

To Restore the Empire

Part 1 (Raydan only)

"To Preserve the Empire"

There is only so much magestone that I was able to hide, only enough to magically transport a few short mage-written messages to you Honored Scholar-Magus. I hope my small supply will be sufficient for the task at hand.

I received the reports you sent me at Fortress Sargus, and made the appropriate arrangements with the other Scholars for my absence. Then, as you commanded, I journeyed from Sargus to and through the Pass of Rye until I came to the magestone mines at Ashon Rye. These mines are busy with at least twenty of Raydan Marz's soldiers carving the earth for magestone.

Another thirty soldiers guard the diggers against attack, walking a double-perimeter to ensure no enemies or scouts penetrate their battle-lines. All present are well-armed, well-fed, and ready to fight on a moment's notice. The entire scene reveals the effectiveness of Raydan's command – even though Marz was nowhere to be found.

I was not at Ashon Rye for long. Long before I arrived at the mines Raydan gave the order that anyone that came to Ashon Rye under the flag of truce be brought to him without question. Five mornings ago I was taken from Ashon Rye by an armed escort and marched for days down to the Vale of Dawn.

The Vale was liberated by Raydan Marz's forces only a few weeks before my arrival, after a terrible battle between a number of warlords hungry for the Vale's foodstuffs, including Kho'Ta and the feared Kossak Mageslayer. With the leaves already beginning to turn, and winter due to come early in the mountains this year, food is more critical than magestone to Raydan's campaign – but not by much. Within the Vale the renegade warlord fields another thirty troops weary from the season's campaign, and twice that recuperating from the injuries inflicted upon them at the fierce Battle for Ashon Rye. There are even Orcs amongst his troops, a true sign of Marz' Outlander heritage.

When I was finally brought into Marz' presence and released from my bonds, I stated my purpose to Marz in plain terms, just as you commanded me to say. That I wanted to learn the truth behind the events that led to one of the Empire's strongest warlords to be placed on trial for high treason. Marz agreed, but on the condition that I stay with him through the next campaign season, and that I record everything that I see or hear truthfully in the name of history. I agreed.

Obviously, the fool wants me to write more than just his side of the story. Perhaps instead how he serves the Empire through his treachery. Regardless, I now have free run of the village, his camp, and all of his strategy sessions. I have the right to talk with any of his officers or soldiers as I wish, all so that I may chronicle Raydan Marz's actions for future generations to understand.

And for those generations to decide whether Marz was a hero, or more likely, a traitor.

Raydan means to bring down our new Lord Protector Jeet Nujarek, and he hints at corruption at the highest levels within both the Empire and the Guild. Not even the Prophet-Magus Osiras himself is blameless in Raydan's eyes.

We know from the reports that Raydan is, above all things, a loyalist. That he does not seem to seek the crown. That he is Altem and wants nothing more for himself. While he has past rivalry Jeet Nujarek, and certainly has more than enough reason to hate the new Lord Protector, Marz remains focused on his larger purposes rather than petty revenge. Raydan has stated again and again that he was a pawn in Nujarek's larger agenda for power; that his trial was a mere object lesson to those who dare obstruct Jeet Nujarek's attempt to gain Empire.

I do not yet know what to believe. I will endeavor to find the truth.

Your servant,

Magus-Scholar Hendraabi

To Restore the Empire

Part 2

Our Time in Fairhaven From the personal journal of Lootan Cole

A New Direction

Yes. This has all the makings of Nadia's biggest score--or her greatest disaster. As usual, I expect the scales to be balanced on the edge of a sword.

I'm still not altogether certain what brought us to Fairhaven, this borderland kingdom that has never before been worth our time. Some nightmare of the Drac's, though a few others claimed to share his dream for a while. Tyrsis couldn't get it out of his mind, even while waking and in the heat of battle. It tormented him for weeks, in between the Relic's first Summons and the Atlantis Guild's final stand at Salis Reach. I've never seen a Draconum obsess before. I never want to again.

Today we scouted the Relic again—Tyrsis, Hodge, the twins and I—while Nadia and the others trailed Prince Aaron home to make certain he didn't run into any difficulties. He did, of course, and she had to rescue him from the claim-jumping Jarl Daw Magister. That's twice she's saved Aaron's royal hide--not that we've seen much gratitude from King Johannis III. And according to Khamsin tradition, it makes her twice as responsible for the crown prince in the future. I tried to tell her the guy was blue-blooded trouble, but you don't tell the Black Thorn anything. You ask.

Nicely.

"The Relic, Lootan. Maybe you should just stick to telling me about the Relic." The predatory hunger in her green eyes might have persuaded anyone else to drop the subject. But I'm not just anyone. And I've been with Nadia almost as long as Tyrsis has, so I can read her moods a touch better than most—maybe.

"Maybe we all should," I answered aloud. "Maybe we should think about the year we chased after Darset Frehr. And how much trouble Polin Unis got us into at the Black Tower."

A flush of color stained her high cheekbones all the way up to the edges of her ears. Now she was angry. My point made, I backed off with some measure of diplomacy. At least, that's what I told myself then. The truth is I was protecting my own arse. "What I mean is, do we need the distraction? There's something else here, Nadia, and it's big."

"How big?" I saw the flash in her eyes, like when she'd learned the Blood of

Khamsin had survived the fall of my homeland. Avarice, maybe. Or the thrill of a challenge.

I told her what we'd discovered.

The Relic is definitely ancient, but we knew this from our first encounter with it. It has its origin in the Age of Mists, in Hodge's opinion, and the Dwarf knows his history. And although the Summons has all but dissipated, other warlords continue to straggle in after the Relic. A pack of Orcs had taken to worshipping the monolith as a voice of their pagan deities. We scattered the Orcs and checked the artifact out as best we could. Its Summons still called, but much more weakly. The generally accepted answer was that the disruption of the Salis Reach magestone deposit had broken the Relic's magical hold over us.

Nadia, as always, was quick on the uptake. "You said 'generally' accepted. Tyrsis does not believe this is the true reason?"

I smiled. The Black Thorn never lets me forget why we fight for her. "Not the only reason," I told her, "or the Summons would have stopped altogether. The ley lines have shifted again. Whatever it is—whatever is out there, Nadia—it's more than simple magestone.

"Much more."

To Restore the Empire

Part 3

Our Time in Fairhaven

From the personal journal of Lootan Cole

Prince's Boon

Dark poetry. That's what it was. Nadia played a masterful game, letting Prince Aaron demand of us everything that she wanted.

We sat around a barracks table in Court, capital of Fairhaven, tearing into blackened fowl and new-baked bread. After a month of field rations and campfire cooking, even this stingy reward left me pleasantly disposed toward King Johannis and his puppy-cheerful son. But not so pleasant that the crown prince's initial offer didn't rock me back on my heels. He even caught the Black Thorn by surprise, it seemed. Her face went blank, her gaze flitting about uncertainly from the prince to her irregulars as if suspecting a joke. "You can't be serious," she managed finally.

With a flourish, Prince Aaron produced a wax-sealed scroll from the sleeve of his robe and placed it on the table in front of her. "The formal offer, signed by my father, which names you as loyal adjutants to Fairhaven's standing guard, under your own independent command, supernumerary and probationary."

She reached out and flicked the scroll with one long finger. Nadia's half-blood showed most in her hands, her elfin face, and the slightly pointed ears that peeked out from under the dark curls of her hair. "Super—what?" she asked, possibly stalling.

"Supernumerary and probationary."

Which often translates as "expendable."

The prince's case was a good one, from Fairhaven's point of view. They needed the extra military support, and as troubleshooters—or troublemakers—you don't find many better than us. Good also for the prince, as he was so obviously interested in the Black Thorn. But for Nadia and the rest of us? We were searching for a hidden treasure. Except for permission to remain in Fairhaven, I couldn't see what we had to gain from such an offer. But the Black Thorn did. "Can you guarantee me the power to draft additional troops from the regular standing guard?" she asked. "I'm going to need it."

Prince Aaron frowned. "I could. But why?"

I hid my smile and kicked Derrik under the table as the other Fuser began to catch on.

“The Summons,” Nadia said slowly, as if she’d just thought of it. Damn that woman and her secrets. I had no doubt this was what she’d been angling for all along. But of course, it would have been far too easy to tell us that.

But we hadn’t won yet. The prince swept aside her concerns with a wave of his hand. “That’s just residual power left over from our earlier troubles,” he said confidently. “As we mine deeper into the Salis Reach site, the Summons will fade.”

“What if it’s something more?” The Black Thorn was not to be put off so easily. Once she sank her teeth into an argument, she worried it down to the bone. “Some treasure at greater distance from the Relic, or one that’s partially warded? Perhaps it’s another magestone deposit, or some ancient treasure.”

“Perhaps it’s the Globe of Jorandal,” Aaron said sardonically, rolling his eyes.

“The Globe of Jorandal?” The Black Thorn glanced at Tyrsis and then at me. Then she took a bite of bread, chewing thoughtfully. “You’re talking about the Radiant Sphere. Able to turn common earth into gold, right?” Aaron nodded, and I could see his satisfaction in being able to tell her a story for a change. “Something like that. Another version is that the Sphere controls the bones of the world, or can pull gold from the earth without mining. There are others.”

She didn’t look impressed. “Those are legends I’ve heard in a dozen different kingdoms across the Land, Aaron.”

“But how many times have you heard it from a descendant of Jorandal?” he asked, clearly thinking this was a wounding touch. “He ruled back when Fairhaven stretched all the way to the Tibersus. Before the Guild or Tezla. Not many people know that at least that much of the tales is true.” He stretched and shrugged his indifference. “But I have no time for old family legends,” he said, baiting the Black Thorn. “At least, not for a foreign warhost that may be moving on tomorrow.” He stared pointedly at the scroll of appointment.

The Black Thorn nodded and her shoulders slumped slightly. She reached out and accepted the scroll with an air of capitulation. But I saw the wolfish grin behind her eyes.

Nadia smiled sweetly at our new liege. “Tell me more,” she said.

"For the Good of the Empire"

We leave tomorrow for the monasteries of Glenn Cur. That is where Maleficus says a group of scholar monks live in self-imposed seclusion. Whether they have the answers that Marz needs to exploit his artifact, only time will tell. My journals grow with each passing day, as I now have the names, professions and histories of almost every warrior and camp-follower in the Vale. I even have a talented young man providing me with sketches of some of the more interesting-looking warriors, which suits my journals very well.

The warriors at Ashon Rye have been recalled to the Vale, and they have returned bearing the last of the chests of magestone the diggers were able to unearth during the last few months of fall. While it is technically possible to mine the hill-faces for magestone during the winter, Marz recognizes that it would be a task of great effort for very little gain. He sees as much as I do that it will be easier to renew the digging for magestone in the Spring when the winter winds cease their howling.

Marz has chosen the members of his warhost, and he has asked for volunteers to step forward for winter duty watching over Ashon Rye. It is clear that Marz does intend to return until after the snows have melted. While the troops staying at the Vale don't seem to mind having the winter to rest, there are members amongst his hand-picked warhost that speak openly about the foolishness of the winter journey.

I go with Marz, by my own choice.

I have learned so much since I have arrived in the Vale. Of the treachery and the secret devices that led to Marz' capture, imprisonment, and trial. I have seen the fear in his eyes when he confronts the inner demons of doubt within. I have seen the anger that blazes in his heart when he speaks of wrongs to be righted, and of the cool truth in his eyes when he says that he does not want Empire – but merely for the Empire to become as it once was. Not a tool to be used by greedy men.

But tonight, when I told Raydan Marz of the reports you sent to me, shortly before I left Fortress Sargus, I saw a different side of the man. One I did not expect. Your reports clearly stated that Marz and his soldiers coldly cut down and executed every Prator soldier that tried to apprehend their flight. I accused Marz of this, as we sat in my threadbare room above the hearth-hall. I accused him of these crimes, of this butchery, and demanded answers why he would slaughter nineteen Prator who were loyal to the cause of the Empire in his haste to flee.

I did not expect the tears.

Jurim Dall, by name, Marz told me. Marz, in serving others, says that he has laid his life on the line a dozen times for his own soldiers or for those above him in command. But Marz never had expected anyone to make a selfless

act for him. An act where there was no pulling back; no escape. Then came Jurim Dall, and the look in his eyes as he sacrificed his own life for the life of his commander on the floor of the Grand Avium.

Marz says the look in those eyes changed him forever. Marz says that he made special effort not to have any of the Home Guard injured beyond necessity. That he made sure every Prator they fought against would live to fight another day.

From his tears, and his honesty, I believe him.

Then Raydan Marz opened and spilled a sack of magestone across the tabletop between us, and told me to send whatever mage-writ reports to Atlantis I thought should be sent. He picked up one of the priceless stones, pressed it into my hand and told me to take what I needed for whatever I thought was necessary. Even if it meant using the stones to kill him. Marz told me that if I truly believed that he ordered the executions of those good men and women, that I should do what is right – and take his life.

I chose not to.

With that single choice, I also have also chosen the path of my own loyalty to the Empire - and thus to Raydan Marz. The hero. Not the traitor.

Only time will tell if Atlantean troops are waiting for us at Glenn Cur. Or whether you wait there for me alone. That decision rests upon you and what you think is right – and what you believe is best. For the good of the Empire.

Goodbye, my wife.

Your servant,

Magus-Scholar Hendrabi

To Restore the Empire

Part 4

Our Time in Fairhaven

From the personal journal of Lootan Cole

The Messenger

Events proceed at their own pace. It is a truth the Black Thorn has often used to chivvy us along when we grow impatient. It has even stayed her own hand at times, just when I believed her temper was about to get the better of us all. And, granted, the natural course of things frequently allows us room to maneuver. At other times, however, it forces our hand.

Like today.

We waited, Nadia and I, in a shallow alcove that had once held an alabaster sculpture of King Johannis' long-departed queen. The fragile artifact had, tragically, been recently destroyed, and so the Black Thorn had been able to persuade Prince Aaron to place a wicker screen before the alcove, behind which we could watch in secret. I think the king agreed only because it removed the Thorn from his side. So to speak.

The young man who approached Johannis Verrick did so cautiously, his gray eyes flicking from side to side to find each guard and identify every exit. A careful man, for one so young. Small and lean, with a twitch to his fingers, he reminded me of a nervous cat--one that had already given up a handful of lives and was carefully hoarding those it had left.

"You are Arik?" Johannis asked, officially recognizing the messenger. "Envoy of Raydan Marz, the Outlaw?"

The slight man nodded and swallowed. "Yes," he said briefly, and then seemed to realize this was his cue to deliver his message, "Yes, sire, I am. The Warlord Raydan Marz requests safe passage through your beautiful and ... peaceful ... kingdom."

I caught the ghost of a smile on the Black Thorn's face. I could certainly understand Arik's note of skepticism. After a recent invasion of many warhosts, including our own, the small kingdom still had several armies bivouacked here, clashing daily as they sought some manner of satisfaction. And with the recent friction between Fairhaven's sovereign and the Atlantis Guild, I doubted that our remaining in the temporary employ of Fairhaven--of Prince Aaron, specifically--had helped.

King Johannis was less amused. He met the gaze of Magus Roquan, his most trusted adviser, and inclined his head in unspoken agreement. "Fairhaven may have its difficulties, but we have still heard of Marz's betrayal of the Guild and Empire and his questionable service even before his treachery was revealed," the king said to Arik. "Fairhaven has no need to share his troubles. He will travel around our borders."

"He cannot," Arik replied, a slight tremor in his voice. Some might have taken it for fear, but I recognized it as frustration. I was beginning to suspect this young man was not a simple messenger. "Raydan Marz seeks the counsel of the scholar-monks at Glenn Cur. The abbey is within your borders. He gives his word that he desires only peaceful passage."

The abbey of Glenn Cur. This time I studied Nadia's face more carefully. The abbey was one of several possibilities we were considering in our private plans to search for the Globe of Jorandal. The scholar-monks were reputed to have long memories and excellent records. They could know something of this ancient artifact, and it was knowledge we needed. The question on the Black Thorn's mind, and on my own, was what Raydan Marz might want with them.

Johannis Verrick wasn't inclined to inquire further. "You have our refusal," he said. "Take it back to your master, and warn him that we will brook no further interference. Let him seek counsel elsewhere." There would still be discussion, of course. There would be debate. And ultimately, there would be a decision. Taking Raydan Marz prisoner would go a long stretch toward regaining Fairhaven the favor of the Atlantis Guild. Of course, so would offering up the Black Thorn's life, though we had at least the dubious protection of Prince Aaron's sponsorship. At least for the time being. In the meantime, Nadia would be hip-deep in the arguments.

"I will handle this," she whispered to me now. "And I will find out anything Prince Aaron even thinks he knows about Glenn Cur. Lootan, you get our people out on the streets. I want the commoner's knowledge of the abbey and surrounding countryside, and I want it tonight." She paused, looking through the white-painted screen at the departing Arik. "And follow that messenger. Find Raydan Marz, and let me know where he is."

"We may have a new player on the board."

Events do indeed proceed at their own pace, and it looked as if we would have to run to catch up.

A Key to the Empire

Honored Scholar-Magus:

I thought we would be heading into snow and swords. Instead, we face chaos, and fire.

We stand on the border of Fairhaven, a small client-kingdom ruled by the wise and just King Johannis III, who is loyal to the Empire. Within its verdant borders lies Glenn Cur, the monastery we seek. Maleficus says the scholar-monks there should have the knowledge Raydan needs to find the artifact he seeks--the artifact that will give him the advantage he requires to challenge the Empire. But the journey has turned out to be more difficult than we had anticipated.

As early as yesterday morning we could smell smoke on the wind. As we crested the top of the high ridge marking the southernmost edge of the Serpines, where the mountain chain dissolves into the forested lands along the Whitespray River, we could see Fairhaven spread out before us, a woven tapestry of trees, pastures and planted fields with the capital city shining in the distance. But from three points in that green country, columns of black smoke rose into the still morning air.

We halted at the ridge and sent our scouts and our volunteer messenger, Arik, down the slopes into Fairhaven. By nightfall our scouts had returned and told us that Fairhaven was in chaos. Due to a summons of some kind from an artifact dating back to the Age of Mists, an unknown number of warhosts have entered the country seeking treasure and glory. While most of the serious fighting had been over for some time, the scattered warhosts that still linger in Fairhaven skirmish daily with whomever they encounter--Guild or Sect, League or Raider--with all the tricks of war that can still be mustered after weeks in the field. The scouts reported wearily that there were no set battle lines we could avoid, and that nothing lay ahead but leagues of chaos.

Arik returned the following morning, his horse nearly ridden to death by its inexperienced passenger. Our plea for safe passage into Fairhaven has been denied by King Johannis. Raydan's name is well-known even here, on the edges of the Empire, and his false crimes common tales in every tavern. While Arik was allowed to return after delivering his plea, our young friend said that he overheard a squad of Fairhaven's soldiers talking as they purchased supplies and provisions for a week-long hunt. He went on to say that he heard the warriors boasting about how they were going to spend the reward money that Magus Roquan, the chief adviser to the king, would pay them if they captured Raydan Marz alive. And, on a darker note, they also discussed at length how they would split half of the reward if they were able only to bring back Raydan's head.

I hope to see you safe at Glenn Cur in a few short days.

Your loving husband, Hendraabi

To Restore the Empire

Part 5

Our Time in Fairhaven

From the personal journal of Lootan Cole

Shadows

“Of all the things you could tell me, ‘We lost him’ will get the most blood spilled!” Nadia spat.

The twins winced and kept their hands well away from their weapons. You don’t brush aside such threats, not when the Black Thorn is in one of her moods. I think it has something to do with her half-breed nature: the constant warring of raw human emotions and the (usually) more sedate Elven heritage. It could also rise from the events of her earlier life, of which I know more than anyone, and that still ain’t much.

Whatever the reason for her temper, we’ve all learned that when the pointed tips of her ears flush pink, we step back. Tyrsis, the Draconum, lost an eye learning that lesson. The rest of us have come to the same understanding with little more than a scar or two.

Rabeus, the elder twin by a few minutes, tried reason. “Thorn, there really wasn’t much we could do.

The paths weren’t clear, and then their tracks crossed those of a Fairhaven host. Still we kept on him. But when they put a battle between the League and Jarl Daw’s warhost between us and them, there was really little more we could do.”

Rodan, his brother, could see that Nadia was in no mood for excuses, no matter how well argued. He turned and stiff-armed his brother across the chest. “Fool,” he snapped. “I told you we could have fought our way through. Better to die trying, right?” he asked the Black Thorn.

One tactic we’ve all learned is that it’s often safer to strike first. Rodan turning on his brother--before Nadia had the chance to--bought him just enough time for her to calm down slightly.

The Black Thorn stared them down for another moment before the hint of a feral grin finally softened her glare. “All right.” She put away the pistol she’d been brandishing. “All right, you two. Next time, don’t be so damned certain of your own tracking skills. Take a flyer with you.”

“Perfect,” I volunteered, hoping to ease the tension. “Tyrsis is so unobtrusive, after all. I mean, whoever looks for seven hundred pounds of dragonkin on a sixteen-foot wingspan?” Tyrsis sat by the fire, our only source of light this night. “Six hundred fifty,” he corrected proudly, slapping one hand against his washboard stomach.

It loosened up a few people enough to chuckle, but the Black Thorn remained dangerously quiet. I knew why: we might be all that stood between Raydan Marz and the abbey of Glenn Cur. King Johannis had underestimated the size and enthusiasm of the renegade warlord’s army; the force he sent to guard the border was not enough to stop him, and now Marz was one more warlord loose in Fairhaven. But he was the only one forging toward Glenn Cur, looking for some piece of treasured knowledge that the scholar-monks might possess.

Was it the same treasure we sought? The Globe of Jorandal? An artifact out of the Age of Mists, the Globe was rumored to hold magical powers over the Land. Raydan Marz’s appearance now was too coincidental.

And the Black Thorn did not believe in coincidences.

“We know where he is going,” she said finally. “We can guess when he will arrive. We can’t stop him from getting there, but maybe we can prevent his gaining the abbey itself.” She drew her rapier and stabbed the point into the space between the twins. “You two set off before daybreak. Find Prince Aaron if you can, and have him meet us in the shadow of Glenn Cur. Try not to get lost. Lootan”—she turned toward me and then changed her mind--“no, Derrik.” She pointed the rapier at the other Khamsin Fuser. “You head south and swing around toward the abbey. If you find any Fairhaven stragglers, bring them along.

“The rest of us will push directly for the abbey and see if we can persuade the monks to talk with us first.”

“And when Raydan Marz shows up?” I asked, knowing that he would. Things just work out that way for us.

Nadia’s grin was hard and toothy, reflecting the dangerous light in her lupine eyes. “When Raydan Marz shows up, we’ll see just how high a price he’s willing to pay for the monks’ counsel.” She resheathed her weapon with an easy flourish. “With luck, the only service he’ll get from them is a funeral. His own.”

To Cross the Empire

Honored Scholar-Magus:

We entered Fairhaven this morning at dawn. In case young Arik had been followed, we looped around the outer edge of the kingdom, hoping eventually to spiral inward toward the monastery at Glenn Cur. Our first hours in the country were peaceful, without encountering anything more dangerous than a herd of goats loosed from their pen.

Just before noon we passed near the rearguard of a detachment from Fairhaven, staying hidden from their scouts only by a combination of skill and blind luck. When the way was finally clear, we skirted the road for almost two hours, keeping to a narrow deer track that wound through the trees. The dry leaves underfoot were noisier than I cared for.

Then we came upon a battle between two rival warhosts--one of Rebel origin, the other of the League. We had to wait under the thin cover of the trees, thankfully undiscovered, until just before sundown, when the rattle-pops of Fuser volleys finally ceased. When our scouts reported no more troops in our path, we moved on, finally turning to head deeper into Fairhaven.

After dark fell we were forced onto a road by two flanking fields of waist-high gamato plants. We moved quickly along the roadway in the moonlight, well aware of how attractive a target we made on the open path, but travel through the fields would have been impossibly slow. Much to our surprise, the small village at the far end of the fields was sacked and abandoned. A pair of lightning-blasted Orcs lying in the road was our only clue to what might have happened here.

We have decided to camp in this unnamed village for the rest of the night, choosing a small farmhouse still intact enough to have a front door as our headquarters. Ahead lies the border of one of the Royal Forests, where the royal stags have roamed, safe from hunters, for generations. Beyond the woods is a crossroads, and from there we will continue our dangerous journey to the monastery at Glenn Cur.

I've never been so tired in my life, but Marz seems to be gaining in strength and vitality. The rest of our small band trusts his judgment with their lives--even down to our young messenger, who is sleeping soundly in the corner across from me. Arik is a fine young man, with a knack for drawing and a good eye for faces. It is a pity that he has no talent with maps, for as I sit here in the moonlight tracing these words on the page, I look around me and fear that we are terribly, utterly lost.

Please write. I begin to worry.

Your loving husband,

Hendraabi

To Restore the Empire

(As told through the eyes of those close to the great Warlords Raydan Marz and Black Thorn)

Part 6

Our Time in Fairhaven

From the personal journal of Lootan Cole

Bragging Rights

When things go our way, the Black Thorn can be generous.

Fresh meat sizzled over a half-dozen cooking pits; the mouth-watering aromas of pheasant, wild boar and venison drifted throughout the camp. Three barrels of spiced ale had been cracked open, and our wine casks would be drained to the dregs tonight as we hosted Prince Aaron and half a hundred Fairhaven soldiers along with our regular troop. Taking a long draught of sweet wine, I shuddered to think of the thick head I'd have in the morning, but I was damned if any Empire man could claim to celebrate harder than a Khamsin son. Only Dwarves were allowed to make that boast.

Tyrsis piled Draconum-sized armloads of dry wood onto the bonfires until the flames leapt so high into the night that Raydan Marz could see our festivities from five leagues away. According to the twins, he was closer than that but in no shape to worry us. Not after Glenn Cur.

"I really thought we had Marz stopped cold," one of Prince Aaron's lieutenants, an older man, said as he hacked off a slice of boar and speared it with his eating knife. "I can remember the final years of Fairhaven's war to reclaim Duncastor, but I've never seen a battle this savage."

Hodge slurped noisily from a tankard nearly as large as the Draconum's and wiped froth from his mustache. "Marz is a desperate man, and no denyin' it," he offered. "You can see that—how he broke his command up into small outfits and his attack on the palace when his scouts told 'im we had the abbey."

Rabeus was stretched full length next to his brother, the two soaking up heat from the dancing flames. "That demi-magus we captured," he mused. "She said—"

"—Raydan didn't intend to hold the prince's relations hostage," his twin finished.

"Rubbish." This from Aaron's cavalry leader, a young firebrand who probably

slept in his spurs. “If that’s true, my cavaliers just rode down the largest, most heavily armed ‘scouting party’ you ever saw.” He waved a drumstick at me, as if I had challenged his story. “You saw,” he said. “We rode over them, turned them away from the palace.”

Derrick cleared his throat. “That was me,” he said, “not Lootan.” Then he lapsed back into silence as the Black Thorn speared him with a sharp glance.

Nadia was pleased with our overall victory, but the fact remained that Derrick’s failure had hurt us badly. When Raydan’s people lost their bid to capture Prince Aaron’s cousin, they ransacked the guild hall and stole a small fleet of Golems from under Derrick’s nose. In his defense, none of us ever thought there would be a Storm Golem there. Not even Prince Aaron, and he should have known.

“We held Glenn Cur,” the prince said, breaking his long silence and raising his glass in a toast, “and that’s what’s important.” More important than discussing any of his own failings, his tone implied. “It was my father’s order, and our charge.” His blue eyes sought out the Black Thorn. “I think you’re due a reward,” he said, his voice full of promise.

Befitting her role as a mercenary captain, Nadia smiled an avaricious smile. Her violet eyes, normally so intense, softened. “Perhaps the prince would like to discuss those rewards?” she asked, rising in one fluid motion and pulling a flagon of wine from a nearby cask. She beckoned to the prince.

“Perhaps he would,” Aaron agreed, levering himself to his feet.

Most of the camp carefully ignored the byplay. Tyrsis chuckled loudly, earning a quick glare, but the Draconum had been with the Black Thorn so long he was allowed more leeway than the rest of us. He waved off her irritated glance and dunked his snout into his wide-rimmed tankard. Froth blew out in an amber geysir.

Taking a cue from the Draconum, I also returned to my drink as Nadia and the prince disappeared into the darkness. Bragging rights continued to make their way about the large camp--an after-battle tradition I would not be participating in tonight. With Nadia distracting Prince Aaron, the twins determined to sleep through the revelry and Tyrsis rarely feeling a need to fan the flames of his ego, that left me to reflect on our greatest victory of the day. The true reward for which we had fought at Glenn Cur: half a dozen pages, ripped from one of the scholar-monks’ precious histories and now tucked away safely with Nadia’s belongings.

Those pages held vital clues to the location of the Globe of Jorandal. The Globe had to be Marz’s goal, as surely as it was ours, but we were in possession of the information and he was not. We had the advantage. We would get there first.

Duncastor, after all, was only two days away.

Battle for Glenn Cur

My dearest wife,

I have often heard that combat makes one a man. It has made me a very old man--one who wishes to see no more of it. We have been to Glenn Cur, and we have failed. The forces of Fairhaven's Guard, led by none other than the legendary Black Thorn, were waiting for us when we arrived. The fighting was quickly joined once we penetrated the city; Marz and his lieutenants broke into small groups to better harass the Thorn's soldiers.

The city of Glenn Cur is small, with only a few districts surrounding the abbey at the heart of the walled complex. But by the time we arrived, enemy forces had already blocked our path to the scholar-monks. Marz took a dangerous gamble, deciding to attack the palace to gain access to the guild hall. While swords rang, arrows hissed, and men and women fought and died on the cobbled streets, the Black Thorn's cavaliers rode down our unmounted troops, felling them with sharp swords and blows from iron-shod hooves.

The palace fell to Raydan's warriors after some considerable struggle, though it was never his intent to use the nobles of Glenn Cur as hostages. While the nobles retreated to the royal armory, we pushed through into the guild hall and took Raydan's real objective: a fleet of Brass Golems and a mighty Storm Golem, fresh from the Empire and ready for my warlord's commands.

We then moved out along one of the back roads to the abbey, a move we hoped would take the Thorn by surprise. But she was well prepared, and we clashed countless times in the space of a few short hours. In the end we pushed past them, leaving our dead behind in our hurry to get to the abbey.

But the scholar-monks had vanished, and in their vaulted library, a single book lay open on one of the tables, with the key pages referring to the legendary Globe of Jorandal torn out. The Black Thorn had beaten us there.

We learned later that after we had disengaged her troops, the Black Thorn fought her way out of Glenn Cur and headed west, toward Duncastor. We also learned that a couple of the Black Thorn's brigands, escorting a hay-cart filled with protesting monks, had been seen heading east as fast as their horses could carry them.

Since then we have made chase, driving west after the Black Thorn with our newfound Golems guarding our backs. Thanks to her foresight in removing the monks from our grasp, we follow her trail without the slightest idea of

where she is bound. West. What is west? The old bridge? The barges at Flatboat?

Please send word, my love. I fear something horrible has happened to you.

Your loving husband,

Hendraabi