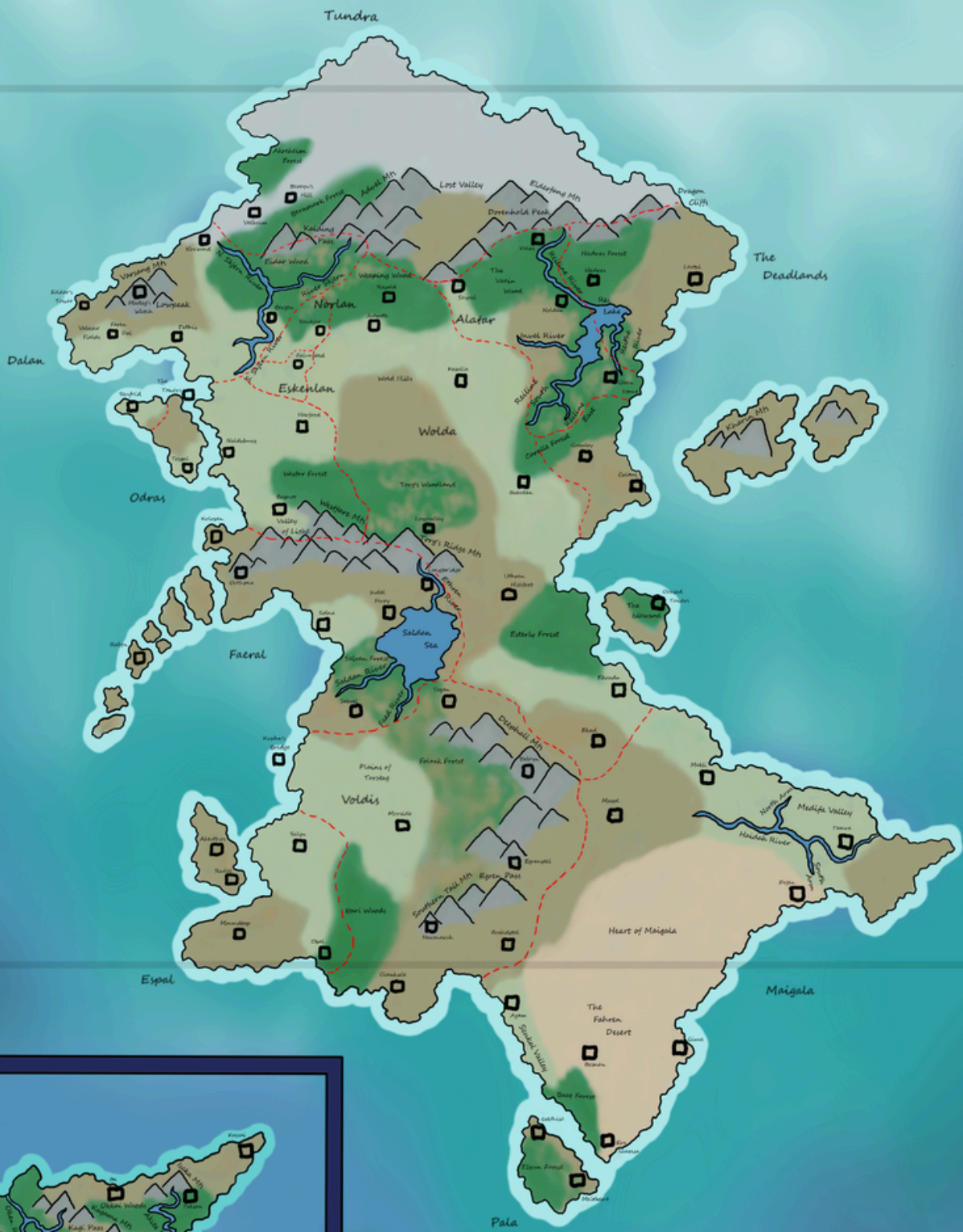
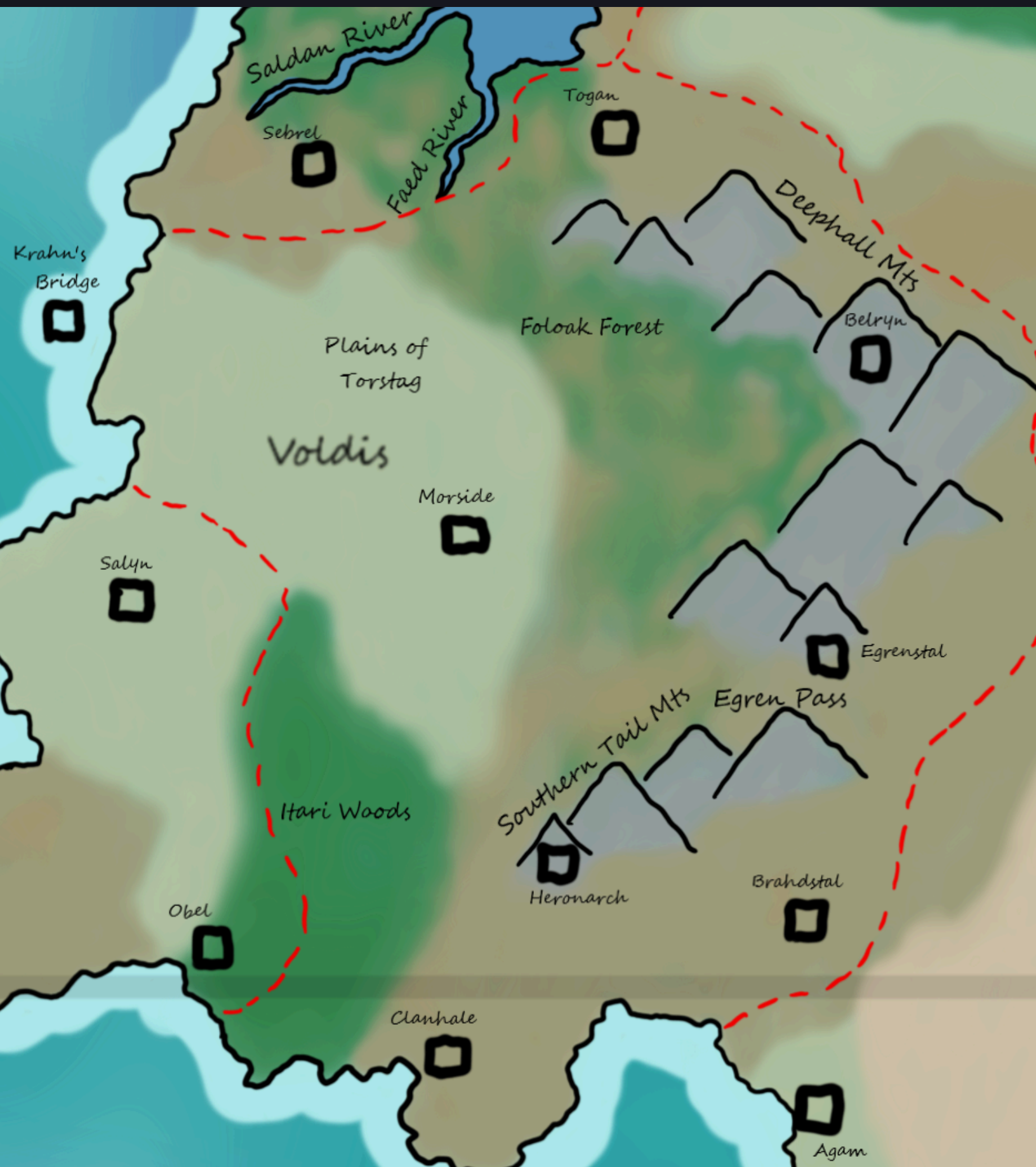


Spears of Redriver



Written and Illustrated by
Konstantin Livetskiy





Saldan River

Faed River

Sebrel

Togan

Krahn's Bridge

Plains of Torstag

Foloak Forest

Deephall Mts

Belryn

Voldis

Morside

Salyu

Egrenstal

Hari Woods

Southern Tail Mts

Egren Pass

Heronarch

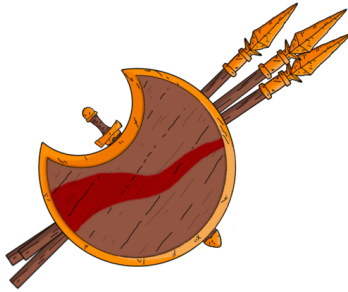
Brahdstal

Obel

Clanhale

Agam





Chapter One - The World Beyondthe Hills

Part One - Hunt in the Hills

The sun slowly rose over the jagged mountain peaks in the east, revealing the roughness of the rolling hills ahead in a sharp contrast of light and shadow. There was no cloud in sight, and the sky continued to turn from the dark of the night to lighter blues and, nearer to the horizon, brilliant shades of orange and red.

Carthus looked north into the distance sternly as his friends climbed the steep hill behind him. Sweat beaded on his forehead, glistening in the glow of the sunrise against his dark skin. The foothills of the Southern Tail Mountains stretched as far as the eye could see, with a massive spread of woodland to the west. He shuddered slightly, trying to shake the dawn's chill, his short dark blue cloak wavering in the breeze behind him, too short and tattered to truly offer warmth. The round wooden shield on his back, however, did provide some comfort against the wind.

"Do you see anything?" Jeden took a deep breath. He was light on his feet, and being the smallest of the three, he was the first to catch up to Carthus, stumbling up the last bit of rocky hill. Oro was close behind, pulling himself up the steep ridge by the roots and shrubs growing out of it. They stood to either side of Carthus, catching their breath, and mimicked his gaze for a

moment as they leaned on the shafts of their spears. Each dressed in a similar garb of gray and blue with light, tanned leather breastplates, greaves, and vambraces.

"Nothing," Carthus replied with a shrug.

"Nothing but the empty hills...freedom," Jeden smiled briefly.

"Freedom, if the Nadaens don't catch us," Oro shoved Jeden jokingly, and the smaller man took two steps to catch himself.

"We don't know if they are following us; there is no way they'll know where we've gone...they probably don't even know we *are* gone yet," Jeden tried to reassure them, but Carthus knew that he didn't fully believe his own words. He shoved Oro back, but Oro was so much bigger that it took far more effort and had much less effect.

"We must still be ready for it if they follow us," Carthus nodded. Do you both still want to continue with me? To Morside?"

"Without question, Carthus," Oro replied, clearing his throat, "we are with you and have your back no matter what!"

"Morside will be a safe haven; from what passing merchants told me back home, it's a large city," Jeden patted Carthus on the back, "a good place to start fresh."

"Besides, we can't go west, with the woods there...the elders always spoke of trolls and other beasts living in the shadows," Oro nodded.

"And the Suttal dwarves of the mountains east will surely kill us at first sight, with the Nadaen's fool war against them," Jeden added.

"I know. You don't have to tell me twice," Carthus agreed and proceeded forward, using his spear like a walking stick. The Nadaen's greed for dwarven metal and land overshadowed Carthus' father, who gave his life to secure peace between the two groups long ago.

"North to Morside then!" Oro nodded.

The three of them continued onward, clambering down the rocky slope of the steep hill. A few birds flew overhead, but aside from them, nothing else moved. Carthus felt tired and imagined they all were after trekking through the wild terrain all night. None of them had any rest since the previous evening. They had fled the clanlands, fearing for their lives after Carthus killed another of the Maeli, *honored clan warriors*, in combat.

Even though the duel was sanctioned by the elders, the family of the dead man, the Nadaens, which was one of the largest and most influential families of their clan, took up arms in an attempt to execute Carthus. His friends warned him and fled with him, leaving their homes and families. He was an orphan without a real home, and it was easy for him to leave. For their help and sacrifice, he had no answer. He did not know how to repay them.

He thought about his father and his sacrifice for the clan while they walked. Considered one of the greatest warriors of Clan Yndar, his father, Rhythus, was a force to be reckoned with. However, he fought for peace, hoping to save as many lives as possible. Instead of raising the clan to war, he challenged the Suttal dwarven champion to a one-on-one duel, barely winning. Though gravely wounded, his victory forged an uneasy alliance between the two peoples, and he died shortly after.

Carthus' thoughts drifted to his mother, Anyra. She, too, was an honored member of their clan before sickness took her shortly after Rhythus passed. Carthus learned much from her, tracking and hunting, as she was a fearless huntress and leader of the Yndar Riders. He drowned himself in training with the spear and shield after her death. Silence followed, and his mind drifted between different memories of his family and their home, which were now hazy after the years had gone by.

"What happens when we get to Morside?" Jeden asked when they reached the bottom of the hill, where the dirt was soft and the grass was tall.

"We find work and stay quiet," Carthus answered after sloshing through what was starting to feel like a swamp. With each step, he sunk nearly to his ankles, his boots slowly beginning to soak with the cold water below.

"And if the Nadaens find us?" Jeden asked.

"We fight...or run," Carthus replied.

"We can take any of the Nadaen Maeli...Carthus killed one of their best, one-on-one," Oro joked, but Carthus interrupted suddenly.

"He wasn't their best...just a boy, like us," Carthus said regretfully. In truth, the Nadaen soldier he killed, Erius, was a good fighter, but the boy was young and had far more ego than he ever cared to admit. He carried himself like the best and told everyone who cared to listen. Carthus regretted that their feud over the Nadaen war with the dwarves came to bloodshed in the clan, *I never wanted to kill one of our own, but they spat on my father and all he did for peace.*

"Dogs," Jeden sharply replied.

"They are dogs..." Oro laughed.

"No, look there," Jeden pointed, "dogs!"

All three of them turned to follow Jeden's gaze and extended hand. Three massive hounds stood on the crest of the hill they had just descended, sniffing at the air and the grass and dirt around them. Even from the bottom of the ridge, Carthus could see the collars and leather armor painted in Nadaen green and yellow on each hound. He could see their painted fur.

"Get down," Carthus motioned and dropped quickly into the overgrowth. The others did the same, still keeping eyes on the dogs. Lucky for them, the grass here was tall and thick.

"Are they hunting dogs? Nadaen hounds? You think they saw us?" Oro whispered frantically.

"They will find our scent regardless of how good we are at hiding," Jeden replied, fear evident in his shaking voice. Carthus nodded in agreement. He watched the hounds as they began to descend toward them.

"We kill them or die in these hills," Carthus whispered.

He stayed quiet, holding his breath at times when he didn't realize it. He kept his eyes sharply fixed on the hounds as they drew nearer, but with each step closer, they seemed more and more lost. *The water and mud must have thrown off our scent.* Carthus gripped his spear tightly with one hand. He pulled his small pack off his shoulder and froze as one of the hounds came within ten feet. He took a slow, deep breath and threw his pack into the distance past the first hound.

It turned, hair standing on its back as it growled with a ferocity that he had never heard before from a dog. As it lunged at the pack, Carthus cast his spear as hard as he could. The blade hit deep, dropping the large hound into the thick grass and mud. It yelped loudly for a moment and then stopped.

Carthus wasted no time drawing the long knife from his belt and facing the other two hounds. Oro tossed his spear, hitting a second hound before it saw him. It stumbled with a growl but stood quickly, the shaft sticking from the leather on its side. Jeden stayed ready with his spear in both hands and eyes wide. They surrounded the hounds who remained steadfast, hair up and teeth barred.

"Jeden, your spear!" Oro urged the herbalist to give up his spear. He reached for it, and after a moment of hesitation, the smaller man tossed it over as he stumbled back. Oro pounced, stabbing at the large beasts. "Get your spear, Carthus!"

As he stepped in again on the second lunge, the injured hound jumped in to grab him but missed as he stumbled backward, hurling it aside. He answered with his spear before the hound could recover its footing in the mud. The second hound lay dead, and Oro pulled two spears from the beast.

Carthus circled to keep the third hound's attention. It snapped a few times in his direction, but his blade forced a helpful distance, now covered slightly in its blood. Oro circled it on the other side, tossing one spear to Carthus and holding the second at the ready. Carthus caught the spear and instantly stepped in, jamming it into the dog's side, right between where two layers of thick leather overlapped. It fell and turned sharply, trying to bite him. Oro stepped in on the other side and finished the beast off.

"If the hounds found us," Oro breathed heavier than usual, "the Nadaen warriors will be close behind."

"Their hounds are trained to hunt on their own; the Maeli might not be as close as we think," Jeden replied, still shuddering. He was not a warrior like Carthus and Oro; he trained as a healer before they fled home and knew nothing of battle, spears, or shields.

"Either way, they will eventually find their dead hounds...we have to move now," Carthus added. He examined the dead beasts for a moment. Nadaen war hounds were known for their size and ferocity. They were very well trained to hunt independently and bring their kill home, but even so, the Nadaen Maeli sometimes stayed close to their hounds. These enormous

beasts were bred for killing, and Carthus was surprised at how easily they took them down, *thanks to the mud.*

The party moved on through the wild hills, carving winding paths through stone and dirt, climbing cliffs, and jumping across steep ledges. They made their path as they could through the rocky foothills of the Southern Tail peaks. Every now and then, Carthus and the others turned their gazes south in hopes of spotting their pursuers if they were, in fact, on their trail. The young men wanted to be ready, and every bit of dust on the horizon increased their pace. They were all afraid, even though none would admit it.



Part Two - Captured

The days had gone quickly as the sun rose, passed over them, and began to set far on the horizon. There was no sign of any pursuit, and Carthus was relieved. He and Oro were good fighters, some of the best of the Maeli in their entire clan, but Jeden, on the other hand, was not a fighter. Carthus was sure that the Nadaens would send a large party after them. Two against the whole Nadaen band were not odds he wanted to test.

This fear drifted in and out of his mind constantly along the way. He did not want his friends to suffer for his actions in Yndar. Oro looked to be enjoying the wilds in a new setting, facing a new challenge. He was in his element. Jeden, however, carried a clear, worried expression on his face, with a crease between his brows, and only seemed to be at ease when he was scavenging for herbs or edible plants in the scant growth of the land.

The cliffs and rock-strewn hills soon rolled into a flattened plane as far as the eye could see. There was almost no water to be found, save for the dew on the morning grass and the occasional stream that barely split the dry terrain. The party had gone nearly a week, heading north through the wild lands of Voldis, and their food was running low. Having to flee so quickly from Yndar, none had time to pack enough rations for the road. Carthus and Oro took turns hunting for rabbits or whatever fowl they found before bed each night. While they hunted, Jeden gathered edible plants, however sparse they were amidst the barren fields.

They each kept to themselves and traveled quickly and quietly, knowing that was what it would take to put a reasonable distance between them and the Nadaens. Each day was long and grueling, with the sun above and the winds of the grasslands beating at them.

Now, Carthus and the others walked along the ridge of a long hill that barely gave them any vantage over the rest of the fields. Clear skies hovered overhead, allowing the moonlight to shine as the sun disappeared slowly. This night didn't bring the usual chill with it. Still, nothing moved, and there was no sign of pursuit from the south, but there was a distant glow to the north.

"What do you think it is? Camped caravan?" Oro asked.

"There are no roads nearby. It can't be merchants... someone decided to tread the wilds," Jeden replied.

"Some dwarf king's scouts patrolling the lands or some band of goblin-kin, who knows," Carthus added, "best to avoid them."

"What if they are friendly?" Jeden asked. "We can all use a good rest in a warm tent and some hot food."

"I like the sound of that," Oro smiled.

"I say we scout them out..." Jeden looked at Carthus hopefully.

"Fine, we get only as close as we need to," Carthus nodded.

They went on quietly, and the closer they got to the distant light, the quieter they stepped. The glow soon became a cluster of visible campfires spread throughout the tents of the encampment. There was a soft murmur of voices coming from within. Eventually, they could see men moving amidst the dancing shadows. They had the look of soldiers about them, as most were armed and armored. Carthus shook his head and motioned back the way they came.

"Do you smell that?" Oro whispered, inhaling deeply.

"Smells like a freshly cooked stew," Jeden said with a smile.

"We should avoid the camp," Carthus said, shaking his head. "Let's go."

"Halt!" suddenly, a torchlight appeared at their flank as a small group of soldiers rushed towards them with spears and shields. Dust was kicked up into the air as the firelights of the camp ahead flickered off the spears and armor of the men around them.

They were surrounded; on three sides was the shield wall, and on the other, the dark of the night. As the adrenaline settled, Carthus sighed deeply, glad that none bore the crest of the Nadaens. In fact, not one of these men was a Maad; all were lighter-skinned with various-colored hair. There were no dreads or beaded braids in sight.

"Don't fight," Carthus lowered his weapon as he stood from the grass. There were too many of them, and they had no quarrel. He called to them desperately, "We are not enemies!"

"Drop your weapons!" one of the men commanded. He raised a horn to his lips and blew it twice. A loud blast broke the silence of the night as the soldiers closed in on them.

They were all grabbed, disarmed, and taken into the camp, paraded before the eager eyes of the men sitting around their fires. Still, not a single Maad warrior or Nadaen banner was in sight. Carthus followed along quietly with Jeden, but Oro shoved back when he was shoved or

prodded. When they got to the center of the camp, the group stopped outside a large tent, and one of the men went inside.

"Spies?" a tall but young pale man stepped out of the tent with the first man at his heels. The tall man seemed unnaturally thin in the face and carried himself upright with his chest puffed out. His dark eyes and golden hair made him look even stranger. He wore a purple silk shirt and simple breaches but carried a sword. Carthus had never seen anyone like him.

"We found them hiding in the grass outside the camp, Prince Cadan," the captain reported.

"Who are you three?" Cadan asked. He was resting a hand on the jeweled hilt of his bronze sword. Carthus admired the handle of the sheathed blade a moment. He had never seen anything like it before, either.

"Hunters," Carthus lied quickly.

"Hunters out this late in the middle of nowhere?" Cadan smirked.

"We wounded a large mountain goat in the hills and have been tracking it for days," Carthus continued.

"For days, you say," Cadan glanced from one to the next.

"It didn't seem to want to die," Carthus nodded.

"You folk are mountain men of the Maad peoples, are you not?" the young prince asked smugly.

"We are," Carthus nodded.

"Then why are the men doing the hunting? I heard that the women, or horse maidens, do the hunting...is that not the Maad custom?" Cadan smiled, having caught Carthus in his lie.

"Not all the clans, prince," Jeden spoke up. Cadan glanced at him sideways.

"Ah, I always thought it was a strange custom. I take it that you agree," the young noble smiled.

"Yes, we do," Jeden went on.

"They looked to be spying when we came across them, hiding in the grass...skulking in the dark," the captain said suddenly.

"Why were Maad hunters skulking outside my camp?" the prince asked.

"As we said, hunting...we lost the beast's tracks and came upon the camp instead," Carthus said.

"We were seeing if we should enter the camp or keep moving. It is said amongst our people that these flat lands are full of bandits, and we knew not whose camp this was," Jeden replied.

"Ah, of course, you now see that we are not bandits," the prince said. His smile was beginning to irritate Carthus. It was almost a mocking grin.

"What is an armed host of men doing so deep in dwarven lands? You are but a few days away from Morside," Carthus said.

"A day away, to be exact, and we were hired by the dwarf king of Morside to fight for him, not that it's any of your concern...unless Captain Utha was right about you lot being spies," Cadan's smile disappeared, "no doubt you've heard of us before, I am Prince Cadan, and this is my host of Rytari from the great Obel Port of Espal."


"I don't believe we have heard of you," Carthus replied matter-of-factly.

"Strange, but I guess you don't get to leave your mountains much," the prince nodded.

"What is to become of us, Prince Cadan?" Jeden asked.

"You will stay here, rest for the night, and we shall speak again tomorrow...with the king of Morside," Prince Cadan replied. He turned away and disappeared back into his tent, calling to his men over his shoulder, "Take them away!"



A fantasy map with a central illustration of a shield and spears. The shield is brown with a red wavy pattern and a yellow border. Three spears with yellow blades and brown shafts are positioned behind the shield. The map features various regions like Norlan, Alatar, Eskenlan, and Westor Forest, with numerous place names and geographical features. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the map.

Carthus, a young orphan trained to be a warrior like his father before him, is considered one of the best Maeli in his clan. However, he is forced to run for his life, along with two of his closest friends, for winning a sanctioned duel. They travel from the foothills they grew up in, deeper into dwarven territory.

What awaits them as they carve a name for themselves in their search for freedom, glory, and a place to call their own?