

Extracted

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Reformation
Lightning

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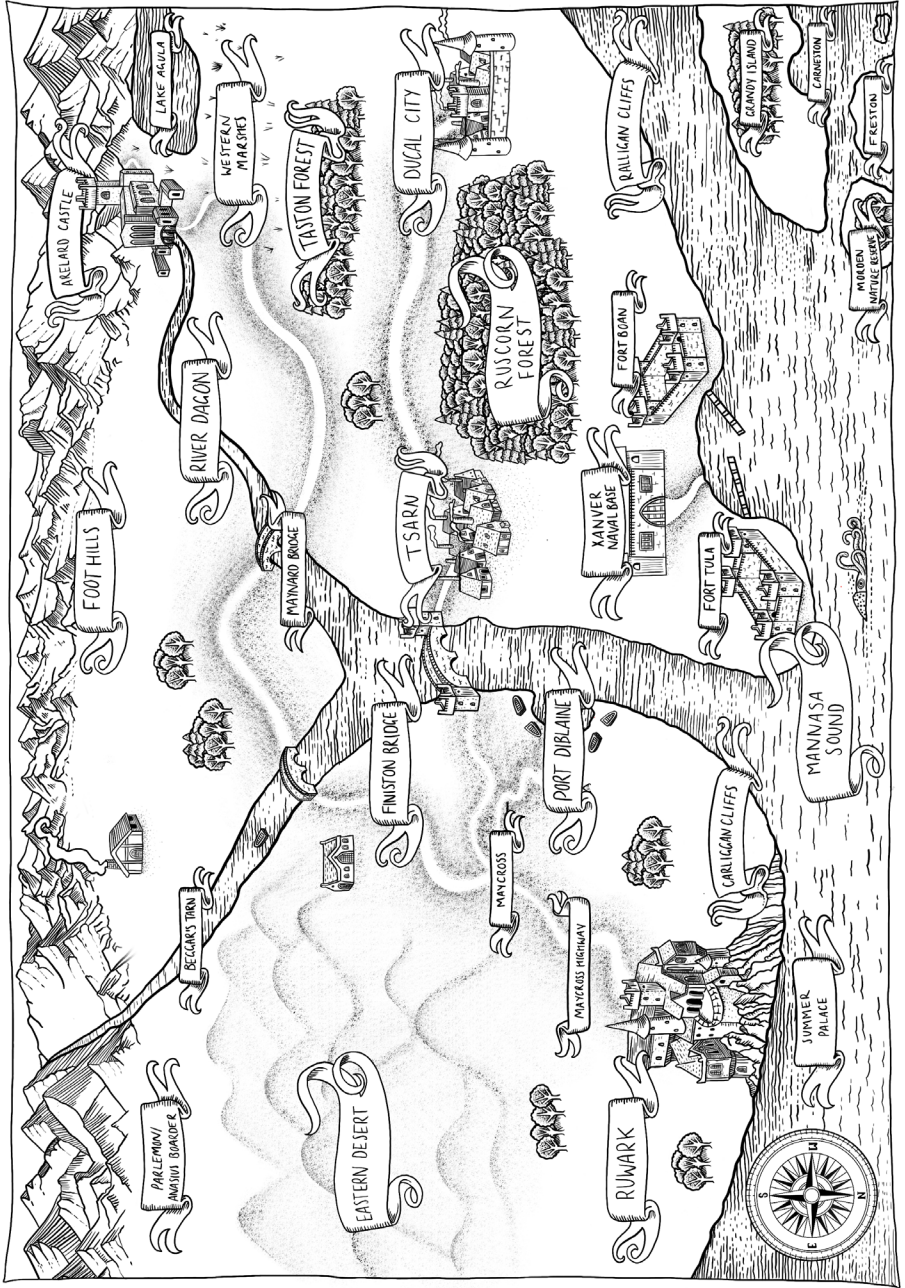
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PROLOGUE

A Dangerous Game

“Unless something changes in the next few seconds, I’m going to get caught,” Jason thought.

The combination of fear and sweat were making his skin clammy. Almost imperceptibly, he pulled his black cloak lower over his face and pressed himself further into the dip in the ground. Three Notalians were enjoying the lingering warmth of the dying sun as they moved slowly towards him, deep in conversation.

Until now, their voices had not carried well across the forest floor. Jason was breathing as quietly as possible and he had turned his right ear towards them to try and hear better. The ants were beginning to bother him, but he gritted his teeth fiercely and lay statuesque.

The tall cruel-looking man with a completely shaved head had a rich black-velvet cape, striking red breeches, a sheathed straight sword strapped to his waist and a

bright gold medallion on his forehead – clearly he was one of the royal princes. The second man was slightly shorter, much broader and his close-cropped hair was such a light blond it was almost white. He had dark, penetrating eyes, and he was clad in a mail-shirt and carrying a sword. He had the forbidding Notalian military insignia tattooed onto his forehead and a dagger strapped to his calf with a wide leather band. He was General Qong of the Notalian Liberation Army and Commander of Notalian Tactical Operations, a ruthless and formidable leader about whom Jason had heard a good deal, none of it pleasant. The third man looked vaguely familiar, but Jason could not place him. He was younger, perhaps only a few years older than Jason, with a dull-grey long-coat covering his mail, a gleaming peaked helmet clamped over his shoulder-length black hair, and an evilly curving sickle at his side. It was obvious that the three men were discussing tactics.

The royal prince had a harsh Notalian accent which was particularly difficult to understand. As Jason strained to hear the conversation ahead of him, he felt it was almost inevitable that he would be discovered. If that happened, the dungeons of Crask along with their infamous torture chambers were a virtual certainty. Ordinarily, his cloak would have been perfect camouflage against the usual dark browns and blacks of the forest

floor, but against the carpet of orange flowers on which he lay, his body shape would be unmistakable, even in the evening's lengthening shadows.

He pressed his body hard against the earth, hoping desperately that the men would change course. He knew that any movement would draw attention to himself, but the ants were crawling up his arms towards his face. Every muscle was taut as he strove to resist the urge to shake them off and scratch himself.

As the three men moved slowly along, their words became increasingly plain. Jason knew that knowledge of their plans would be invaluable to the Anasiun defence, so he lay like a rock, listening intently and praying for darkness. The ring around his ear glowed brighter beneath his cloak.

General Qong was speaking: "...unexpected. Tranton can be taken easily – there is no garrison there, and from there the route to Tsarn is swift."

The younger man replied, "But the plan will never succeed unless we can get through Tsarn. And how are we going to manage the ferry?"

"An undisguised Notalian in Tsarn would stand out like a sore thumb," agreed Qong. "As for the ferry, we're working on it."

"Working on it?" The tall man was angry. "You've had three months! If you don't have a plan yet, you don't

deserve to command my army!”

Qong responded with a quiet, deliberate and dangerous voice that was impossible to challenge.

“Our plans are final and flawless, Your Royal Highness, but they are not for all to hear.” He was staring directly at the tall man as he spoke, with eyebrows raised. The tall man looked at him carefully and then nodded almost imperceptibly.

The youngest man bristled. “As a fully-fledged member of the NTO, I should know all our plans.” His voice was rising.

Qong was immovable. “All in good time, Qinoda, all in good time.” He changed tack. “Now, we need a plan for bringing large numbers of troops through Ducal City and up into this forest. And we need detailed plans of these woods so we can find a quiet path through and reach Tranton from the west, unnoticed.”

The prince grinned and said, “From there, a rush through Xanver and onto Tranton will be straightforward enough.”

Qong continued, “The ferry is a tough problem. Security is tight on both banks of the river. Full shipping passes are needed before they even allow you into the terminals. Now, Qinoda, can your friend get them?”

The younger man replied, “I’ve not yet asked him. So far, he’s simply been our eyes and ears. He won’t be too

happy with us for asking for more.”

“He’ll be paid well.”

“He’ll need to be – he’s risking his life as it is.”

Jason saw that the men had begun to move off to the right. But he didn’t allow himself to breathe relief yet – they were still within spitting distance. He stayed glued to the ground and furiously ignored the ants, even as they explored his neck.

“How many men are allocated for this mission?” asked the prince.

General Qong didn’t hesitate, “The Anasiuns are a weak people, with few warriors amongst them. We can overwhelm them with less than 20,000 troops.”

“So in three weeks, all Anasius will be ours, and they will never see it coming!” grinned Qinoda. “I’m looking forward to the battle.”

General Qong frowned. “As the prophet Zoantha said: ‘Desire not the war, but the win.’ We all know you are mighty in battle, Qinoda, but the key is to be mighty of mind as well as of body. Both are needed for success.” He turned to the prince. “Your Royal Highness, might I have an audience with the king tonight?”

“I know you ask only because it is necessary. I will arrange it. Most options have been considered.”

The Notalians turned and began to walk away from Jason.

“...garrisons...the Uplands...Ducal...”

Jason heard them laughing in the distance, their voices fading into the growing darkness. Then, finally, he could neither see nor hear them. He clawed recklessly at the ants.

At a different time, in a different place, on one fateful afternoon, Jason had his history homework propped in front of him. A coke sat opened on his desk, and he was meant to be revising the Second World War. “We take our stand for freedom...” he scribbled as he tried to remember the words of Churchill. But he was distracted. He kept dreaming of Anasius. He knew that war was coming, a war for which most Anasiuns were woefully unprepared. A war that would be ruthless, vicious and catastrophic, and he could think of no way to avert it. And then, even as he started typing a message to Zak, there was a familiar jolt of electricity from his phone and, for a split-second, he disappeared. His bedroom vanished and he was standing back in Anasius once more. He had been extracted.

It was only much later that Jason realised he had heard the sirens passing his bedroom window.

The king was worried. He had heard reports from right across Anasius – reports that many were ignoring the

Scrolls, the ancient words that had kept the kingdom safe for centuries. There were whispers that Notalia was building its army and planning to invade. Anasius and Notalia had an alliance, to be sure, and an ancient one at that, but he could not be certain it would be heeded, especially when the Anasiun miners were not only bringing gold, but had now found seams of platinum deep in the Arelard mountains. He knew that Anasius was an attractive land, and he knew his military forces were thinly spread. How could he prevent invasion? He took his Scroll and flipped it open. He read again the legend of the snake and it gave him an idea.