

Chapter One: Tall Tales and Dead Ends

“T’was a great tunnel!” declared a haughty man. “Dug when night was at its darkest, the Latans bore into the planet for years, until they came upon a great city of gold, brightened by magic and eternally warm.”

Jaim knew there was no tunnel, of course. It warranted an investigation, sure, but not on the idea of any golden city in the middle of the world. The Latans could have tunneled *somewhere*, but months searching around Latula, now known as Crolun, yielded nothing, and much the same with the surrounding area.

“E’erone knows the Bull took his people west to the coast of Pira,” another man in another city said. *“People weren’t fool enough to mess with em, not after what they did to Alda and such. They sailed north to the Pointed Sea, and with magic, passed through the impassable and still reside in the lands beyond today.”*

More magic. It was common knowledge that sorcery had vanished after the Great Eruption, a cataclysmic event that shook the world over two hundred years past. Jaim sighed, imagining the possibility, though knowing there was

none. Worse, the Pointed Sea was more land than water, mapped out only as far as the eye could see. Giant rock formations spiked from the water with little for gaps in between. It would be a lie to say men hadn't tried, foolish men, and the attempts were many. Among the few things waiting for them in those waters was death and failure. It couldn't be done by one man, much less thousands of men at once.

"Sorcery won the rebellion for Latula, that's plain," said a drunk at a harbor on the eastern coast, south of Alda. *"Gods know them savages had help. Same that got em out of Maloria. They built a magic ship and sailed the skies, far away from this world."*

Travel was exhausting on its own, but listening to these men was more so. No story had a ceiling for embellishment, nor did any rumor have limitations. Jaim was chasing ghosts on the coattails of these things, and he could hear men laughing at him. He was a joke to any who recognized him, and likely to those who didn't. Jaim Telaney, the Great Kingdom's finest, the Sword of the Sun, the King's Man, whispered about in the corner of every tavern. Cups full of ale hid the smiles and snickers of any place he entered. Yes, his once youthful, golden hair had soured into a darkened, ashy blond. His clean cut, square jaw

was covered with a shaggy beard, topped with an overgrown mustache that was commonly soaked in his own cups. Twenty-six long years he'd been removed from the Great Kingdom, far past his peak at just fifteen years old, but men still recognized him. They didn't notice him as Alda's great past, but as the man bested in single combat by the Bull of Westick in the Tourney of Kings, barely a year before rebellion sparked and caught fire. Jaim was dismissed by his King, also named Alda, stripped of his charge and wealth and labeled as an "embarrassment to the throne". While it did him no favors, karma was swift for the Alda and its leader. Latula rose, full of passion and fury from the south of Maloria and demanded to be free from the clutches of the Great Kingdom, free from the overburdening taxes, and free to govern themselves. With little more than surprise and trickery, Latula succeeded and took the city of Alda with just a thousand men, led by the Bull of Westick himself, clad in armor that shone a miraculous blue in the sun, and crowned with a helm flanked by curved bull horns. He wielded a greatsword as wide as a man's hand and five feet in length. It gleamed with Aldan blood and the sun was still shining when justice was served to the king, who was given a choice: The liberation of Latula or death and the liberation of Latula. King Alda made the obvious choice.

In the days following, Alda, the greatest city in the Great Kingdom, was torn apart, relieved of all wealth, horses, food, and steel. Soldiers' lives were reduced to nothing, and they could only beg for mercy from the usurper. Men starved, turned outlaw, thieved and killed. Good men, too. Desperation could twist a soul, transform it into something much, much more. Or less, however one looked at it.

All of this happened because of something unexplained. The Bull could have made Aldans his subjects, could have ruled and governed them. He and Latans didn't have the repute for being merciless. It was expected they wouldn't be. But a fortnight after their return home, the sun rose upon an empty city. The victorious Latans and the Bull of Westick were gone. The wind danced around empty buildings, quiet and eerie, and it remained so for another ten years. While the current population was growing in Latula, now Crolun, many avoided it, in fear they too, may vanish into thin air. *"Tis the king's curse,"* men would whisper, believing King Alda had gotten his revenge the very day his city was taken. *"He spat the filthy magic during his surrender, and it took."* Others, more sensible men, concluded that the Bull and Latula wanted nothing more to do with Maloria, and were destined to leave death and war behind, departing the land with no intentions to return. Jaim knew better. He knew the Bull was out

there somewhere. With him, there were answers, there were riches, and there was revenge. He wanted all of them.

It was common belief the Bull and his people traveled south, as they would have been witnessed moving in any other direction. There was little to the south, as far as population, but there was Westick, the Bull's home, a small village of low birth. It too, was abandoned, with nothing left behind. Beyond, at the southern end of Maloria was the Dark, a place where the sun shone the hottest but for only a few hours a day, a place where the Men of Night Summer dwelled. They were dangerous savages, people said, cannibals and killers, but Jaim had spent many nights in the Dark, nights with the Women of Night Summer, and they were anything but savages. They were drinkers and chanters, singers and priests. They painted their bodies and danced. Despite the goodwill and wisdom they'd imparted upon him, they knew nothing of the Bull of Westick.

So, Jaim found himself on the north side of Alda, once the Great Kingdom. Men called him a fool when he asked about the Bull. "*The Bull's south halfwit, e'erone knows.*" He ignored the insults, for they would've called him a fool anywhere he went. Just where the Aldan border bent westward over the north

end of Pira, a small town called Basel had welcomed him a few days past. It was little more than large puddles of rainwater and one structure amidst several straw huts. He wasn't searching for the Bull here, but a clue found him anyway. Perhaps it was chance, or perhaps a man had heard Jaim Telaney was searching for the Bull of Westick and sympathized with his plight. That man wore a hood, which shielded his eyes and revealed only his pale chin and thin lips. He played Conquer, a popular board game in Maloria, by himself at a table while the sky misted rain down from gray clouds.

"You'll catch a chill out here man," Jaim said as he strode by, headed for dryer places. "Sickness isn't an easy thing these days." As he reached for the door of what he could only assume was an inn, the hooded man turned.

"Neither is finding the Bull of Westick."

Jaim hesitated, then dropped his hand and turned back. He couldn't see under the cowl, but the man was looking up from the pieces of his game.

"What would you know about it?" He braced himself for a wild tale, something to do with sorcery or magic, and waited.

"Perhaps nothing. But perhaps there's a woman in one of the villages along the east coast before you cross into Seaforia."

“I’ve no need of a woman.”

“She deals in secrets.” The hooded man paused, wiping his mouth with a wet sleeve. “Men speak of the results of her information.”

Jaim was too smart to hope, but it tickled his curious nature. “This woman have a name?”

“Ada,” the hooded man said. “She tends bar in a tavern and is the daughter of the landlord there.”

Jaim thought it over. Northeast through Alda, toward the coast, before Seaforia...hell, there were many villages that way. This would take time, and money. He grabbed the handle of the door and gave the man a final look.

“How’d you know what I was looking for?”

“You’re Jaim Telaney,” he said. “And everyone knows you are looking for the Bull of Westick.”