “What is it, may I ask?”

“I’m not sure yet,” the perplexed mage said, staring at the item. He said nothing else and walked aft, the younger mage right behind him.

Captain Dremet saw the mages approach. “Glad to see you two. I’m honored to have two casters aboard.” He turned back to the sea, commenting, “The ship is just at the horizon.” The mages stood to his left and noted the tiny speck in the distance as the two Laserfican suns rose higher in the sky, warming the air. “It will catch up to us in about three hours at this rate. I was worried that Yifura

would not be able to contact the Tower,” said the Captain, slightly relieved. *Now these mages can cut their wind and raise ours a couple of knots.* “How’s the young girl?”

“She’s fine,” said Doerenzar. “She did well and had no problem reaching us.”

The mages watched the speck in the distance. The Captain waited, glancing first at the casters, then to the sails and finally to the approaching ship. More minutes passed and he still felt no change in the wind. *What are they waiting for?* Dremmit thought.

Yifura and Hanya joined them on the aft quarter. “Welcome aboard,” the Captain said to the mage. *Three mages? What’s this all about?* To Dremmit the solution was simple, though he was incapable to do it. Delaying made no sense.

“Thank you,” Hanya replied.

After a few more minutes, Doerenzar spoke. “Captain, prepare the ship for battle.”

Shocked, the Captain stepped closer and asked softly, “Battle?”

Nodding, the mage looked into his eyes, saying. “Yes Captain, prepare for combat.”

Still shocked by the command, Dremmit asked, “What are you playing at?” It was not often an officer of a royal ship questioned a mage’s statement, but this Captain felt an answer was needed.

“I’m not playing. We are going to let them think they had succeeded. Send for the marine’s commander and we’ll need some crew’s clothing.”

The Captain was still in shock. *Battle.* He had never really taken the ship into combat; he’d never had to. The Yomafer-Koerin possessed a compliment of thirty-two soldiers who also served as sailors, under the command of Lieutenant Simlik. They were mostly for show, mostly when they were ported. The Tarrarians were disliked by several nations they traded with. Many marines had served aboard war galleys in the past, but their skills were no doubt rusty.

“Yes, sir,” Dremmit finally said, then nodded to the First Mate.

Tarjhed stepped to the rail overlooking the main deck. “Bosun.” The boatswain looked up. “Rig for battle. They will be here in little over two hours. Please have Lieutenant Simlik come aft.”

“Yes, sir,” the man responded. He turned to the riggers and issued directions. He sent a man forward for the Lieutenant, who was already preparing his men.

Returning his attention to back to Doerenzar and Flaklin, the Captain said, “We have uniforms that should fit you two, but,” looking to Hanya, “sorry, we do not have anything that would fit you.”

“We’ll manage,” Hanya said, not feeling slighted. Turning to the apprentice, “Do you have anything without temple colors?”

“Yes, mistress, of course.”

“That will do.”

Doerenzar addressed the Captain. “Have the uniforms sent to the mage’s quarters.”

“It shall be done.”

The three mages and apprentice went below deck.

Lieutenant Simlik, the marine commander, approached the skipper and came to attention and bowed slightly. “You called for me, Captain?”

“We are going to let the ship commence their attack. When that happens, the mages are going to seize their skipper and officers. Since they think we are without mages, we are going to let them continue to think so, which means we are not going to have protection for a while. Be ready, be brave.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“Tell the men not to hit officers or their Captain. Also, if they see anyone that looks odd, do not hit them either. Tell us. That will be all. Good luck.” Dremet dismissed the Lieutenant with a nod.

Two hours gave the crew plenty of time to prepare. The soldiers had their weapons and shields out and were fitting soft laminated leather over light chain hauberk and padding. Ballistae had been hoisted to the deck and set. As their pursuers had done, archers climbed the rigging and settled into place. Sailors brought oil casks topside to be hurled at the enemy.

A lot of preparation was completed by the time the Captain gave the order. Simlik took any opportunity to drill the men. Much of the motivation was boredom. The Empire had few serious conflicts for a long time and since the Lieutenant was a combat officer, he felt useless on a cargo vessel. He wished to feel less the sailor and more the warrior, so he drilled. With death of the ship's mage, doubled with a trailing ship, he had something more substantial to practice for.

The battle was not practice. A portion of the Lieutenant jumped with excitement, the rest was apprehensive. A few soldiers experienced battle in the past and trained the others during the drills. This would be the Lieutenant's first real conflict. The two shore landings he was involved with on a battle galley did not amount to much of a fight. He would be relying a great deal on his training. "Remember to go to the head, you won't have a chance later," Simlik told his men, heading there himself.

In the mage's quarters, the four casters had removed their garb when a series of raps came from the door. Flaklin let in the sailor carrying an armload of uniform leggings and tunics.

"Set them on the table," Doerenzar told him. "Yifura, please put your crystal away."

The sailor waited as Yifura whispered a short chant, picked up the crystal, wrapped it in a silk cloth and placed it in the intricately carved hinged top box. Yifura set the box in her personal trunk pulled out from under the bunk. The sailor flopped the uniforms on the table and left the room.

Hanya and Yifura dressed in pale brown full-length caftans tied at the waist with simple cords. Those were the lightest colored garments they had onboard and would be less noticeable among the off white uniforms of the ship's crew.

The two men sifted through the uniforms. Flaklin found leggings and tunic that fit comfortably while Doerenzar located a tunic that fit snug and leggings that were a couple of inches short. *They will do*, thought the elder mage, leaving the leg cords hang loose. Neither he nor Hanya felt the need to go elsewhere for other clothing.

After tying a simple cord around his waist, Doerenzar looked to the other three and asked, “Are we ready?” With their nods, he opened the door and led the way to the deck.

\* \* \*

The schooner approached on the starboard side. The loaded Tarrarian ship lumbered with full sail, but had no chance of outrunning the faster attack vessel.

“Come port fifteen degrees,” the Captain ordered. The Bosun barked directions to the riggers. Two steersmen pulled on the long thick pole connecting the rudder fastened along the starboard stern side digging into the water.

“It will not be long before we will be able to fire the composite bows,” the Captain explained to the mages. “Then, not long after that they’ll be in range of the long bows. As they get closer, we will be able to hit them with fire arrows.”

“I understand,” Doerenzar said. “The crew is doing well.”

*Sure they are. They haven’t received arrows yet.* A couple of minutes later, the Captain told his Lieutenant, “Standby on composites. Remember to aim only for the archers and riggers.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Simlik replied, but thought, *At this range we’d be lucky to get hits on the ship.* Addressing the archers, he ordered, “You heard the man. Aim high and to the center and bow.” Simlik could see, like their own ship, the command staff was positioned toward the stern on the raised deck. The distance between the vessels grew shorter.

The Captain spoke loud enough to be heard by the entire crew. “Ready composites. Choose your targets and fire.”

There were eleven composite bows on board. Pulling them back took notable strength, but once at full arc, the tension eased substantially. Aiming at their distance was nearly impossible. The rolling of both ships along with the wind made hitting specific targets a problem.

Eleven arrows took to the air and sped the several hundred yards distance to the enemy. Five hit the ship with magical assistance from Flaklin. One came within a few inches of a startled crewman on the ship's forward mast. The man flinched, lost his footing and grabbed ropes to keep from falling.

Many arrows were then fired from the schooner, landing in the water, well short of the mark. Yifura could see the Captain yelling for them to stop and resisted a snicker. Most of the Tarrarian crew chuckled.

"Stow the laughter," Simlik yelled and then thought, *They still out man us and I'm afraid I'll lose a few of you before this is done.*

More arrows whizzed over to the schooner. A rigger was hit on the third volley. He held onto the ropes in agony until his mates were able to lower him to the deck.

Simlik judged the distance and then pointed to a soldier with a longbow. "Fire a test shot, please," he said calmly, playing out a pat routine.

The man fired. The arrows came up a few yards short.

The First Mate turned to the mages. "If you are not going to put up protection, you may wish to take cover. That ship is about to start firing their long bows."

As fascinated as Yifura was by the activities, she had no desire to find out how much getting hit by an arrow hurts. She and the other mages lowered themselves behind the swordsmen standing at the rail bearing shields, awaiting any boarding action.

"We'll be turning to port shortly," the Captain informed those on the deck, hinting they should be ready to move.

"Understood," replied the elder mage.

After a calculated duration, the Captain nodded to the First Officer. “Come to port seventy degrees. Have eight composites move to the aft.”

The ship turned with the wind. The archers that went to the aft quarter continued to fire, harassing the riggers as they attempted to turn straight at their ship.

The swordsmen and mages shifted to the port side, facing mostly astern.

More minutes passed with no casualties on the either boat. The range closed for longbows.

“Here is where it gets nasty,” the Captain stated in a low tone to the magic casters, so as not to be heard by the others.

It did not take long for the arrows to start landing around them. One struck a swordsman standing near Yifura in the shoulder. Yifura crouched lower. The soldier groaned in great pain, but stayed sturdy. A soldier next to him broke the arrow’s shaft off and both raised shields higher.

Hanya placed a hand on Yifura’s shoulder. “Stay down for now. Reach out with your mind and find the Captain of the other ship.”

“Yes, mistress,” the apprentice replied.

Dremit glanced down, thinking, *This is no time for a training exercise.*

Yifura closed her eyes to try to remove the visual distractions. As the enemy ship came into focus, arrows whizzed by her view in both directions, causing her to lose concentration.

Shaking, the apprentice’s eyes opened.

“That’s all right,” Doerenzar said with a comforting voice. “The arrows cannot harm you. Relax and scry the ship again.”

“Yes, master,” the apprentice said reluctantly. She did not wish to look upon the scene again, but knew this was good training. If she could do this task under fire, then it would be easier under more relaxed circumstances. She focused her mind on the schooner from a different angle, away from the ship’s bow and the arrows’ flight paths. *That’s better*, she thought to herself.

*\*Yes it is,\** Hanya thought to her. The apprentice had felt her presence as she reacquired the view of the ship in her mind.

The mages tried to ignore the screams of the soldiers and sailors, as they were being struck with the arrows. Several fell from the rigging to the deck. Yifura's mind swept across the deck of their opponent and found the Captain and First Officer. There did not seem to be any other officers. A Sergeant-at-arms was present mid-deck, but he was the only other person on the ship giving any directions. Yifura pushed below deck and located a cook and three sailors bringing more supplies top side.

*\*All right, we'll let them get a little closer, then teach them a lesson,\** the elder mage thought to the other casters. "Captain, prepare to show our broad side."

"Very good..." said the Captain. There was a scream a few yards up on the aft mast. Turning to look, they all saw an archer with an arrow in his chest fall from the small platform, bounce off a rope ladder, crashed onto the hull rail and into the water. Seeing other of his men die, Dremit thought, *...and hopefully before I lose any more men.*

Doerenzar mentally spoke to Flaklin. *\*As soon as we turn, put up the wall. Hanya, keep Yifura's and my mind linked.\** The mage then addressed the Captain, "Turn us please and slow us down."

Captain Dremit issued orders to turn to starboard and trim sails. The crew responded. The ship started its turn and they slowed quickly. The barrage of arrows continued and the ballistae started firing.

Yifura was still closely watching the other ship through her mind. At first, the Fraelaran Captain got excited and issued orders to turn with the Tarrarians. Then, when he saw the sail being lowered he became confused. She heard the conversation between him and his second in command, but did not understand the language. It did not take the other Captain long to figure out what was to come and to become worried, but then it was too late.

*\*Now, Flaklin,\** the elder mage thought, while rising to a standing position.

The junior mage rose and waved his right hand from left to right. His other hand traced an intricate signal with a short chanted phrase. A shimmering translucent flat wall formed just off the ship from the water high into the air, from beyond the bow and stern. Inbound arrows hit the shield and dropped to the sea. The caster could have made it invisible, but the effect was dramatic.

The Fraelaran Captain started screaming commands. Then suddenly he was gone.

“You two,” Doerenzar pointed to two Tarrarian soldiers standing to the side of him. “Secure that man.” The mage referred to the foreign Captain now standing, confused and frightened, a few feet from them.

The two soldiers responded without question. They turned to the Fraelaran skipper with weapons drawn and their charge of his sword and dirk.

Flaklin concentrated and placed more energy into the protective wall. With every hit, the wall weakened and many arrows struck. A few minutes later, the mage placed the last of her personal energy into the shield. He knew it would not hold for long, so he reached his mind out to the surrounding area and found the power he needed. Drawing it within him, he directed it into the wall. *That should hold for a while.*

Tarrarian archers continued to fire. The shield did not impair the projectiles being fired out, only those inbound from the enemy ship.

The older mage concentrated on the First Officer of the other ship and he too disappeared. The ship kept its attack course. To their own Captain, Doerenzar said, “If you please, have those two secured down below and demand the Sergeant over there to surrender the ship.”

Dremit had four soldiers take the prisoners away and then nodded to the Second Officer, who knew the language of the people enough to get the meaning across. Words were passed both ways across the water and it was obvious to all the Tarrarians that the response was rude.

“Sorry, Captain,” Tarjhed said, “but besides calling us infidels, they are planning to scuttle our ship.”

Dremit shook his head slowly. He had no desire to kill more men. He was a trader and this engagement was a waste. With a sigh, he said, “Very well. Mister Simlik, commence firing the flame arrows.”

“Yes, sir,” The Lieutenant said, with a saddened tone. He too did not wish to do this, but had no choice. With the magical protection, the adrenalin faded somewhat with the threat.

Captain Dremit looked to Doerenzar. “If you’re ready.”

The elder mage nodded. With a slight wave of his hand, a cask of oil hurled across the water in a high arch and crashed onto the deck. Shortly after that, a fire arrow struck the center of the oil slick, causing it to burst into flames. The crew ran from the sudden blazing fire.

Another cask was sent flying. It cracked open on the enemy’s mid-deck just to the rear of the main mast, as another Tarrarian archer hit it with a flaming arrow.

With two large fires on the deck, the crew brought up spare sail material from below and threw them on the flames. While attempting to extinguish the fire, two of the crewmembers were hit with arrows. More flaming arrows stuck into the sail canvass, causing them to burn.

The enemy ship was now closing fast. Most of their soldiers and crew hid as they awaited the imminent collision. This gave very few targets for the Tarrarian archers, though fire arrows continued to fly.

*\*Yifura,\** Doerenzar thought telepathically to the young woman, *\*scan below deck.\** Hanya had kept their minds linked.

The apprentice looked around the holds of the lower decks until Doerenzar stopped her at a stack of small barrels secured with rope.

*\*Do not be startled about what is going to happen next.\** Doerenzar pulled a bit of his own personal power up and used a fire spell to ignite the rum barrels.

The explosion shook the ship. It was not a particularly large blast, but the crew panicked. Some jumped overboard, while others looked to their officers for guidance. This was the first time that most realized the Captain and First Mate were no longer present. The Sergeant gave orders for water to be hauled aboard and put on the non-oil fires. He sent men below to assess the damage and directed the ship to turn course. Sailors adjusted sails as the steersman turned the rudder.

Bowmen on both sides continued firing shots as they parted. Flaklin kept adding power to the shield. Stress showed on his face.

After several minutes the schooner was out of range.

The Tarrarian Captain called to his sailors and soldiers. "Stand down. Bosun, drop the sails fully. Deploy the boats and get those men on board."

The ship came to a halt and crewmen worked at lowering the shore boats into the water. The Yomafer-Koerin had two twenty-four foot longboats. Three men with swords climbed in each and rowed to the men in the water. Seven from the other ship still lived on the ocean's surface and were soon aboard.

The wounded were treated and bound with clean cloth. Hanya had a healer from the Mage Tower magically transferred to the ship to use their abilities on two cases, to prevent their deaths. As it was, they lost five of their own men and eleven were injured before the magical wall was raised.

"This did not need to happen," the Captain scowled in a low tone to the Doerenzar. "You could have snatched the Captain from a distance and given us wind."

"I could have," replied Doerenzar quietly. "With what little they really had to throw at us, that would have worked. I could not believe they would strike this ship without having more. It was suicide. I had to know what else they had."

"Well, now we know."

## Chapter – 2

The Yomafer-Koerin was at full sail, the wounded cared for and a section of the top deck held the prisoners with guards posted to ensure their good behavior. The Fraelaran's First Officer was brought up from below to join his crewmates.

The Tarrarian Captain hosted a late lunch in his cabin for Uegar, the Fraelaran Captain. Doerenzar and Hanya sat on one side of the small nook table, still wearing the crew uniform and pale caftan. Tarjhed sat on the outside with Uegar on the opposite bench. The built-in benches were comfortable with red cushions on the seats and backs. The Captain of the ship sat on a separate carved chair, with matching red cushions, at the end of the table.

The ship's cook brought in silver platters of food, setting them in the center of the table. Each person served themselves from common platters of seasoned sausage, potatoes, vegetables, cheese and bread. The Tarrarians spoke in their tongue about home and the places they had traveled recently. They ate for quite a while without engaging the Fraelaran into the conversation. Their guest was only able to pick out a few of the words as he nibbled from his plate. The food was spicier than Uegar was accustomed to and felt uncomfortable with the surroundings and situation.

Captain Dremit offered his guest more wine, which was refused. After a little longer, Doerenzar finally turned his attention to the prisoner and said, “The obvious question is why did you attack us.” Tarjhed translated.

“I’m sure you know everything I know,” Uegar said with disgust, looking back and forth between the mages.

“Not at all,” Hanya responded. “It takes a lot to look into an unwilling mind and I am still tired from earlier.”

“Yes, I suppose you expect me to believe that?”

“It does not matter what you believe,” she said, taking another bite of sausage.

“Captain,” Dremit said. “We will be rendezvousing with the Limlaree, where you and your crew will be transferred and taken to a colony fort. I will assure you that you and your crew will be treated properly and well. You will eventually be sent home, but we do need to know why you did this attack.”

Uegar said nothing.

Doerenzar looked at the man for several moments and then said dryly, “You can freely tell us why you attacked this ship or my colleague will do what you have been fearing.”

There was a long silence while the Fraelaran Captain stared at the elder mage. Then with a humph, he pushed the half full platter away and said, “Why? Because you are immoral and you spread your filth amongst my people with your nakedness and...” He paused, uncomfortable about discussing the reproduction process. “...open coupling.” For Uegar and most people of Laserfica, sexual activities were a closed and forbidden subject. To talk about it was bad enough, but to show affection openly around others was much more than they could endure.

After Tarjhed translated, the others around the table chuckled. Hanya gave their guest a warm smile. Uegar scowled in return.

Dremit stopped smiling. “Honestly, you wish us to believe that you orchestrated this attack and...” He paused for his First Mate to find the Fraelaran words, “and threatened war with the Tarrarian Empire on the basis of our customs?” Dremit shook his head. “No, there is more to this. I doubt it is just common piracy, either.”

There was no reply.

Dremit turned to Doerenzar, “If you please?” nodding to their guest, whose eyes widened.

Doerenzar nodded to Hanya. She sighed softly and focused at a point in the center of the table, between the platters. “She is better at this sort of thing,” the elder mage commented to Dremit.

Worried, Uegar stiffened and pushed back against the wall. No one was smiling. Uegar was certain that anything he could say would not stop these evil people from probing into his mind.

Hanya’s eyes went out of focus and she lowered her head ever so slightly.

Uegar tried to push his way past Tarjhed, who forced him back in place with one hand while moving the knife and two-pronged fork safely out of the man’s reach.

“Relax,” Doerenzar told their guest. “This won’t hurt if you don’t resist.”

The man shook his head to free his own mind from Hanya’s and then threw his full weight at Tarjhed. Both fell to the cabin’s floor. Hanya did not react to the sudden noise or scuffle. Captain Dremit calmly rose from his seat and pulled his etched double-edged leaf shaped short sword from the sheath that hung on the wall nearby. The blade was similar to the standard sword for Tarrarian marines.

The two men rolled together on the floor, Tarjhed held the man tight.

“Dear, sir,” Dremit said, lowering the point of the sword to the man’s back. “Please stop fighting my First Officer. We can get the answers we need without you and I would rather not have to kill you here.”

The Fraelaran stopped, but kept a firm hold on Tarjhed. He was stronger, especially with fear running through his veins, but death was not something he yearned for. Eventually, the man released the First Mate and scurried to the wall.

“Now,” Dremit asked again, “why did you attack us?”

Up against the wall, the terrorized man just mumbled, “Stay out of my head, stay out of my head...” over and over again. The fear of the mages weakened Uegar’s courage.

“He’s resisting too hard,” Hanya said, looking up at the standing Captain. “I may hurt him.”

“Damn this whole situation.” Dremit continued holding the sword toward the prisoner. “I’m a trading Captain, not a soldier.” To the cowering Captain, he said, “Sir. We really need to know why you did this and why did one of my crewmen helped you.”

The man stopped mumbling, but did not say anything. Dremit was not sure he even heard Tarjhed’s translation.

“Doerenzar? Can we find out in some other way?”

“Yes. As you have said, we can get the answers by other means, but that will take longer.”

Dremit let out a slow breath. “That’s fine. We do not need to torture this man further.” He handed the sword to Tarjhed. “Take him to his men.”

After the two left, Dremit looked to Hanya. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Thank you.” The woman smiled a bit. “Letting him relax helped. He stopped resisting his thoughts. There was not much. He still may be hiding things, but it looks like he was working on his own as far as his nation is concerned.”

“Alone?” ask the Captain.

“For the most part, yes, at least without the sanction of his king. He had contact with a man who gave him instructions. That man told him about us and that the mage would be dealt with if he waited to attack after sunrise on this date.”

“So, what of the one who told him, why did he wish to have my ship attacked?”

“I don’t know yet, but we will find out.” Hanya addressed Doerenzar. “With your leave, I’d like to take Yifura to the funeral.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll stay on board in case something occurs. Take that pendant back with you and give it to Arlakar.” With that, the mages took their leave of Captain Dremit. Doerenzar went to the deck to enjoy the fresh air, while Hanya went into the mage’s cabin.

\* \* \*

The battle was the first Yifura had seen. She felt more disturbed after the conflict had ended and the cleaning of the blood was complete. She did not participate with the cleaning, but the activity held her attention. Once there was nothing to do and the ship sailed as though nothing had happened, it gave her time to think. The dead laid covered on crates near the main mast. They were men she knew. Tears flowed. The girl turned to the sea and cleared her thoughts using a mental discipline taught to her early in her apprenticeship.

“Yifura,” Doerenzar said softly. “Hanya is in your quarters. She’ll be taking you to the funeral.”

“Thank you,” the apprentice responded, stepping from the rail.

In the cabin she found Hanya changing back to her own garb. “Greetings, Yifura. Please change into something appropriate. The suns will set soon at the Tower and we wish to conduct the ceremony there. Preparations are being made.”

“Yes, mistress.” The young apprentice went to her trunk, selected her best robes and started to change.

Hanya collected the pendant and placed it in a pouch on her waist belt. She then looked the apprentice over as she changed her own clothing, making certain Yifura's gown was appropriate. They helped each other comb and weave ribbons into their long hair. After both were dressed and groomed, Yifura started weeping freely. Hanya held her until girl's breathing stabilized, kissed her cheek under the ear and released her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, mistress," Yifura whispered with a nod.

Hanya guided her to the bunks and touched Oermdaeya's shoulder, while holding the apprentice's hand. The mage reached out with her mind to the Tower. After making contact, the casters at Tarraria pulled the three of them to their location.

In a fraction of a moment, Yifura and Hanya were standing in a warm room bathed in soft light from dozens of candles burning in tall floor sconces. Oermdaeya's body laid a few feet away on one of two beds.

The room was one of the smaller in the Tower, about thirty by forty feet, with dark wood door on one of the short walls and a closed stained glass window opposite it. Thick dark maroon fabric hung on the walls giving a comforting feel. Two tables, several cushioned chairs furnished the chamber. Three mages and six servants were present.

Hanya led Yifura from the room, leaving them to tend the dead mage, into a very large hexagon chamber about one hundred and eighty feet across. Intricate pattern stone mosaic tiles of cream and rose told Hanya they were on the fifth floor. The ceiling was of carved dark wood supported with cream marble pillars lining all six walls leaving gaps for doors similar to the one they stepped from. A second set of pillars was circular and about ninety feet across around the center area. The third to the fifteenth floors within the Tower had similar layouts. The pillars and tiles differed in color and carvings to distinguish them.

The open area was filled with mages of various ages and disciplines. Well over hundred casters talked softly in groups. Apprentices were scattered among the groups, ranging from as young as five

to adult. They stood listening to the mages around them, who ranged in status from young first circles and older, more experienced casters. Hanya saw a particularly old mage master of the sixteenth circle, who came for the funeral. The venerable mage had been in Prileeria, a nation on the continent to the west, for the last four years. There were a few mages older than he, but none who had achieved his advanced circle. When an opening occurred in the next circle, known as the Mage Council, Hanya felt that he would be a good choice for the Merlin to pick. Only nine were selected for that highest circle. Those nine Grand Priest Mages were advisors to the Merlin and the Emperor.

When the gathering saw Hanya and Yifura, they went to a few at a time Yifura, giving warm hugs and light kisses, adding sympathetic comments. Yifura saw several women shedding a few tears. Tears ran freely down Yifura's cheeks. She noticed that a few of the men had moist eyes as well.

"Yifura," Hanya said, "I don't see Arlakar here. I'll be back soon." Yifura nodded while hugging another woman. Hanya asked a higher circle mage where she could find Arlakar. He told her. Thanking the mage, she left the congregation.

Hanya went through the nearest set of double doors leading to one of the six stairwells within the Tower. She walked up two levels. The Tower and its twin for the Ministers were by far the largest single structures within the Empire. Each was sixteen floors and about three hundred and thirty feet across at the base.

Once on the seventh floor, Hanya went to the room where she was told Arlakar would be. She knocked lightly on the door.

"Enter," came a low voice from within.

Hanya opened the door, stepped in and closed it. The room was dark, lit only by a single candle to the right of a short, chubby man sitting cross-legged on a large woven meditation mat. A three-foot mirror with an elaborate silver frame was propped in front of him and set off center so the mage was unable to see his own reflection or the candle.

Patting the area of the rug to his left, Arlakar said, "Please Hanya, sit." She moved closer and lowered herself to the indicated spot, shifting her caftan around her. "You have something for me to see."

"Yes, I do. Doerenzar could not get any reading off of this pendant." The woman removed the silver pendant and chain from the pouch and handed it to him.

As he took it, he said, "It took deep concentration just to view you while you had it in your possession."

"That seems to be it's main quality. That is all we've been able to find out so far."

Arlakar set the item on the mat in front of him. Hanya did not disturb his mind by looking into it. She just closed her eyes and meditated while he worked.

Arlakar was unable to get a solid reading from the pendant. He was able to sense a very faint elfish touch. *What do elves have to do with this thing and why give it to an assassin?* Arlakar thought, *a traitor assassin at that.* He felt a bit of anger stir. Letting out a slow breath, he released that anger.

The mage opened his eyes and looked at the pendant again. The symbol etched on it did not look like any elfish writing he had seen. Arlakar had worked with elves for several decades since he became a mage of The Order of Taerimojhae. The Mage Tower, sometimes called the Temple, was the core of that order. The Shrontoffiluan and Baazanzaran elves had representatives assigned to the Tower most of the time. Shrontoffiluans had been part of Tarraria from the earliest beginnings and most of the islanders had their blood in them. The Baazanzarans had a continuous presence within the Empire for over seven hundred years. It was thought that their influence accounted for the stability within the Empire. Arlakar had had opportunities to travel to both nations and knew enough to give a comparison.

There were other elfin nations and Arlakar had visited a few of them, including the tribal elves of Lokrae. He had seen examples of their writings, though he could not read their script without mystical assistance, Arlakar knew none resembled the symbol on the pendant.

Hanya heard him pick up the pendant. She could tell he had gained all the knowledge he would at the moment. “Anything?” she asked, “You have been working on it for several minutes.”

“Really, that long?” Arlakar looked at her with a sideways glance. “There is nothing on it. It’s as if it had been deeply cleansed. This is very odd. Not even your recent contact left any essence on it.” He rose from the floor. “I’m going to talk to Eshrezha about this.”

“The Elvin Ambassador? You think this is elfish?”

“Maybe. As faint as it’s, it is the only thing I feel from it.”

Hanya rose as well.

“Thank you, Hanya. You may go now,” Arlakar said. The woman bowed to the mage and left the room. He recited a short chant and blew out the candle.

On his way to find the elfin ambassador, Arlakar thought of the pendant he held. It made him uneasy. They lost a mage with the help of the item. If not for the luck that Yifura was below deck and watching, they could have lost a royal trading ship and crew. *That ship was not that important*, the man thought. *It contained no valuable cargo. The loss of the vessel, as much as it would anger and sadden the Emperor, would not amount to much of a setback.* “It does not make any sense,” he muttered aloud as he stepped off the stairs onto the thirteenth floor.

A servant was on his way down, asked, “Pardon, master?”

“Oh. Sorry, nothing. Just thinking aloud.”

The servant bowed, saying, “Yes, master,” and continued down the stairs.

It did not take Arlakar long to find Eshrezha. He was sitting on a large dark green cushion in the central area of the tenth floor, talking with a couple of Tarrarian mages and an apprentice, also sitting on cushions. There were a couple of other small groups having conversations. A man and woman were joined in a passionate embrace on the far side, beyond the ring of pillars.

The Ambassador saw Arlakar heading his way and his expression went very dark. This took Arlakar by surprise. He had never seen such a look on this elf before. Like most elves, Eshrezha was always cheerful.

Arlakar drew nearer. Eshrezha rose from the cushion. The ambassador was tall and thin, even for Baazarans, and they were the tallest of the elfin nations Arlakar had ever seen. The elf's hair was straight, nearly platinum and long, hanging to his calves. He rarely stood while in discussions with humans because of his height. Now Arlakar approached this very menacing elf, which stood a good two and half heads taller than him, bearing an uncharacteristically foul demeanor.

"Sir? I beg your pardon, but I have an item that we have not been able to identify. I feel an elfish touch, but nothing else." Arlakar handed the pendant to Eshrezha.

The elf, who was also a high level mage, turned to his students. "Excuse us. Continue with your studies. Arlakar, please come with me." He started to walk away slowly, which for Arlakar, meant he had to walk quickly.

"You know what that is then?" the human mage asked. "We got it off of the sailor who killed Oermdaeya."

"You found this on one of your crewmen?"

"Yes. Why?"

The elf settled into another cushion that was out of earshot of others. "I do know what this is and how it is made. I will be keeping it."

"As you wish." Arlakar did not wish to object. The Ambassador rarely made such statements and never lightly. When he did, the mages accepted it without quibble. "Those who know what happened feel there's more to the attack than just the ship or the Captain's view of our culture, but we have not been able to divine any reasoning."

"I do not doubt that. The people that made and use the pendant are not traceable, not with the art at any rate."

“Who made it and what did you mean by how it was made?”

The elf looked at the man. “You will probably need to know so you can fight those who would use these things. Tell only those who need to know and no one else.”

Arlakar now felt even more uncomfortable. “I understand.”

“Not yet, but you will.” The elf looked apprehensive and took a deep breath before saying, “There is a group who calls themselves The League of Assassins in your tongue. It translates about the same in most tongues.”

“I’ve heard of them, but not of that,” Arlakar said, indicating the pendant.

“Of course not. They would not wish others to know. Most members within the league will have one. They are made during a very dark ritual, where....” he paused and his look became even grimmer, “an elf is sacrificed and the pendants are dipped in their blood. Some have been made with dragon’s blood, as well. Dragons are more powerful, but we are easier to get and handle.”

Shocked, Arlakar’s eyes widened a bit. He had never thought of an elf ever being sacrificed.

Eshrezha continued, “You know my people are hard to scry and my home is impenetrable. Have you ever wondered why?”

“Not really. You have powerful casters and many shields are erected.”

“That is only part of it. We as a people resist the magical sight naturally. The pendants take that ability and give it to the bearer. There had been a great number of them made over the centuries. I’ve only seen seven myself. For now, that is all you need to know.” The elf stood. “I’m going back to my land. I’ll return in a few days.” With that, the elfin mage closed his eyes and vanished, pendant and all.

\* \* \*

The two suns approached the horizon. Hanya and Yifura walked down the stairs to the second level. The six hexagon shaped staircases within the Tower ended there and fed onto a large balcony overlooking the great entry hall. Black marble pillars, with gold leaf caps and bases, lined the walls and balcony rails. The floor was done in a mosaic pattern of polished black and dark green marble tile. The ceiling, like the upper floors, had carved dark wood, but was trimmed in gold leaf. The large area would be dark if not for the second floor windows and numerous gold candelabras mounted to balcony rails and golden candle chandeliers hanging from the ceiling over the open area.

Hanya and Yifura walked down the nearest of three main wide black marble stairs leading to the main level. The first floor was more than twice the height of the second, with much the same décor as the floor above, but having gold floor candle sconces. There were no side rooms on either of the two lower floors. They walked out of the Tower through one of six fifteen-foot heavy solid bronze double doors inscribed with ornate designs and images of celestial and terrestrial nature.

Outside, Yifura looked up at the Royal Ministers about four hundred yards away through the trees glistening in reds and purples from the fading suns rays. Both the Minister's and Mage's towers were near reflections of each other within the large expanse of the inner courtyard of the Minister's Castle. There were other prominent building in the castle, but all were dwarfed to the tower's majesty.

The two women approached an area where many gathered for the ceremony. Servants had set wooden tables, placing great amount of food and drink for the feast, which would follow the ceremony. Yifura stopped. A few yards away was the funeral pyre, a low flattish pile of wood dowsed with animal grease completely covering the day's rubbish. Tarrarians wasted little and what was unusable was burned most nights. Throughout the Empire, communities would light bonfires. Not all were funerals.

The apprentice fought tears as she talked with the others. Eight chanting mages approached with Oermdaeya's body completely wrapped in white linen except for his head. They went to the pyre and placed the mage on the wood. From the castle's garrison building came eight soldiers carrying another wrapped body. Yifura heard one the royal honor guard's mother died that day. She was very old at one hundred and sixteen. They placed her body next to the mage. An adolescent boy placed a smaller bundle next to the woman. His dog passed on and was allowed into the castle for the ceremony.

Once bodies were placed, Hanya motioned for Yifura to proceed. The apprentice had been to several funerals and knew basically what to do, but she had never started the ceremony herself. She stepped over to a separate stack of chopped wood that was stacked up a few feet from the pyre and took a piece.

"Oermdae..." Yifura's voice cracked as she started to speak, tears rolled down her face. Clearing her throat, she said, "Oermdaeya was my mentor, friend and lover." She paused, taking a breath. "He was a good man and a great mage. His death is a loss for us all." Leaning the wood on the mage's arm, she could hardly whisper, "I will miss you greatly." Yifura gave his lips a kiss.

The son of the dead woman spoke of her as he placed a piece of wood over her body. Each person present did the same until the woodpile was gone. Many attended the ceremony and it was well after the sundown before bodies were completely covered.

Torches lit the area. The eldest person present, a mage of many years, took one of the torches and handed it to Yifura. She was hoping not to have to do this part either, but she was the one present who knew him best. Others who may have known him better were not able to make it by sundown the traditional time for the cremation ceremony.

She stepped to the pyre. "To the sky we send the spirit of Oermdaeya." She touched the torch to the lower wood of the pyre.

“To the sky we send the spirit of Boermaelia,” spoke the son. He also had a torch and did the same on the other side.

It did not take long for the grease-soaked wood to take hold and the fire spread around the wood. The gathering of people talked quietly of the two they had helped pass on and of the dog. When the pyre was in full flames, they passed goblets of wine and toasted Oermdaeya, the mother and the pet.

They ate, drank and talked for a couple of hours when Hanya came over to Yifura. “It is time to go back to the ship.”

“Yes, mistress.” Yifura had wished to stay at the Tower. She had not thought that she would be going back to the ship, assuming they would reassign her to another mentor and she would go to wherever that mage was lodged.

The two said their farewells at the ‘Passing Feast’, walked back into the Tower and located a mage skilled at teleporting. Back in the ship’s mage’s cabin, she found the suns were still up, but low to the horizon. Yifura had forgotten of the time differences and how traveling magically made that more apparent.

Hanya and the apprentice went topside, in time for the ceremony for the lost sailors and soldiers. Captain Dremet performed the ritual. At sea, bodies were wrapped in the traditional manner, except that the Captain wrapped the head just before the body was lowered to the sea. When the suns dipped below the horizon, Dremet spoke. “May the spirits of these brave seamen find their way.” That was all he said and then helped raise each body to the rail. The short statement was not from a lack of respect; it was that the man spoke very little on such occasions. Other crewmembers spoke about the men they knew as each body was lowered to the sea. Twilight darkened.

The crew did not muse over the mage’s death or the absence of his body during this ceremony. The funeral feast on the ship was meager for there was not as much to eat. They were allowed to two goblets of wine each and then the normal ship routine resumed.

Hanya and Yifura went down to the bunks in the mage's cabin to sleep. Doerenzar stayed on deck and thought about what had happened. The future was not clear to him. He tried to look into the days to come and saw only chaos and fire. He slept on the deck, as did many of the crew who were not on duty.

Chapter – 3

“Your Majesty?” a soft voice whispered.

Kibrye, the Tarraria Emperor, woke to see one of his chambermaids sitting on the bed leaning to him. “Yes?”

“You wished to be awakened at this time.”

“Thank you,” he said. A woman slept peacefully next to Kibrye. He gave his harem girl a light kiss on her shoulder and rolled out of bed. Heavy dark green drapes were drawn over the windows, allowing only a sliver of the bright sunlight to shine in around edges telling the man it was morning.

The Emperor was moderate size, with a little extra on the belly. His long shiny black hair hung loose and he would pass for most full Tarrarians except for his deep green eyes, an influence of the elfin blood in his family’s lineage.

After a stop to the private privy, the Kibrye entered his bath chamber, a large room with a step-in pool. Dustaenia and three serving girls accompanied Koelletta, his second wife, waited in the water to attend the monarch. Dustaenia showed early signs of pregnancy enhancing her prominent curves

and had recently been elevated to the newest of the royal harem mistresses under Koelletta's instruction.

Kibrye stepped into warm pool. Hot water flowed from a large iron pot over a fire along a channel in the floor to the pool. The pot was replenished with fresh water from a controlled slit in the fitted stone wall. Water flowed from the pool along another channel to a small opening in the wall. The flow was continuous and kept the bathing water fresh.

The attending servants went to work on cleaning their liege. As the women worked soap on the Emperor using natural sea-sponges, he caressed and kissed them. When Kibrye's body and hair was thoroughly cleaned and his face shaved with a finely honed blade, he and the four women stepped from the pool, where two maids waited with warm towels to dry Kibrye.

Cleaned and dried, the Emperor moved to the dressing chamber where the women attired him in three layers of flowing dark blue skirts and a tunic of similar color trimmed in gold. An intricately woven green cord was tied to his waist. Other girls brushed his hair and weaved a single braid down each temple, allowing most of the hair to flow free.

Dressed, Kibrye turned to Koelletta, who held his silver crown up above his head. She gave him the customary kiss and then lowered it, ensuring that the front triangular leaf with the Imperial seal was properly centered.

Leaving the royal suite, Emperor Kibrye became flanked by two of four male honor guards standing outside the royal chambers wearing studded forest green leather jerkins. Together they proceeded to the Minister's hall within the palace. Kibrye would see the Ministers before having breakfast.

The palace was immense, having octagon towers connected by wings, creating square and hexagon garden courtyards. The stroll to the Minister's Hall through the wide halls took several minutes. People stood aside and bowed as he passed. Entering the Hall's foyer, two honor guards there pushed both doors to the Hall open, indicating to those within the Emperor had arrived. The

right hand door would have been opened for other royals and nobles, while the left for Ministers and other attendees. In response to doors opening, three heavy timed thumps came from inside the chamber. When the Emperor passed the threshold, a single low tone of a gong rung announced him. His two escorts stepped in with Kibrye, taking their places on either side of the entry. The outside guards closed the doors.

The hall was octagonal, about ninety feet across. Men and woman in court finery bowed low from stepped platforms to the left and right. Two additional honor guards at the throne dais on the far end stood at attention, long swords sheathed on their backs. The herald, chamberlain, prime adviser and an assortment of staff stood bowing on each side of the dais steps. A slender woman to the right of the entry next to a large etched bronze gong also bowed holding the leather headed mallet to her chest.

The Emperor crossed the polished black marble floor to the dais. The royal seal, inlaid with gold, took up much of the center floor consisting of a war galley within two consecutive circles having thirteen full moons between the circles. On the wall over the throne, between two large black marble pillars, hung a long green banner emblazoned with the gold royal seal.

Kibrye took his place on the thick soft deep green cushion throne intricately carved of dark red wood with high broad back and wide arms all inlaid with gold. The nobles and Ministers had ornate seats with low backs to sit upon. The room was one of four audience chambers for the Emperor. Three were within the palace and a fourth at the Minister's Castle. Within the chambers, the Ministers were allowed to speak freely.

Kibrye motioned for Royal Herald to come forth. Esparee, a short thin man with light brown hair and eyes, stepped onto the dais and stood before the throne. "What have you on today's agenda?" Kibrye asked.

The herald bowed his head slightly. "If it pleases His Majesty, Arlakar of the mage's order has a sad announcement to make."

“Proceed.”

The herald turned, raised the large scepter a couple of inches and thumped it squarely on the platform. “Would Arlakar come forth and be heard.”

The mage, dressed in very fine robes, stepped forward and bowed to one knee.

“Rise Arlakar. What grievous news do you bring this court?”

“Your Majesty, it saddens us all at the Tower to tell you that the Yomafer-Koerin was attacked yesterday. Several of its crew and the mage were killed.” The Herald informed Kibrye of the identity of the ship, operating family, the mage and captain.

“Attacked? By whom?” asked the Emperor. There were several whispers around the hall. The hushed chatter was not a distraction, so Kibrye allowed it continue as he listened to Arlakar.

“We had hoped to have more information to bring you. An assassin, who served for years on the ship as a member of the crew, killed Oermdaeya. We feel he was recruited shortly before the assassination. A Fraelaran schooner then attacked the ship and five men were killed.” Arlakar told him all the details they had. “The whereabouts of two other cargo ships are unknown.”

“Two ships missing and one attacked? How could this happen? You normally sense these things before they occur, don’t you?” Kibrye said the last with a flutter of his right hand.

“Normally yes, but the traitor wore a pendent that prevented us from sensing him or his intentions and made scrying the ship difficult.”

“Pendant? Lets see this pendant.”

“Sorry, Your Majesty. Eshrezha had taken it.”

“What does the elfin ambassador have to do with the pendant?”

The mage look around, “Your Majesty. May I speak privately?”

“Yes, of course.”

The mage looked into the Emperor’s eyes, projecting his thoughts directly into his mind,

*\*Eshrezha informed me that these pendants were made from the sacrifice of an elf or dragon. I*

*sensed an elfin influence and took it to him to ask about it.\** Arlakar told Kibrye of the League of Assassins and the use of the pendants.

*\*May I see the ambassador?\** Kibrye thought back. He had many conversations in this manner and knew how to project his thoughts in more than just random images, feelings and mental sounds.

*\*He left immediately after our conversation, taking the pendant with him. He stated he would return in a few days.\**

“Was anyone else harmed?” Kibrye spoke aloud, having received the sensitive portion.

“A few. They are recuperating on the ship.”

Kibrye finally asked the question that was on everyone’s mind: “Why did they attack?”

“That we do not know yet, but it seems the Fraelaran Captain was functioning without his king’s blessing.”

“Pirate?”

“It does not seem so. There’s this association with the League of Assassins. It seems too well planned for simple piracy.”

Kibrye looked to his herald. “What do we know of this...League?” His voice held a hint of frustration and anger.

“Well, Your Majesty, not much, I’m afraid. We are trying to gain more information. What we do know is that they hail to no crown and have no central focal point. They have been around for hundreds of years, likely thousands. Their members have a very high sense of honor, loyalty and duty.”

“One of my clansmen was a member? What happened to his sense of honor, loyalty and duty to the Empire?”

The Minister of clans, a tall man, stood and stepped to the center of the room. He bowed.

“Yes, Baron Mieroe?” Kibrye said, acknowledging him.

Rising, Mieroe took a couple of steps forward. "I've sent people to check on his family and acquaintances. I hope to have that answer within a couple of days. The sailor's name was Zuederek Averoes."

"The Averoes family had been a loyal part of our clan since the beginning of the Empire."

"Yes, my lord, I know. That is what makes this so disturbing to us all."

Nodding, Kibrye said, "Please have Count Shaeroe brought to my presence."

"Yes, my lord." The Minister bowed and backed away, taking his seat.

Readdressing the mage, the Emperor asked, "Where are you in all of this?"

"We have contacted all the mages that are at sea and abroad. No others have reported problems. We are still at a loss, but we will get to the bottom of this."

"I know. Keep me apprised and find those other two ships."

"Yes, my lord."

"Thank you for your visit. I miss our talks. You should visit more often and not just with such news."

"Yes, my lord." Arlakar bowed and left the room. Once the door closed again, chatter erupted.

Kibrye raised his right hand slightly. The herald gave one thud with the scepter and the room quieted. "As you have heard, the mages are looking into the matter. No one will speak of the pendant or speculate on what has happened. We still do not have any real information. This may be an isolated event, but I have my doubts."

With that the court went on to other matters of state. *What was this attack about*, the Emperor thought throughout the day.

\* \* \*

Yifura slept uneasily on the top bunk in the cabin of the Yomafer-Koerin. Hanya, Doerenzar and Darriyum, a tenth circle male mage, were talking softly concerning who would become Yifura's mentor. The matter was not as simple as Hanya had first thought. They discussed several candidates, Doerenzar felt the need to leave her on the same ship for the time being and not relocate her to another ship. Doerenzar was not planning to stay. His duties required him back at the Tower.

"I am without an apprentice," Hanya said. "I have not had one for a while. Maybe it is time I took one again."

"That is true," Darriyum replied, "but you are not a ship mage and that is the focus of her training. Besides, with all the contacting of the ships, we will need you at the Tower. The others are getting worn down."

They went through each of the available mage and got to Aerifka, a sixth circle caster presently at the Tower. His temper and personality were very close to Oermdaeya's and had served one three ships in the past. Aerifka had only one other apprentice, now a talented second circle ship's mage by the name of Ontoe.

Doerenzar agreed. "Yes, he is a good choice. I think she would like him. If there are no others to consider, let's bring him here." There were none and Hanya contacted the Tower.

Once Aerifka was located, it took over an hour for him to pack his belongings in his trunk. Yifura was still asleep when Aerifka appeared in the cabin. He set down his trunk and introduced himself to Hanya and the others.

"This is your new apprentice," Hanya said, motioning to the sleeping girl.

He looked at her. "Poor girl. They told me what happened."

"Yes. She has been through a lot in the last two days." Hanya stood next to the bunk and gently brushed Yifura's hair out of her face. "Dear, there is someone here for you to meet."

Startled, Yifura opened her eyes. “What?” Seeing the other mages. “Oh.” The young woman slipped out of bed, straightening the gown she slept in.

“Yifura,” Doerenzar said, “This is Aerifka. He will be your mentor for the rest of your initial training.”

Yifura bowed to the mage, noting that he was younger than most mentors and five circles below Oermdaeya. After a short conversation, Aerifka said, “I have some other things to collect. I shall return shortly.” After contacting the Tower, the new mentor disappeared. The others talked a little longer telling Yifura what she should expect from Aerifka, then Doerenzar and Hanya left to go back to the Tower.

When Aerifka returned and Yifura and he were alone, they became acquainted, discussing her training to date, how Oermdaeya was teaching her, how that training was progressing, the apprentice’s strengths and weaknesses. Hours passed. In time, Yifura’s new master had her scry the ship that attacked them. It was still sailing towards Fraelar. He had her scan the area for other ships and possible trouble. There was none. After a tour of the ship, introductions and brief explanations to the Captain and officers, they both returned to their cabin. It did not take long for either to fall fast asleep in their individual bunks.

\* \* \*

Four days had passed since the attack on the Yomafer-Koerin. The elf, Eshrezha, had returned, but he would not speak of the pendant any more than he already had, even then, only with Arlakar, the Mage Council and the Emperor.

Out at sea, east of the island, the Remojh, a royal two masted battle galley sailed with both masts erected and canvassed. The ship sailed east on a warm summer breeze that came in from the southwest on their way to the Darrinin colony.

Two lookouts talked quietly in the crow's-nest high on the second mast, leg dangling over the edge of the small planks. The light from six of the eleven moons provided enough light to observe the surrounding water. Word about the Yomafer-Koerin had spread to the crew through the mages and officers. Rumors spread with the news and twisted variations abounded. The crew was jittery and the officers reassure them that only one ship had been attacked. None knew that two ships remained unaccounted for. The mage scrutinized each crewmember.

"What's that?" one lookout said, peering out over the ocean's water to the horizon. The double suns had not yet risen, but the east hinted of the coming dawn.

The second sailor turned to the direction indicated. "I don't see anything."

"Over there," he pointed more carefully, "just above the horizon."

"Oh. That? A bird."

"This far out to sea? Its big, whatever it is."

"I don't know, but you're right, it is big." Looking down from the lookout seat, he located the deck officer. "Ensign Hoshtraer?"

"What is it?"

"There's something very large above the horizon, two points off the starboard bow."

The ensign, Officer-of-the-Watch for the morning, moved to the bow and looked into the growing light. It took a few moments, but he saw what they referred to. *What is that?* he thought, trying to ignore an unnerving feeling. It seemed to be getting larger, which meant closer. Turning to a crewwoman standing next to him, he said, "Get the Captain."

"Yes, sir," she replied and ran off.

Less than a minute later, the skipper of the boat stood the bow. "That is big!"

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Call the ship to stations,” the Captain ordered. He saw it clearer, since it was much closer. He had heard of dragons, but had never seen one, nor truly believed in their existence.

The ensign signaled the drummer, who started striking the large round drum that sat just under the aft quarterdeck. The crew below came alert and ran to their battle positions. The ship was one of the larger in the royal fleet, even with only two lasts. Its complement included one hundred and forty rowers, who took alternate positions on two lower decks, thirty-five per deck per side. Also on board were forty-two archers with composites and longbows and thirty-six swordsmen. Archers and the rowers would take up sword during boarding operations, often after ramming another ship.

The drake glided very high over them. “Standby on oars and prepare to drop sails,” the Captain called out, as he kept an eye on the beast. “It may fly by and not attack us.” He had just made the statement when the creature started its descent. “Lower the sails and drop the masts. Prepare for battle.”

Naval battles normally gave the crew more time to get the sails and mast stowed. It took time for any approaching ship to get to them, not that many really did, considering the ship’s mages. The swooping drake dropped from the sky quickly. The crew scrambled to get the lateen sails and the two-part yardarms down. Hoisting the fore mast from its mount, held by the stay ropes from the bow and stern, the crewmen walked the base towards the stern of the ship. When the mast reached about forty-five degrees, the crew used ropes and tackle with the yardarms to help lower it the rest of the way. It was a well-practiced execution, but still took time.

Seeing that time was running out, the Captain yelled to the crew, “Toss the mast and yards overboard. We’ll row back for them. Archers, ready and aim.” Turning to the ship’s mage, the Captain saw that he was chanting and motioning with his hands. Each mast, one at a time, was magically lifted from of the men’s hands, floated over the water and unceremoniously dropped it into the sea with great splash, while other crewmembers heaved the yardarms over the deck rail.

The caster had just dropped the mast, when the dragon leveled a couple of hundred feet off the surface. Its wings were wider than the ship was long. The mage made more hand gestures. When the dragon got within a hundred feet, it spit out a column of flame. The fire splattered on the invisible shield the mage erected. The flammable liquid burned yellow hot.

The dragon appeared to be surprised at the sudden halt of the flames. It flapped its wings and rose over the wall, passing above the ship. "Archers, fire," the Captain ordered, a slight uneasiness in the voice. The massive body that skimmed overhead disturbed him and his crew. The archers loosed their arrows. One imbedded under the scales in its side. The beast roared in pain.

The mage had used all the energy within him, so he reached his mind out to the crystal hanging on a silver chain around his neck, pulling power from it.

The dragon soared into the air and in a smooth rotation, stalled, turned and dropped back to the ship.

The mage then cast another wall in the shape of a dome over the entire ship. The dragon seemed to sense it and with a few flaps of its wings, it settled on top of the shield.

Arrows shot through the wall and bounced off the scales. The yellowish-orange dragon was huge by the crew's reckoning and terrifying, with four legs, the hind haunches larger than the front, but both sets were sizable, strong and menacing. Each foot had three front talons and two rear for gripping. The creature raked the wall with its front feet. The head was massive with tapering up-curved horns, about half the head's length extending from the brows sweeping back. The enormous wings were the same color as the scales and bat like. The long heavy tail beat down on the wall as well.

Seamen cringed from the dragon's screeching roar. Two more arrows dug into the beast and seemed to anger more than damage it. It clawed, scratched and pounded the wall, spitting fire straight down onto the dome. Flames burst up around the creature, not affecting it.

The sheer weight of the animal, fire, scratching and beating took its toll on the magical wall. Having used the power from his crystal and himself, the caster reached out to the surrounding area for more energy, only to find nothing to latch onto. Something blocked him from the power the universe creates from life and that 'something' he knew had to be the dragon, for it was the only element that had changed.

In desperation, the mage reached his hands out and placed them on the shoulder of the Captain and a nearby sailor, forcing power from them. It was not much, but enough to strengthen the wall. After reinforcing the shield, he turned to another crewmember and placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling out her power. All three looked at the caster in confusion. He then reached out with his mind to the mage's tower only to find that it too was blocked.

"Captain," the mage said with an apologetic tone. "I can't reach the Tower and the beast is not letting me have the energy I need. The wall will drop."

The Captain and the First Officer looked to the caster in shock, near terror. The man had never failed them in the eight years they served together. Their hearts sank. The creature would not take long to destroy the ship once it got through the dome barrier.

Drawing his sword, he addressed the crew. "Archer, keep firing. Concentrate on the lower neck and the head. All hands to arms. Clear the center deck. The wall will not last and the beast will most likely land there."

The crew vacated the center portion of the deck, crowding on the bow and stern quarters. The rowers below jumped from the planks and grabbed swords hanging near the center isles and ran to the both sets of steps leading to the top deck. When the first rowers reached the top of the stairs and saw the dragon for the first time, they jumped back falling onto the other crewmembers. Terrified, they tried pushing away from the steps, but were pushed back up and out by the other men. The last thing these people wanted was to be trapped below deck.

Most of the crew got above deck, leaving a couple of dozen still below when the barrier gave way and the dragon dropped onto the port rail. Wood cracked from the weight as claws dug into the ship's side. The extra poundage rocked the ship in a lurch. Few crewmen kept their footing. The ones that did charged the beast, swinging blades. Most everyone else fell and slid into a pile at the rail and under the creature.

The Captain regained his footing and hollered, "Close in and thrust under the scales."

Hearing that, the creature turned in the direction of the Captain as though it understood the command. The beast spit fire at the Captain and swung its tail to the rear of the ship. People ducked, two leapt into the sea. The tail struck three sailors, knocking their broken bodies in an arch to the water. Fire landed where the Captain had been standing, flaming liquid splattered several of the crew.

The dragon turned its body, moving the right leg to the starboard rail, facing the bow and the Captain. The galley leveled and sunk low in the water. The Captain charged the beast as it lunged its head at him with a snap of its jaws. Ducking under it and thrust up with his sword, the point missed slipping under any of the scales and deflected off.

Another swordsman thrust at the same time and caught the edge of the drake's mouth. Blackish blood flowed from the wound. In pain, the beast raised its head, arching its long neck and sprayed fire straight down onto the deck. Men, women, officers, the mage and the Captain jumped away as flaming oil spattered them all. Screaming, most, including the Captain, jumped into the sea. Others writhed on the deck as fire consumed them, the mage among them.

The dragon crashed its heavy tail on the deck, casting splintered wood in all directions. Two rowers below deck saw an opportunity. The chest of the animal was over the stair's hatch. They both ran up the steep steps and pushed their swords under the scales with all the strength they could muster. The blade dug in deep, dislodging several scales.

The dragon leapt back in surprise and great pain, crushing several sailors attempting to stab its backend. The crew below deck looked into the slit eyes of a very angry dragon. Men scrambled back,

falling on each other trying to get away from the hatch when a flaming column filled the confined area. Screams of burning crewmembers sickened those topside.

With the bow of the ship ablaze, the beast jumped into the air, spun around and landed on the rails again, facing the stern. This cracked the spine of the boat. Water started flooding the bottom deck. The remaining crew jumped overboard as the drake snatched a sailor with its front talons tearing the sailor apart with its strong jaws, it consumed the halves.

Looking around and not finding live prey on the ship, the dragon took to the sky.

The yellow and red suns of Laserfica rose over the horizon to find the dragon swooping over the charred debris of the Remojh, clutching men and women from the water, flying up into the sky and then flinging their screaming bodies into its jaws. Some of the crew dove under the churning bloody surface to avoid the dragon approached. Many mercifully drowned.

The feast continued until the dragon had its fill. The dragon flew to the suns and the sea grew quiet. The smoldering husk of the ship slipped below the waves as a sailor, burned severely, swam weakly to one of the masts floating on the surface. Groaning, he struggled up, collapsed on the mast under the warm suns and exhaled his last breath.

Chapter – 4

“We’ve located the Remojh,” Danfarhee informed Arlakar. “There’s not much left of it.” Since the attack on the Yomafer-Koerin, the tower mages communicated regularly with the ship mages and searched for the two missing vessels, never found. In that time, everything seemed calm until they could not reach the caster on a war galley heading to the Darrinin Colony.

Concerned they lost another ship, they desperately scryed along its course from a known point several hours earlier. It took time to locate and when it was found, they saw scattered charred bits of wood, blue sail canvas, rope and other debris. Sixteen bodies floated on the surface and one laid across an unburned mast.

“What happened?” Arlakar asked.

“We’re not sure,” Danfarhee replied.

“I have been hearing that a lot lately.” Arlakar rose from the table where he had been writing.

“I know. Aereena is peeling back the last few hours to see what she can find.”

“I need to have something more to tell our Majesty. A war galley was lost with all hands and we didn’t get a warning. What the hell is going on out there?”

Bowing slightly, Danfarhee responded, "I don't know, master."

"I know, but we need to find out. Are there others ships in the area?"

"None, but we're the only ones that sail to the east."

The two mages left that room in the Tower and entered another larger room a few doors down along the wall. Several mages had been working at contacting all the ships again to inform them of what was happening.

Arlakar stepped to Aereena, who sat crossed-legged on the floor rug, candles all around her. He sat across from her outside the circle of candles and waited. It was over fifteen minutes before the woman opened her eyes. Arlakar looked into her black eyes. She looked worried. "What is it?"

Aereena looked around the room. "A dragon attacked them."

"A dragon? What kind of dragon?"

"Huge, larger than the ship. Samlar put up a wall, but it was not enough," she said, her voice cracking slightly. "He tried to contact us, but could not. The dragon was doing something to block him. The crew put up a gallant fight but it was no use. Several arrows struck it and the crew stabbed it quite a few times." The woman squinted her eyes tight, forcing her emotions to calm. "It began to eat them."

"Any survivors?"

Aereena shook her head. "The sea will claim the bodies shortly."

"Yes it will," Arlakar said softly. "The priests will guide their souls. Go meditate and relax. I'll check on you later, before I have to see the Emperor. I will get your vision then." The woman nodded. Arlakar remained seated in thought as the woman gave a short chant, put out the candles, collected them and departed.

After a while, Arlakar talked Hanya who worked with other mages to contact ship mages. "I want every one to know that, no matter how trivial something may seem, they are to contact us immediately, before doing anything else."

“Of course,” she replied, closing her eyes.

“And, have the ship mages talk to each other. They could help track each other.”

Arlakar left the room and found a sage on a cushion, talking close and quiet with a small middle-aged woman. Arlakar sat on the edge of the cushion next to the woman and spoke to the sage.

“Know anything about dragons?”

The sage looked at him. “Not really. Why?”

“Who does?”

The sage stopped his explorations of the woman’s curves. “I don’t know. None of us have ever seen one. I’ve heard they have been sighted in the southern hemisphere, near Tonnae. I can check a few things.”

“Do that,” Arlakar said. He gave the woman a light pat on the hip as he pushed off the cushion.

“Sorry to disturb you two.”

The sage looked up, concerned. “Does this have to do with the latest missing ship?”

“Yes. It is no longer missing. Get what you can within the hour. I’ll be briefing the Emperor shortly after that.” The mage turned and left them.

The sage looked at the woman, kissed her passionately and got up. He went to the sixth floor. The entire open area was an extensive library with rows of shelves. Scrolls and books filled the shelves. He approached a couple of clerks and asked them to pull all the information on dragons that could be found and bring it to him. The man then found two scholars idly reading scrolls. “Please come with me, Arlakar needs knowledge on dragons.”

The three entered an unoccupied side room. Inside, the sage told the other two what little he knew. The clerks brought in a few books and a pile of scrolls. “Thank you. Please stay, we may have need of more.”

They read, took notes with quills on parchment, sent the clerks for more material and read some more. “We do not seem to have much on dragons,” said one scholar.

The sage agreed. “Keep checking. I’m taking what we have to Arlakar.”

Arlakar had gone to inform the Merlin of the events. Lofflarin was the one and only ‘Merlin’, the title given to the head of their order. He was an average built man of eighty-six years. “I’m going to court with you when you brief the Emperor,” Lofflarin told Arlakar. “Come back here when you are ready to go. I will also share the woman’s vision with you.”

Arlakar went back to the room with Hanya and sat at a table. He was still preparing to give more bad news to his liege. *Who is behind this?* He thought, knowing the Emperor would ask the same unanswered question.

The sage walked in, finding the mage deep in thought. He handed Arlakar the parchment with his notes. After reading it, Arlakar said, “Legends, myths and vague references? Is this truly all we have on dragons?”

“We are still doing research, but yes, that does seem to be the bulk of it. No one goes to Tonnae. The animal people there are inhospitable and attack humans, elves, dwarves and the like on sight. No one has ever been able to reason with them.”

Arlakar thought of what he knew small continent south of the equator, hoping to have more to present Kibrye. Some considered Tonnae a very large island. The Tarrarians sent expeditions a couple hundred years earlier and found various animal-like people inhabiting it. The creatures walked erect like humans, but were obviously animals. Reportedly, some were cat like; similar to tigers and lions, while others were wolves, bears and even ferrets. All were vicious and hostile. Only casters that could magically talk to animals and control their temperament had any chance to do so. All any of the scrolls indicated was the creatures spoke little, mainly snarled and growled remarks like ‘mankind must be purged from the world’ or ‘the bare-skinned have no right to life’. Myths had it, that the animal people were created by the gods to fight in some war in the heavens and were then left on Laserfica to fend for themselves.

The only other animal people Tarrarian had contact with were lizard like on the Ietkata continent, east of Tarraria, where they had three colonies in the northern regions. The lizard people resided well south, but every few years, in the heat of summer, bands of these lizard people would travel north, where it would normally be too cold for them and attack the colonists. That seemed to be the reason for their trek north and the reason no other human migrated to the continent or sail east of Tarraria.

Dragons were never seen north of the equator and only writings of about Tonnae even mention of them, very little information at that.

“We’ll have to start gathering more about these creatures and find out why one attacked a galley well north of the equator, just four days after the other incident. It was no coincidence. This may explain the missing ships.”

“Those ship were to the west. That would say there were several of them.”

“Have we never scryed on the Tonnae?” Arlakar asked

“According to the writings, they were always blocked. Now we may know why. If dragons truly have the ability to dampen the magical energies in an area, then its is no wonder they have fallen into legend and myth.”

“Thank you. Send a couple of people to the Grand Library and see what can be found there. Also, see if Tonnae is still beyond our sight. Now that we know why we were blocked and have a reason to look, maybe we can break through.”

“At once.”

Arlakar went back to the Merlin and together they located the caster who viewed the dragon’s attack. She was resting alone in her room, which she shared with three others. Aereena stood and bowed when she saw the head of their order. Lofflarin had her sit back onto her bed. Arlakar and Merlin remained standing as the three shared minds. After seeing everything she had experience concerning the attack and the dragon, the Merlin thanked her and then passed a hand over her face.

“Rest now.” The woman slumped. Arlakar settled her onto the bed, straightened her gown and placed a light blanket over her.

From there the two went to the ‘gate’. The gate stood alone in a side room of the third floor. Two royal honor guards stood outside of the room. They opened one of the double doors. Inside were two other guards and a mage. The complement was always present to ensure the safety of the gate.

The gate itself consisted of two carved vertical dark gray stone square columns, about seven feet tall and eighteen inches across. Set on top, was a crossbeam of the same stone and same width, making the center area a little over four feet wide. The gate sat in the middle of a nine-foot circle of three-inch medallions made from the same stone material as the gate. These medallions were inset into the slate floor and each had a unique symbol upon them.

The room seemed plain in comparison to the rest of the Tower and if not for the stained glass window and the twelve candles in four bronze sconces mounted to the walls, the room would be as dark as a black pit on a cloudy night. As it was the small stones were hard to see.

The Merlin approached one of the floor stones. Standing in front of it, facing the gate, he put his hands together in prayer and mentally projected a short chant. The center area of the gate, as seen from one side, shimmered. Another room came into view, a small cavern-like chamber lit with similar sconces. Arlakar and Lofflarin stepped into the circle and through the gate as though walking through any other archway.

On the other side, they turned to the wooden door centered on a fitted stone wall. There was an honor guard to either side. The guards came to attention and one opened the door. The mages passed through and up the winding natural cave tunnel, lit with oil lamps.

The palace was three miles from the Ministers Castle containing the Tower and across land the gate was the only other way into the palace. Shields surrounding the palace prevented any magical means of traveling in or out. Mages ensured those shield-barriers were strong and un-tampered. Though it would only take a half hour by horse or carriage to travel between the two places, the gate

was set up as an alternate - safer - faster way for the Emperor to travel. Besides the Emperor, only a few mages were allowed access to the gate and only they knew how to operate it.

The passageway ended, opening into an elaborate chamber built of cut beige stone, carved with intricate scenes. Those who walked the path and climbed the stairs to the ornate door could not help but feel they were entering another realm. Even the Merlin paused before opening the door to the private entry hall connecting the cave to the imperial private apartments. Two more honor guards were assigned there. The short hall had three doors. Tapestries hung over maroon fabric stretched within ornately etched panels on the walls.

The two mages nodded to the guards and continued through a large anteroom to the main halls of the palace wings. Eventually they located Fimmlar, the Lord High Chamberlain. “Good sir, where may I find His Royal Majesty?” Lofflarin asked.

“He is dining. I will take you to him.”

“That will be good. Thank you.”

The Emperor’s private dining chamber was a large rectangular room with a raised dais along the middle of the inside wall with the royal table that seated three on either side of the Emperor. The opposite wall had clear multi-paned lancet windows, overlooking the grand courtyard. Entry doors were on either side of the dais with guards posted. Even though the chamber was considered private, there were several tables below the dais for his guests.

The Merlin and Arlakar were brought in. Kibrye was in his usual large chair, with his first wife Chanarzra to the left and another woman from the harem to his right. Courtiers filled the seats at the table as well as the other tables in the room.

The harpist who entertained those who were eating stopped when the mages entered. Arlakar stepped to the front of the Emperor’s table and bowed to one knee. “Your Majesty, another ship was attacked.” The Merlin stood next to him, bowing slightly in respect.

The Emperor put down his fork, placed an elbow on the table and set his chin thoughtfully onto his fisted hand. “Yes?”

Arlakar rose. “The Remojh, one of your war galleys, was sunk, a total loss. I do not think this is an appropriate place for the details, Your Majesty.”

“Quite right.” To Fimmlar, Kibrye said, “Take them to my drawing room. Have Jaarin and Esparee join them.”

The mages left the room and Kibrye finished his meal quietly. His wife, concerned, placed a hand on his arm. He kissed her shoulder in return. “We’ll talk later,” he said. The music resumed, but discussions around the room became subdued.

Kibrye entered the drawing room, waving the others to remain seated. The chamber was plush containing large cushioned chairs a circle with side tables holding wine and platters of food. Besides the mages and Chamberlain, Jaarin, the Royal Warlord General and Esparee, the Royal Herald were present, discussing the news. The casters had not yet gone into detail or mentioned the dragon. They talk about the locations of the fleets and the individual ships that were out sea.

Once the Emperor was settled comfortably in his seat and sipped his wine, Arlakar detailed all he knew. Most were shocked of the announcement, especially hearing the mages were not able to find the dragon and it blocked the power needed to cast spells.

“Dragon?” Jaarin asked. “Where did it come from?” He was a large, strong, imposing man.

“It flew in from the east and left in that direction.”

“We have colonies that way.” Fimmlar said, distressed, his tall thin frame shifted in the chair.

“Have they been contacted and warned?”

“Yes,” Arlakar stated. “The word is spreading to the mages and command leaders, but we have restricted the information to clan chiefs, governors, legion commanders and their aides. This information in the general population would cause unnecessary panic. We need full knowledge of

what we are up against before letting everyone know. We've also sent scholars to the grand library at Izzirak to see if more information can be gained."

Kibrye looked at Lofflarin. "Merlin, you've been quiet."

"Yes, my lord," was all he said. Everyone waited, but no more was said.

"Anything to add?"

"I believe you know why I'm here."

The Emperor paused and then said, "Lord Tovvig."

The Merlin nodded once. The others in the room, including Arlakar, looked around confused. With no small amount of embarrassment, Esparee asked, "Who is Lord Tovvig?"

Kibrye looked to the Herald, knowing how disturbing it was for the man to hear the Emperor make reference to someone that he had never heard of. It was Esparee's position to be informed of everyone who affects the Empire and the Emperor and to hold that knowledge for his liege. Esparee felt he had failed his liege. That never happened before. There were times he did not know people, but not like this. "Sorry, Esparee. There was no reason for you to know Lord Tovvig. He is Prileerian."

"I'm familiar with the royals, nobles and notable people of that nation. I have long discussions with Duke Grograe. I beg your pardon, but may I ask who this man is?"

"Of course. I must stress this information is to be kept to yourselves and spoken to no one else for any reason what so ever." Kibrye waited for everyone to acknowledge. "He is the Knights Marshal of the Prileerian dragons."

Everyone, except the Merlin, looked at their Emperor in shock, more shocked than they were before. Then Jaarin said, "Prileeria has dragons?"

Kibrye nodded.

“How? Where?” Jaarin erupted. He then regained composure and lowered his voice. “Excuse me, my liege, but if they are so vicious and dangerous, how do they control them and keep them secret? That is a pretty big secret to keep.”

“Yes they are dangerous and this is a big secret. Arlakar had explained much of how it is achieved when he said that dragons block any viewing. Even the few magicians Prileeria has do not know they are there and cannot sense them. Dragon handlers absorbed some of the resistance to mental probing from the dragons, so they are harder to read psychically. A few years ago, I was able to see one of their mountain strongholds and a few of their dragons. They have been breeding the creatures for a couple of hundred years. Those dragons were huge and quite frightening.”

Arlakar nodded in agreement, remembering the vision he received from Aereena. “Yes they are.”

The warlord leaned forward, placing his arms on his legs and clasped his hands. “Are we seeing treachery from King Savverae?” Each in the room thought about the statement. The nation had been a good ally for many generations.

“I don’t think so,” Kibrye said, “but there has to be a connection. There was that civil war of theirs around fifty years ago. Many of the nobles were upset that the king remained on the throne.” To the herald, the Emperor said, “Esparee, have Duke Grograe come see me and I’d also like to see Eshrezha at his convenience.”

“Yes, my lord.” The Herald rose and took his leave.

After the man had left, the Emperor addressed Jaarin. “I do not think this is over. Deploy most of the fleet’s ships to sea. Hold some here, though. Have each cargo ship escorted by a galley and the remaining galleys are to stay in large groups. Concentrate a third to the east and the remaining to the other directions. You have discretion. Have the Clan Chiefs send their galleys to protect their cargo ships and their remaining ships patrol the islands. Hold the honor fleet in reserve, here. That is all for now.”

The warlord rose, bowed and departed. He went to his own aides and instructed them to have scribes draft messages for the Clan Chiefs and their personal generals.

After the door close, Kibrye told the Chamberlain, "Talk to the Ministers and tell them what happened. Tell them of the dragon, they'll need to know, but they are not to discuss the matter with anyone. Have them be ready, I may have tasks for them soon." *Where did that dragon come from?* he thought and then said, "We need more information. We do not even know what we are reacting to. They do not need to know that, my friend, but see what they may be able to find out."

"Of course, my lord."

The door opened. Yoerdloe, Kibrye's third son and Crown Prince, walked in. He was a couple of inches shorter than his father and wore a trimmed mustache.

"Father?" He kneeled. "I just heard. Another ship had been attacked?"

"Yes. It sank with all hands."

"I see. Is there anything I can do?"

The Emperor thought "Go with the Fimmlar and observe. Pay close attention and listen. What ever you hear, keep to yourself. Understand?"

"Yes, father."

Kibrye nodded and both left the room. There was silence for some time, the Emperor and mages lost in their thoughts. After a while, Kibrye turned to Lofflarin. "I suppose we wait and see what happens next."

"Sometimes that is all there is to do."

"Sorry for your losses," Kibrye said, referring to the two dead mages.

"It is a loss for the Empire."

"Yes it is." *And someone will be held accountable.*

\* \* \*

On a small road, near the small town of Millia, on the eastern portion of the horseshoe shaped island called Oerudoer, rode Allik, his wife and three children. Oerudoer was, by far, the largest of the Tarrarian islands. It wrapped around Rindella, the Emperor's Island, with the only outlet at the south-southeast side. A complex of other islands surrounded Oerudoer.

Allik, a caster of fourth circle, rode along the wooded trail to Millia, the town of his birth. Seven servants traveled with them. A cart, pulled by two draft horses, carried the belongings they had decided to take along, as well a few pieces of furniture for the mage's parents.

"Master? Riders approach," one of the servants near the back called nervously.

From behind, two royal clan soldiers rode up on horseback. Riding around the cart, the lead guard pulled along side the mage. The other remained behind the column. "We have been assigned as your escort," the soldier stated.

"That is not necessary," Allik said, feeling uneasy about the fuss.

"Our commander feels differently, sorry. We will stay out of yours and your family's way."

"All right, thank you." The mage gave a slight nod. "Millia is just a couple of hours ahead."

"Yes, we are familiar with this area," said the lead and sped his animal up to lead the family.

Behind the parents, the oldest daughter, a curvaceous girl of sixteen, asked, "Father? Is something wrong?"

"No dear. They're just here as a precaution."

"Against what?"

Her mother looked back. "We've told you about Oermdaeya's death. You were at the funeral."

"I know and I've heard of talk about the other ship being attacked and two are missing, but I thought that was all out at sea?"

“It is,” her father said impatiently, “but it does not hurt to be cautious. Enough questions, I’m thinking.” The mage’s family knew that meant he was trying to talk to someone somewhere else. The two girls and their brother talked very softly so as to not disturb their father. They were excited to see their grandparents, but when wished quiet, he meant it, and to have him tell them to hush up inside their heads was unsettling, so they remain relatively quiet.

It had been almost two years since the family visited home. Allik’s parents were too aged to travel and the mage had not given it much thought. Since things seemed to be heating up, Allik felt the need to bring his family to his family estate while he still could. For the last five days they had traveled at an easy pace from the capital to the port of Eksetka, then took a rowed longboat to Port Oeress where they transferred their goods to a cart. From that large port city the family rode inland through the low mountains. Separating the farms were large woods of pines, alders, firs and maples.

The sky was pleasant and clear and rains were not due for a couple of days. Allik turned to his wife. “There was another attack. I’ll only be able to stay here a few days before going back.”

“Another ship? What happened?”

“Another dragon. It doesn’t appear to be the same one. A few of the crew was killed, but Efferia was unharmed and Bokket was able to hit it as it flew off.”

“Where did it go?”

“They were not able to follow it for long.”

The news ended the hushed chatter and everyone rode in silence the last mile. No one had anything to say nor did they try to lighten the mood. They worried for their father. Dragons were all but mythical and having them attacking the ships was very hard to comprehend. Not seen one themselves, they even felt it may not be real.

The party was glad to see the woods thin, revealing the town of Millia. Like most Tarrarian towns, Millia was a collection of communal estates with roads connecting them. Each estate had an assortment of structures and buildings around a large courtyard. More often than not, the two to five

story buildings were built next to each other. Where there were gaps between the structures, thick walls and gates were placed.

Allik and his party rode to the main gate of one of the estates. An elderly couple greeted them. Allik dismounted. "Mother," he said, hugging the woman warmly and then reaching his hand out to the man. The men gripped wrists. "Father, you look well," Allik said, releasing the shake.

"I'm feeling better. That ointment you sent from that healer helps."

"I'll tell him."

While they talked, the mage's mother hugged his wife and then the grandchildren from the oldest to the youngest, commenting, the way only grandparents can, about their growth in the last two years. After the greetings, Allik said, "It is good to be home, but unfortunately I will have to leave in a few of days."

"So soon?" the mother sighed.

"Sorry," the mage said, "but yes, I must. There are things happening abroad and I will have to return to the Tower. I will tell you what I can, but that can wait until later." Allik walked with his father through the gate, guiding his horse. The others followed into the compound. "We brought a few things from the capital."

The courtyard was a wide rectangular open area about two hundred and ninety by three hundred and ten feet. Eighteen buildings made up the perimeter with tall walls and small gates. Within the courtyard, trees, small bushes, pots and patches of herbs and flowering plants were arranged in a park like setting around a central fountain. Amongst the flora was an assortment of stone benches and statues of animal, mythical creatures, men, and even more of women with figures reflecting the populace in various amounts of dress, often.

Allik took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of flowers. The cart was guided to the largest building, while the riding horses went to another structure, housing the stables and carriage house. The family and servants began unloading the cart. Others from the house joined in and after a very

short time all the furniture and goods were in their new place. The rest of the day was spent sitting around the garden, eating and talking about the news, local and abroad. Allik had told them of what had happened out at sea, as much as he could. “We’ll find who’s behind this and take care of it.”

“I know you will,” Allik’s father said with pride.

\* \* \*

High in the mountains, a wounded dragon landed on a ledge of a large carved tunnel entrance. Six men-at-arms hustled out of the way as the beast crawled into the opening and down the long curvy tunnel to a huge cavern, one of many within the stronghold. The odor of several adult dragons and a few younger ones filled the air.

“Welcome home, Bersba,” said a black haired man who stood at the open door leading to a smaller tunnel. Several men and women came out of the small tunnel with clean rags and buckets of hot water.

“Hello, Downen,” the dragon said in a very low, slow, almost singing voice. The huge beast seemed even larger in the limited space of the cavern and the voices resonated off the walls.

“These people are going to care for your wounds,” Downen said, motioning the nervous servants forward.

“They are nothing and do not need to be cared for,” Bersba said, referring to the arrow wounds.

“They may not be much, but they need to be removed. You know that.”

The beast paused, then said reluctantly, “Alright, but be quick. I am tired.”

To the servants, Downen said softly, “Do not worry. She ate well. I will pull the barbs. All you’ll need to do is wash the lacerations and dry them. Now let’s go. As she said, she is tired.”

The group went to the dragon. She tucked her right wing to her side and rolled to the ground. The massive body made surprisingly little sound as she shifted over to expose the broken arrows stuck in her hide between scales.

“Bersba...”

“Yes, I know. This will hurt. Just get on with it, they are starting to itch now that I’m not moving.”

Downen chose an arrow that seemed to be in the most sensitive area and took hold of the broken shaft. The servants started backing away. “Stay where you are.” The servants halted, terrified. With a grunt, Downen pulled the arrowhead out. The dragon roared. The sound reverberated off the walls. The servants ran to the entrance.

Both Downen and dragon laughed at them.

“Get back here and clean this wound,” the Downen said sternly. The frightened servants crept slowly to the neck. One took a clean rag and dipped it in the bucket he carried. He then proceeded to wash the cut. Compared to the size of the body, the injury was tiny. A small amount of black blood flowed out and was dabbed by the servant.

Downen pulled another arrow and that wound was also cleaned. He did this to all the arrows, having Bersba roll at times, so he could reach them. With the last arrow pulled and the openings cleaned, he patted an uninjured area hard enough to be felt by the beast. “Now rest. You did well.”

The servants hurried out the cavern, rushing passed a man in colorful finery standing at the man size entrance. The man, Lord General Wonpoer, arrived during the caring of the dragon. He watched with concerned, waiting for Downen to finish. With a last glance to their pet, the two walked through the thick rough-cut wood door, closing it. In the hall the General asked, “How is she?”

“She’s fine,” Downen replied. “These animals are fantastic. She took negligible damage and will heal quickly.”

“Good. It looks like they will do well, though I had not expected so many arrows to penetrate their scales.”

“They can take a lot more.”

“That may be needed.”

The two continued down the tunnel in silence.