

THE BUCCANEER OF NEMARIS

...Of Scimitars and Sands

Surrounded by the vast expanse of the Qylan Desert lies an island of culture, history and countless wonders. Long long ago, winds shaped the desert into tall dunes and deep rifts populated by the occasional oasis, the largest of which lay in the Qui-ley Valley. Here, in the geographical center of the desert, the Qui-Qui Clans staked their claim and surrounded the life-giving springs with thick walls and barricades to defend their bounty of fertile soil and fresh waters that remained cool in any season. Thus began the nation of the desert and the glory days of plenty. Their caravans would soon bring the people together as wealth spread towards all four corners of the land. Soon, these four corners would unite under the banner of the Krynn Empire. That banner would fly proudly, but within its shadows awaited an insatiable evil.

The Krynn Empire's northernmost port had been formed by a group of traders and sailors, connecting the colony with the world beyond and eventually naming itself Plemias. Those founders soon faded away and were lost to time, but in their place a constant struggle to maintain order developed as instability and conflict soon became the city's calling card. While trade fuels most economic endeavors, no stable economy can thrive here unless a more consistent form of government is established. Until then, the colony will remain vulnerable from all sides, but most likely from within.

Southern mountains and a discovery of minerals gave rise to the strongest of the nations in the southwest city-fortress known as Krynnis. Mines in the nearby hills drew skilled folk to uncover unfathomable riches, and soon construction of a mighty fortress-city controlled those resources. With access to the technology stemming from an ancient age, it is here where the hardest folk lived in splendor and abundance. Close access to ocean traders allowed them to rise independently of the inland settlements. As a result, those who descended from the early settlers in Krynnis could now live more luxuriously than royalty anywhere on Gaia. Those in power would swear fealty to the leaders of Qui-Qui, but the arrangement was fragile at best. Sadly, the riches of Krynnis would fuel greed and corruption. Luxury and power soon became masks which harbored evil. As the wealthy grew in power, those who labored to serve them acted as a powder keg of bloodshed, poised as a stone above a valley, awaiting the chance to take what they wish. As is the axiom of peace, it is said that he who cannot defend himself with a scimitar can die by one, and the elegant streets of Krynnis became primed for conflict.

At the desert's eastern edge, a quiet port town was established at the time Qui-Qui came to rise. In those days, the settlement became known as Valsleyst, the Jewel of the Desert and a city remembered for elegant splendor, festive dance, equal wealth, and gilded halls. Power befriended power, and soon Valsleyst became the fourth city of the Krynn Empire.

These four nations, united under the Throne of Skies, became one beneath the mantle of the Cap of Quazar. This grand sultanate was known as the Krynn Empire, and its own historians decreed it a nation of nations, too great to fail.

History might have otherwise been unkind to the desert had its last leader failed to foresee its demise. As the story of Qui-Kinneas began, so too did the story of the Krynn Empire and the Great Uniter, for each story inevitably involves the other. For in those ancient days, as

plentiful as trade had become among the many tribes, so too did the corruption. Behind the glittering facades and beneath watchful eyes blinded by bribery and blood, the promise of a few gold coins could mean the difference between contentment and chaos. Animals, women, and even children could be considered property in the marketplace of secrets and political instability opened for trade at any price. Not even the power of a genie could stop the corruption.

On the advice of his closest advisor, the Sultan fled into the Mahashna Mountains, turning his back on the kingdom that drove itself mad and betrayed its ideals. In time, that empire would fade and diminish. Allies and loyalties became forgotten resources as the most basic needs became scarce and neighbors began to fight over empty patches of dirt.

Dark times would follow. Indeed, the empire's fall was swift. Old alliances became bitter enemies, and prices for everything from bread to hummus became exorbitant. The people starved. Corruption begat corruption, and violence erupted. The four great cities would have to begin again, isolated, alone, and lost. A hundred years later upon the ruins of the Quazar Palace, society began to rebuild as it pawed through the rubble to find itself again.

Unknown but to a few high-ranking few, however, the Sultan laid the groundwork for a better age. Visions of comfort and abundance were once again upon the horizon, though none knew what perils must be first overcome. Stories of this great prosperity took many forms, but all of them stood behind a clear symbol that could easily be recognized, a standout from the darkness and the destitute.

It was said the glory days would return when a man arrived at Qui-Qui's western gate wearing several symbols - golden Treasures of the Sun - that would declare a rebirth of the old alliances and reunite the nations, returning prosperity and order to the desert.

But for generations, these were mere stories. Society would have to fend for itself. After the fall of the Krynn Empire, Valsleyst would almost completely vanish from memory. Random survivors remained, and ships stopped coming. Centuries after the fall of the empire, traders became rare as those bound for Krynnis or other nations had far too much to risk and far too little to gain by stopping. This forgotten port's name ultimately changed to reflect sadder times as the flow of profits went elsewhere.

Today, the locals call their town Ley Heyste, words that the ancient Krynn language translate to Lost Port. While peace has been maintained here despite an imbalance of wealth, this hamlet has never been, nor ever will be as great as Elna City, Feirmarin, South Cimmordia, or even Davenport. But history has been kind to Ley Heyste, as it is a place recognized by the great scholars as the homeland of a just and wise leader whose story began here. Known in countless texts as the Great Uniter, this tumultuous life brought relief from the centuries of longing that later became the mighty nation of Qui-Kinneas.

Centuries after the fall, the people of Ley Heyste had managed to live in comfort and security. The people on the west edge of town were the merchants and the wealthy, while the east housed the workers and the farmers. Those in the center made their middle class lifestyle work with the goods of the Old Caravan and by whatever skills, or means, were necessary. Some became wealthy, others got by. Those who could do neither ran the trade routes to Juniper Bay and the growing nation of Tallebeck by sea, opting to avoid staying in one place for very long to best determine their own fates. Ley Heyste would somehow become a city of peace and stability, but its citizens had yet to know true abundance again.

As the other nations of the Krynn Empire faded into poverty, the ancient promises of former leaders were forgotten. Relics of the ancient age were treated like common antiquities,

not the treasures of kings that they once were. Soon many wandering merchants dealt with such products and were able to maintain a steady industry. Occasionally, an ordinary oil lamp would be sold with the promise that it contained a genie's gratitude; the merchant who sold it was quick to vacate the town in the event his false hope was discovered.

It was said that a genie, a spirit of generosity and change, when freed from its prison within an oil lamp or other ordinary object would bestow upon its master three wishes. The power to shape the world and redefine history itself could be achieved by the power of but a single wish, yet this lucky master would be granted three. Believed to be unbounded by borders beyond the imagination of the caster, the genie would cheerfully change the fortunes of their hero. Occasionally, history would make note of these legends, though the next granted wish could completely alter recorded history to benefit the whims of the next master. History became unreliable, and such legends remained legendary. Of the few times the legend proved true, one constant surfaced: those who had their fates altered rarely lived happily ever after, as the genie was often crafty and manipulative. Prosperity would not return to the desert so quickly.

Despite these hopes, the legend of the Great Uniter would persist in the shadows of the great cities. The story became as old as the desert itself, foretelling of an orphaned boy who would one day lead the people to a single kingdom of eternal wealth with abundant clean water and enough food and wine to sustain the millions without fear of shortage or want. Even a false hope was better than no hope at all, and hope can come from anywhere in the darkest of times.

In the year 1372, an orphaned infant wearing the Medallion of Men was found in the East. This news would spread quickly, and the legend of the Great Uniter soon returned to the minds of the people. But a young man without a family could never hope to survive in the harsh desert lands. Few believed that this child's potential, a destiny clouded in ancient dreams, would ever raise beyond the starry night skies.

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Chapter One

Sylik and the Tale of the Old Caravan

Salutations!

Do you hear the bells ringing in the square? It seems the Old Caravan has returned to Ley Heyste again. Twenty wagons long, the caravan is packed with goods of fine silk linens, glittering jewels and flavorful spices, mysterious flash powders, potent potions and elixirs. Every wagon arrives to deliver these goods along with a wealth of stories of their journey upon each visit.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, dear reader. You have merely walked into the door of this fair tavern, and I can sense that you are new to the desert, yes? Allow me to fill your glass, strum my lute, and welcome you to this land of adventure. The world beyond your doorstep has

been anything but what you expected, yes? Bear in mind that even the great explorers began their journey as you now sit.

Permit me to introduce myself. I am a wandering bard, the epitome of adventure and entertainment. Although I once lived in the hills of Dieteria, I no longer have a doorknob upon which to hang my hat. When you're a wanderer you can choose your home, but wanderers are never content to stay in one place long enough to build a castle, nor are they wise enough to understand how wonderful a home is to enjoy it.

Allow me to bow to you, dear traveler. The name is Sylik, pleased to meet you!

Now I can guess what you're thinking. Have we met previously? Well, I've been everywhere that has a name in this wondrous land. I've visited Juniper Bay, Xavier, Tallebeck, and traveled as far north as the snow drifts of Sylaris and skirted the ice flows of Phrynn at the southern reaches of the turbulent waves that are the mighty Centra Sea. I've climbed the mountains of Aldera and rode tall in the saddle along the plains of Dieteria. Not even ol' Scyhathen could say that! But forgive my boasting. My true pleasure is visiting new places, those I dream of or hear about, and learning the stories of those who live there. I welcome any opportunity to hear your stories as well, dear reader. But for now, when the wind speaks to me, I listen. I follow wherever she leads.

Today, we meet in the city of Ley Heyste on the outskirts of Qui-Kinneas, the quintessential jewel of the eastern desert. A city that, I have learned in my travels, has created countless stories in its long existence. In the days of the Krynn Empire, this city was known as Valsleyst, the city of the hidden heavens. But that city succumbed to the corruption of darkness and was swallowed by sand before falling into ruin. Centuries later, Ley Heyste would be resettled when the mines were discovered and wealth flowed like water. A new age was born, built upon the foundations of the past. Today, during the year 1595 if you've forgotten, the city is a cosmopolitan treasure filled with arts and wonders that could fill an entire armada of ships. Qui-Kinneas has been a nation for many long, prosperous years, and I assure you is in no danger of falling to darkness again.

But perhaps it is the story of those ancient days that brings me to your side, dear traveler! The very tale that defines Qui-Kinneas, a nation joined from four city-states and by definition owes its legacy. A story that has been told and retold in many forms, and a story that changed history not only as it was retold but also as it occurred. This tale began in the late 1300s, and it is a story that has never been told in its correct and complete form until this very day. A story in which the first sultan of Qui-Kinneas, Ketze Qatyl, united the nations and brought peace to the desert only to be consumed by the evil anxieties and dark shadows who remained in its wake.

It is the story that I will tell to you today, dear traveler.

It is a story passed down by the people, but it is also a story that has never been retold consistently throughout history. Like the flow of a river that changes with erosion, stories can change and twist with the passage of time. As the world became shaped by those fantastical creatures known as the djinn, the story has taken many forms and is no longer remembered exactly as it happened. Some historians would tell you that two copies of the same book printed the same day told two different versions of it!

Indeed, I have heard many accounts of this tale in my travels, but the version told to me by a young, comely woman rang a bell of pure truth. Something about her account breathed truth to the telling. She wore blue silken sashes and carried an oil lamp crafted of sapphire from her belt; a valuable trinket to be true. Her wisdom surpassed her years, and I accepted her telling to be genuine, for she spoke with passion and otherworldly experience the likes of which I have

never seen. So extensive was her details in the telling that we spent the better part of a week in a quiet tavern in Feirmarin discussing the story of the Great Uniter, Ketze Qatyl.

This is Qui-Kinneas's story, a story that surpasses time and crosses many lives. I could only wonder how this young woman, who I had assumed to be much younger than I, could tell such a story so well. Never before had I craved the outcome of a story! As the lion craves flesh I craved this story. Experiencing it has changed my life. Perhaps it will alter yours as well.

Allow me to share this adventure with you now.

Let us travel into the past, dear adventurer. We open onto a cold desert night beneath a starry sky as a train of wagons wind through the shifting sands. The Old Caravan, as it was known even in those times of change, was twelve wagons long at that time, the shortest of the three main caravans. Twelve wagons, all riding in a row, were burdened by camels and guided by the archaic and wise wagon master Tynnar.

At that moment in time, each wagon was very different than what it would become when Narill rubbed the lamp. Oh dear! I am jumping ahead of myself. Call it habit.

That evening, the Old Caravan's journey had finally come to an end after two long months across the harsh desert. It had not been an easy journey, being fraught with water shortages, bandits, and countless wind storms. But despite the hardships, theirs was a journey of importance, as the caravan members depended upon their customers as much as their customers depended upon the caravan. Despite the risks, this journey commenced each season, riding continuously for ten of the twelve months of the year.

Why only ten months, you ask? Because winter in this desert is much different than your desert at home, adventurer! Harsh winds during the months of January and February make travel impossible for even the hardest of travelers. Instead, the members of the caravan use this time to replenish their wares, experiment with new techniques, and enjoy a much needed rest from the dangers of the trail.

On this eve in March, each wagon made its way to the square on the northwestern outskirts of Ley Heyste, filing into a wide circle. The wagon teams unpacked their wares and the crowds began to arrive. A bell tower signaled their approach.

The first wagon housed Tynnar, a bachelor but to the caravan and its merchants. As the head of the caravan, Tynnar also sold charts and maps to the local adventurer as well as the fool who wanted to comb the sands for lost artifacts and treasures. Were you to ask, he would suggest these maps were nothing more than a novelty, but then, Tynnar was also a master of local legends.

The second wagon carried ores and oil, lodestones and blacksmithing equipment. Operated by a brawny fellow named Munda along with his son Ermund and wife Kasibelle, this wagon was always lively with the song of the anvil during the day and the warm fires of the forge at night. As the blacksmith for the caravan, Munda made tools that the town's miners often cherished, for they were often more durable than company tools and could mine a lifetime's worth of wealth.

A third wagon operated by a man named Farion and his pregnant wife Iannis carried soaps, linens, and other household goods. Farion was a good man, who would always lend a hand to his fellow travelers when needed, while Iannis had learned many medicinal techniques that kept both her customers and her fellow travelers healthy.

The fourth wagon held strands of rope, woven raw materials, and other items that builders and artisans would find useful. The master here was named Jebrand, who lived with his

wife Nindy and their four children. He had two boys named Robun and Ward, along with two girls named Jindy and Selby who loved to crochet.

The fifth wagon was the chuck wagon, and had flat breads and spicy rice dishes available for sale. The chef was named Gunther, and his wife and principle server was named Lana. While on the road, these two also did the majority of the cooking for the entire caravan, as they had the equipment and materials. They also would occasionally sell dried fruits and fresh honey, as Gunther was a devoted bee-keeper. While this could be seen as an unusual trait, he had several hives across the desert which were harvested whenever they passed by an oasis. His mead sold for top dollar whenever he parked.

The sixth wagon, along with the ninth wagon, were both rather quiet in activity by day, as they sold no wares. Opa and his son Benn ran the sixth wagon, along with Keller and his wife Wynk of the ninth. Together, they made up the caravan's watch crew. Opa had served the caravan for many long years and thought of Benn as a partner, never his son. Keller had served about half as many, but viewed the job with as much conviction as the old man. Wynk, meanwhile, was not a fighter but a seamstress who spent her time dreaming or spending time on her sewing whenever possible. Because it was a full time job keeping the caravan safe from bandits, this job did not leave her nearly as much leisure time as she would've liked. On occasion, either of these wagons would also carry goods for other members, such as additional ore that Keller frequently carried for Munda. Ores were very valuable in the desert, and the teams guarded them well.

The next wagons held more valuable goods. The seventh wagon was operated by two sisters. Sabelle and Venus ran a shop with porcelain, perfumes and plates, among other clay goods. These porcelain goods tended to be smaller in size, but still brought in a great deal of customers, who were happy to part with their coins. The eighth wagon brought along items of metal, ranging from brass chalices, silver necklaces, and even oil lamps. Caban and Pearl, along with their two young daughters Cyana and Pandy, got a great deal of attention whenever they laid out their goods for sale. Once in awhile they would even get to sell something with a trace of gold or jewels crafted into it, and that always raised eyebrows among the shopping public.

Onto the tenth wagon, the master here carried the most fragile of goods. Hordin stocked glassware and other related items. Because of the harsh trails they journeyed, sometimes not all of them made the trip; thus, they also gave glass shards to artisans who wished to create their own works. Along with him, Hordin traveled with his mother, Dannel, who often sold blankets or other handmade garments.

An eleventh wagon carried bats of fabric and made clothing for the caravan as well as custom suits. It was run by the tailor Larsi, his wife Ashara, and his daughter Yovel. However, there is little demand for raw fabric among his travelers, so Larsi makes the most of his custom tailoring skills while he is in town.

A final wagon sold shawls, blankets, and was also the only other wagon to sell bread besides the chuck wagon. The mistress here, a woman named Narill Wyndhum, was the least social of the caravan and often kept to herself. Narill would one day reshape the entire line of the caravan, but in the meantime enjoyed a simple life.

Now it was this twelfth wagon, owned and lead by Narill, where our story truly begins. Her history with the caravan was extensive, but filled with many dark days. Narill's grandfather Cadiz had established this incarnation of the Old Caravan, started many generations after the fall of the Krynn Empire and at a time when such trade and communication across the Qylan Desert was minimal. Although I would love to dwell upon the story of the Old Caravan further, as it

has a history as long as the view across the burning sands, we must move on.

Narill's own story began with a man in Qui-Qui, and with this man Narill birthed two sons, twins named Jonas and Ketze, who would not be long for the journey. Her family having succumbed to the desert's harshest winds, Narill soon found herself alone in her rolling testament to that fallen family, without anyone to inherit her bloodline or to offer company in her old years.

Despite these hardships, Narill held firm to her grandfather's legacy. She vowed to live by his example each day of her life. While her spirit remained steadfast, her body had become worn and frail, as the sweat and dust of the desert often left her grey hair in constant tangles. Indeed, she was a tough woman. Even though the desert had claimed her family, it remained her duty to carry on before the desert claimed her.

In her dreams, Narill held fast to a distant hope that her family may one day be restored. Unlikely as a dream it might have been, any who knew her would say that dream began when a ray of hope struck at an oasis along the trail.

Now I should warn you, dear traveler, for there is much dispute on this part of the story. Some historians would tell you that her discovery was pure chance, while others claim she had heard the coos of the child in the reeds of the oasis. At any rate, it is not known how Narill was able to find the young boy who was no larger than a tumbleweed.

The child with fair skin had been wrapped in royal linens and protected by a basket of woven reeds. Resting beside his chest was a seal of a bygone age, emblazoned upon a belt buckle the size of his forehead. It was not immediately apparent, but the wisest of scholars would know that that symbol had once belonged to the earliest of travelers in the Qylan Desert. Tynnar would identify the symbol as that of the old Krynn empire, almost certain that he who wore that symbol would unite the nations of the desert and begin a new age of trade and prosperity. The legend known as the Legend of the Great Uniter had been told among the traders ever since the last sultan of the Krynn set into place the stepping stones of a future nation reborn. A legacy that, ever since the fall of that great empire, had been forgotten for nearly a thousand years except for those who continued to hope that better times were soon to come.

Narill discovered the child despite no evidence of parents, who may have come to the oasis in peril and could not save themselves while the child endured. Why, indeed, would they abandon a child to the oasis, only to head into the desert? This is but the first of many mysteries associated with the legend.

Surely to a mother's eye this was a simple child with a wealth of potential, no matter what the scholars would say. In addition, Narill knew that the child who could not have been more than several days old needed a place more hospitable than the desert to thrive. Putting aside her dreams of a restored family, she quickly earned Tynnar's blessing to find the child a more stable home life, one away from the evils of slavery and strife. With all of her heart, she hoped that that this child would find family in Ley Heyste.

No sooner had that twelfth wagon unloaded and came to a stop in the square did a crowd begin to gather. An early rider had sent word of the child that would be up for adoption, and there was no shortage of families who hoped to raise a young man to work in the mines and provide them healthy wages. As the day continued and the sun completed its path across the sky, there would be a great deal of money and goods exchanged that day. However, the child did not find a home. Not yet.

A wealthy gentleman named Ronas Qatyl was the front runner for Narill's hopes. Realizing that their time in the city was short and they had to prepare for another crossing, Narill

made her decision. After speaking with Tynnar and securing his intentions, Qatyl arranged to meet with Narill inside of her wagon. Under the watch of Tynnar, Qatyl made his case for a child who would certainly change the destinies of those around him.

"It is a pleasure to meet with you both, I cannot thank you enough for your allowing me this time," Ronas replied. "You cannot imagine my desire for family."

"Tynnar told me that you were most interested in adopting this child," Narill said.

Ronas bowed. "Yes, and I am willing to offer you anything for that chance, Madam Wyndhum. Cronans, minerals, I can offer any price."

"That is all I have heard all day." Narill sighed and pulled the curtain of the wagon aside. "I do not wish for this to be an auction! Tynnar, show this man out."

Tynnar rose to his feet. Even as an older man, his height was imposing. But Ronas did not leave. Instead, he begged Tynnar for more time.

"Wait! Please, that was not my intent," he said with a bow. "I merely meant that it would mean more to me to have a child than money. Allow me a moment to explain."

Tynnar returned to his seat as Narill gave him a nod. "Please."

"Thank you," Ronas said. "My wives Yumi and Ellen, as wonderful as they are, have both been unsuccessful at bearing a child, and perhaps it is my fault, but while they both would be fine mothers, they cannot get pregnant. Alas, my third wife Patricia had been blessed with a child, but passed away with child only last season. Neither survived."

"My apologies for your loss, sir," Narill said softly. "Please, continue."

Ronas bowed again. "It is my greatest wish to have an heir someday, and my family has not been blessed. A child in my family would be free to choose his fate, and would never have to work in the mine to put food on his plate, unless he chose to do so himself. He would be a leader of men, not a laborer who gave his life for peasant food. Under my roof, he would be raised well."

Tynnar cleared his throat. "If I may, Master Qatyl, tell me of your fortune. What kind of holdings do you have?"

Narill glared at the wagon master as Ronas continued. "I have holdings in the mythrill mines of Krynnis in the southeast, and provide workers who operate out of the Shaven Mine in the eastern mountains. For every transaction made between the South Traders and the nation of Qui-Qui in the central desert, I am well paid."

"As well as the copper mine, you say. I am familiar with the books, and can attest that those are valuable ores indeed," Tynnar added.

You may find the name odd, dear adventurer. The name of the mine is pronounced shaven and not shay-ven. Goodness knows that few things in the world are named after a sharp razor! Forgive this first of many clarifications. Now where were we?

Ronas nodded upon hearing Tynnar's comment. "I am not worried about losing money for a long time, sir, and a child in my care would never know a life of poverty."

"Tell me more about your desires for a family, Master Qatyl," Narill asked.

"Indeed," Tynnar said. "What would drive a man to pay out his fortune for such a commodity?"

Ronas sipped from his flask of wine. "My honored hosts, I had only heard the tale of this son of kings no later than this morn, when I decided that it was fate we meet at long last. You see, a dream I experienced at the Festival of Ferns one year ago, when I saw my son with a seal

of spirits upon his belt, a symbol that the men of the mountain hold dear. I watched him grow up as a man of the people, a leader of commerce and loyalty, and a defender of men. Clearly, this child from the oasis is a prince, and I feel it is my duty to make him worthy of any title to which he may belong."

Narill nodded. "Truly, this child has come from status, but along his road his mother met ill fate, for I can assure you the desert is not a forgiving place. Terrible sandstorms carry sand particles like arrows, and water is more valuable than gold. But while others might falter, this child has avoided the grime and dust upon his garb, and he has thrived while his mother succumbed to the most horrid conditions that the Qylan could offer. While I would aim to raise a child in the manner you suggest, Master Qatyl, I would sooner die a thousand deaths than attempt to raise a child in the caravan again."

"You once had children of your own, madam?" Ronas asked.

Narill nodded as she dabbed at her eyes.

"Two sons, Master Qatyl," Tynnar explained. "There were fine men, I might add, who defended the caravan honorably before an untimely end."

Ronas sipped from his flask once more. "I shall drink to their memory, madam."

Narill drank from her own flask, even though it only held water. "Thank you."

"As you see madam, there is much love in my empty house. To think, we were so near to having a child! I would raise this boy as my own," Ronas said. "Take my word that my intentions are the purest. Do I have your blessing?"

Tynnar turned to Narill. "What say you, madam?"

Narill stood up and turned towards the door. "I am most satisfied and honored by your intentions, Master Qatyl. But my own failures trouble me, and I had hoped I would find the child's family in this town."

"There are very few people in this town who venture into the desert," Ronas explained. "Those who do must be bred from the heartiest of stock. None but your caravan and the boldest of bandits will survive even the first twenty leagues of sand, and those that do would not wrap a child in such wondrous materials that are more valuable in their hands. Therefore, I am certain this child cannot have come from this town. In the absence of his true family, I would consider it the highest honor to raise him as my own."

"Perhaps it would be best if we parted for the evening, Narill?" Tynnar asked. "A decision like this is best decided overnight."

Narill turned towards Ronas, who had an optimistic look on his face. "You present a wealth of arguments, sir. I will consider your appointment carefully."

Ronas bowed, kissing Narill's right hand. She smiled, flattered.

"A thousand blessings, Madam Wyndhum!" Ronas said. "How long must I wait to receive your approval?"

"I am sorry, I do not know when I shall have a decision for you," Narill said.

"You have told me of your house, Master Qatyl," Tynnar said. "I will send word for you soon. Our caravan will not depart unless a family is found."

Ronas nodded and headed towards the exit at the rear of the wagon. "Certainly. But please, forgive me if I rush you. May your evening be pleasant, thank you again."

Narill nodded. "Good evening, Master Qatyl." Narill watched the man bow as he backed out of the wagon. Replacing the blanket that served as the door of her home, she turned to Tynnar. "He is enthusiastic and zealous, caravan master. Tell me. Do you believe his intentions to be genuine?"

"Quite genuine, as the fatherly instinct is strong in him," Tynnar answered. "Were it up to me, I'd leave the child with him tonight."

Narill sat upon the sack of dried beans that served as her bed and picked up her sewing. "Perhaps, but surely you understand what it means to be a father? I worry that Master Qatyl will be unprepared for the trials of fatherhood."

"All men share that same level of training," Tynnar said with a shake of his head. "My only child is the caravan, and its success is owed to the individual masters of each wagon that populate it. I've decided my path, and while my own involvement has been minimal, I take pride in that success."

Narill smiled. "You belittle your contributions, Tynnar."

"Prepared or not, a man has to become a father the day his son is born. We must aspire to be as good a father as our own. I believe Master Qatyl has made his choice."

She turned towards the exit. "As always, your advice continues to guide me. Would you check with Wynk to see that the child is well before you retire tonight?"

"Certainly." Tynnar stood up and headed towards the exit. "Wynk has been wanting a child herself for many years, you know. She may not want to give him up."

"Yes," Narill said with a nod, "But my best friend on this caravan understands my hardship better than anyone. Wynk knows this must be done if the child is to have any hope in this world."

Tynnar pushed aside the rear flap and stepped outside. "I trust the child is in good hands for this evening, and also in the care of Master Qatyl." Tynnar climbed down to the ground and turned to face inside. "But I caution you, Narill, not to dwell on this matter. Your responsibilities to the caravan have always come first. You will recall your grandfather's words in this matter. It was he who taught me that."

"His teachings have brought us this far, and I will always respect his methods. Thank you, wagon master. Good night."

"And you. I shall honor whatever choice you decide come the morning."

Cadiz Wyndham had begun the Old Caravan several decades before that evening, insisting that its members joined for life and devoted their efforts to the caravan. Every member of the train would treat their fellow travelers as family, so long as their actions benefitted the well being of the group. This is why Narill could never leave their ranks, even after the death of her family. The caravan had been the only family she had ever known, and that bond between her and the other members was very strong. This would come to remain true even after she left their company. Forgive me for jumping ahead!

Upon the rise of the desert sun, Narill started out her day with her usual routine. After a visit with Iannis and a trip to the well to clean her body and her clothing, Narill would make her way to Keller and Wynk's wagon. Even before finding the child did Narill stick to that routine, but indeed today was special.

Wynk was waiting outside the wagon. Her long brown hair was brushed and straight, and the child slept quietly in her arms as she sat in the wagon's front seat. The boy had enjoyed a meal of fresh camel's milk and was snoozing quietly.

Wynk smiled as Narill approached.

"Is he still sleeping?" Narill asked quietly.

Wynk nodded. "You're leaving him here, aren't you?"

Narill nodded sadly. "I think I found someone who will raise him well."

"Besides me?" Wynk asked sadly. "Keller and I would consider him as our own."

"Yes, I do not doubt your talent to coddle." Narill smiled, even though it too was a sad one. "You are my only true friend, Wynk, and we can debate this all day, but if we argue the child will surely wake."

"Someday, though, Keller and I will be as happy as this child's father is today."

Narill nodded. "And there would be no finer mother than yourself, Wynk."

Wynk carefully leaned forward, allowing Narill to take the child into her arms. The child did not stir for a moment. "Farewell, you dear young man," Wynk replied.

"Thank you for caring for him, Wynk. I trust you know how I feel," Narill said.

"It was no trouble, Narill. Give my best to the new father, and tell him that if he does not wish to feel my wrath, he should do his best too."

"I shall tell him proudly," Narill replied with an amused smirk.

On her way through the square, Narill passed by another of her friend's wagons, Farin and Iannis of wagon three.

"Farin, how fares the sales?" Narill asked.

"It's been busy, but no takers," Farin replied in his shrill voice.

Narill hushed him, as Farin now spotted the child in her arms.

"Oh! The young prince." Farin said quietly.

The child yawned, but remained asleep.

"Would you be willing to watch my wagon today? If only for a few hours? As you can see, I have an errand to attend to."

Farin nodded. "Of course, Iannis and I'll be happy to. Is there anything special I should know?"

"The smaller blankets can go for ten Hymes each, I'd like to see those go. See if you can't push some of them loaves of bread, also. They're no good stale."

"Actually, I should confess that I've been handing out a loaf with each blanket sold. It would seem the loaves dried quicker than you might have wished," Farin replied with a smirk. "Curse these dry Eastern winds!"

Narill nodded. "No matter. They will be worthless to anyone if they are allowed to go bad. I appreciate your watching things today."

"Anything for a friend, Narill," Farin answered. "Your wagon is safe with me." Narill headed back to her wagon for one last task. She placed the child inside the same woven basket she had discovered him in, and covered it with a thin white sheet across the top so that the child wouldn't be in the direct sunlight. Once the child was protected from the heat of the sun, Narill then followed the directions to Master Qatyl's house on the west side of town. Of all the mansions on this richest quarter of the city, it was fairly easy to find his. Ronas Qatyl was the wealthiest citizen of Ley Heyste, and therefore owned the largest mansion.

Narill spent several minutes walking around the outer wall before coming across the front, as she had difficulty finding the front door. Her wanderings led her through a series of gardens before reaching the entrance. Because the town was so close to the ocean, water was plentiful in these parts. As a result, the gardens here were lush with green plants, tall blossoming palm trees, and a small pond with fish. The scent of the white roses and gardenias caused the child to sniffle quietly.

After admiring the gardens, Narill knocked upon the main door. A moment later the

heavy oak door opened, and a tall butler with a stern expression answered it.

"What manner of wares might this be?" he asked sternly, glaring at the child.

"Forgive the intrusion, sir, but I am not selling anything," Narill said. "I come with approval of your master for a visit. We met yesterday at the caravan."

The butler cleared his throat angrily. "Hmm mmm, yes, I see. Fascinating story. And I suspect you stole something of his and wished to return it, yes?"

"I did no such thing!" Narill exclaimed.

Just then Ronas rushed up to the door. "Greetings to you, Madam Wyndhum! Be gone, Julius!"

The butler immediately bowed low and backed out of sight.

"Forgive my butler, he takes his job very seriously," Ronas said.

"Yes, Master Qatyl-" she began.

"Did you come to a decision, then?" Ronas asked as his eyes brightened. "Perhaps I should keep my voice down."

Narill nodded. "May I enter? He should not stay in the sun so long."

"Of course, of course! You are most welcome here, please, come in, come in! Julius! Some wine and bread at once!" Ronas called as he escorted Narill inside.

At once, the child was awake and opened his brown eyes. Narill cooed softly to calm him as she followed Ronas into a lavish foyer on the way to the parlor in the west wing of the building. All the floors in both rooms were covered in black marble, with velvet and silk draperies across the expensive glass windows. Glass and porcelain vases stood on pedestals in various corners of the parlor, next to furniture that easily could've been owned by a sultan. Had Narill not kept her focus on the child, she might have noticed that the foyer itself was larger than most homes in town, and certainly larger than her tiny little wagon.

Although the child was now awake, he did not stir nor make noise. Rather, his curious eyes darted around his new surroundings. Ronas stood behind a seating area as Narill finally presented him with the child in the basket.

"Is this?" Ronas drew aback. "Is this my son?"

Narill nodded. "But only on one condition, Master Qatyl. My eldest son was named Ketze. This child does not yet have a name, but if you would honor my son, it would mean a great deal to me."

Ronas bowed. "Ketze. There is no better name befitting a prince and no greater honor can I offer." He nodded towards the next room. "Well, I must offer you something for your troubles. It is not gold, but I ask you take it just the same. Madam Wyndhum, these are my wives, if you will allow them to come in and join us."

Narill nodded.

From a room to the north two women entered. Both were breathtakingly lovely in their own way. Each wore a veil of satin and a dress made of the finest silk; one dressed in green and the other in yellow. The one in green had rich blonde locks while the other had hair as dark as night.

"My favorite ladies, this is the woman I told you about. Narill Wyndhum, the caretaker of my son, Ketze," Ronas said.

The blonde woman smiled. The one with dark hair gave an affectionate nod of approval.

"Forgive me, my guest!" Ronas rushed around and presented his wives as if he had unveiled a statue of each. "To your left is Yumi with the hair as bright as the sun. To your right is Ellen with the hair like twilight, and my third beloved was named Patricia with hair as lovely

as the red rose. I do wish you were able to meet her, Narill."

"Master Qatyl, I do not wish to keep you. I leave this child in your capable, loving hands," Narill said, rising. "Your home is wonderful, but I must resume to my duties with the caravan."

Had Narill been less modest, she might have mentioned how small she felt within this massive mansion. Ronas did not notice her discomfort, but his wives did.

"Please, stay but a moment! My darlings, will you care for my son a moment?" Ronas asked. "I must share with you something for your journey."

The two women bowed and accepted the basket with warm smiles.

Ronas escorted Narill into the hall. "My guest, please! I cannot allow you to leave without an offering to take away with you. You must be compensated for blessing my home."

Narill shook her head and started for the exit. "I have faith in your devotion to fatherhood, Master Qatyl. All I ask is a promise that he be raised to be the prince among men that he is."

Ronas shook his head. "Madam, I must insist. Julius, there you are!"

The butler entered the hallway carrying a tray. Upon it were two tall earthenware cups, a flask of wine, and a loaf of bread that had already been broken into several pieces. In addition, a small amount of butter and some crushed fruits and a knife sat on the tray to be used as spread.

"Where shall I prepare the bread, master?" Julius asked.

"Just place it wherever, I need you for a different task," Ronas said, no longer interested in the refreshments. "The item from the basement you procured last night, please bring it forth. I need it for my guest here."

"That item is my master's prized possession, are you certain?" Julius asked.

Ronas pulled the butler aside. "Narill, my guest, forgive me for parading you around, but will you wait in the sitting room to the east? Your patience will be rewarded."

Narill nodded and went into the next room on her left. The two men discussed something quietly before Ronas dismissed Julius again and reentered the sitting room, this one very much like the parlor across the hall. Looking around, Narill realized that this sitting room was a mirror copy of the previous room.

"Some bread, Narill. Please, take as much as you will!" Ronas said.

Narill took a small piece of bread, even though she had plenty of stale bread waiting for her back at her wagon. "Master Qatyl, know that any gift you give me will be most grateful, but certainly lavish and unnecessary. My wagon is small, and I have not the space to display such treasures a palace like yours can offer. No matter how grand a gift you may offer, I cannot accept it."

Ronas poured the wine and took a drink. "Madam Narill, I cannot even begin to explain what a blessing this child brings to my home. And I do understand that you do not wish for wealth from me, but what I will give you is something that is a treasure in my family. Julius told you that it was my most prized possession, and he is right to say so. This item I am going to part with you is the last item my father left to me."

Julius came into the room carrying a small, unfinished wooden chest. It had been held together with nails and appeared to have been abandoned for decades. Dust and worn markings covered the wooden surface. Gently, the butler placed it onto the table in front of Narill and quietly left the room.

"You must understand, that I had all but forgotten about this, locked away in the basement of my home. My father left instructions to never open it, and only to trade it at a time

of great need."

Narill nodded as she listened to his story.

"It was not an item my father displayed in our home, and it came to me only after his passing. Within his study, a place I had been forbidden to enter, he kept it locked up and isolated. Sadly, he would not live to tell me its practicality or why he suggested it remain sealed away. But he believed its value beyond coins, and I would wish very much for you to have it."

Narill could only marvel at what could lay inside as Julius carefully lifted the lid with a small pry bar. Inside the contents were obscured by red velvet linens, and he lifted the veil to reveal a black oil lamp that was about ten inches long from the spout to the handle. Due to its dark luster, Narill could not tell if it was made of metal or obsidian. Despite the black finish, it seemed to reflect the light with a mysterious red luster.

"What a lovely artifact," Narill replied, hesitating at first.

"I recall finding it among my father's things after his death many years ago inside of a letter addressed to me, but my mother insisted that I have nothing to do with it. By all rights it is nothing more than an ordinary oil lamp and I have never suspected otherwise. I have respected my father's final wish since his last days, and, seeing as I have more lamps than I need, I ask that you take it. Please take it in exchange for your kindness."

Narill looked at the black lamp carefully, awestruck of the treasure that had been presented to her. It almost looked to be made from nighttime itself, with the ruby and onyx gems across its midsection. A single red pearl covered the tip of the vessel's lid, designed into the lid's handle. As Narill inspected it closely, she could almost sense something was inside, but backed off as Ronas continued.

"This is quite a treasure, and I would hate for it not to belong to one as worthy as yourself," Ronas said, distracting her. "But I digress, and I have indeed taken too much of your time. I recall your wagon master saying that the caravan will be leaving soon, and you have a great distance to travel tomorrow. I would hate to deprive you of rest."

Narill replaced the lamp inside of the chest and closed the lid. "Indeed. I must apologize, Ronas. I feel that if I remain in your fabulous home any longer, I may have to move in with you."

Ronas laughed happily. "That is how I met Yumi!"

Narill raised an eyebrow. "Of course. Thank you for this gift."

"No, I thank you for my son. You are always welcome in my house, Madam Wyndhum. And upon your return, I wish you safe travel."

Julius appeared at the door. "I will show you outside, madam."

Narill nodded. "Good day, Master Qatyl."

"To you, my friend, I am Ronas."

Narill smiled. "And you may also call me Narill."

Ronas bowed before joining his wives across the hall. Narill picked up the chest.

"The master requested I send with you bread and fruit, if you wish," Julius said. As Julius spoke the word 'wish', the lamp flashed brighter in color for a brief moment. However, it did not glow enough to be noticed by either of them.

"No, I have more than enough bread than I know what to do with, but thank you," Narill replied.

"As you wish. This way." Julius said.

Again, the lamp flashed briefly at the sound of the word.

For the remainder of the day, business at the caravan would be fairly routine. Narill placed the chest in the very front of her bedchamber and covered it with blankets, knowing its value to Master Qatyl. Although she was curious about her new trinket, her responsibilities to the caravan came first. She then traded the rest of her stale bread for additional fabric with local merchants, and now had plenty of raw material to make several blankets for the next market. With assistance from Yannis and Keller, she restocked her wagon and cared for her camels. By sunset, Narill had cleaned up the last of her things and prepared herself for the journey west.

Look for the full text at BuccaneerofNemaris.com coming
May 25th, 2023!