

CHAPTER 1 - PLANS

The Carahaun, refuge of Rhidaun-Lorn's underclass. A maze of alleys, with brothels, gambling dens and dirty alehouses. Once, respectable merchants had plied their trades in these streets, but over time the area had degenerated into a night quarter; a haven for pickpockets, thieves and pimps. Like the poisonous midnight flower, the Carahaun bloomed in the dark; the daylight saw the neighborhood sleepily silent.

Silent, too, was *De Lamme Leeuw*, a dim tavern in the cellars of a rundown warehouse. The host of the *Leeuw* had many sources of income, and his establishment was more a convenient place for shady deals than for drunken carousals. Still, he wouldn't let an opportunity pass to pick the pockets of the unsuspecting. That's why he warmly received five stray Opitian mercenaries with their thirst and their newly earned gold. The host's smile sat chiseled on his face while he served can after stone can of his thin wine, which the fighters shared as enthusiastically as they quaffed it.

Against this rough background, the three in the darkest corner of the room were out of place in their youth and their fine clothes. Upon arrival, they had mentioned the name of a promising young man who knew the right people. For such a one's protégés, the host always had a table in the shades available.

The front door opened and closed again. A slender figure slipped past the carousing mercenaries, and the host discreetly turned away.

At the table in the corner, Zethir halted. He had pulled his hat down over his face. From beneath the brim, his eyes inspected the dark corner before he sat down on the free stool.

'By Dragos,' whispered Torril. 'You look like a spy.' The others laughed, and Zethir smiled with them. He looked around the table and saw three pairs of expectant eyes on him. All at once, he felt guilty about what he was going to ask of them. He tried to hide his confusion by grabbing one of the untasted mugs of murky beer and pretending to drink. His nose protested at the reek of dead cockroaches and rats. Of course he had known it wouldn't be drinkable; the mugs were for appearance's sake, no more.

'I'm sorry I dragged you to this pigpen,' he said, and at that moment he meant it. 'But the *Leeuw* is the last place anyone will come looking for us.'

He saw Torril's questioning eyes, but the adepta Avelore was faster. 'Does Ghyll know where we are?'

Zethir blinked and looked at the girl. She sat upright, her hands folded on the tabletop, outwardly imperturbable. It was like gazing in a mirror, he thought. Like him, she had witnessed unspeakable things that had changed her forever. Like him, she showed the world a mask of strength and independence, the obduracy of a castaway with her arms clamped to a piece of driftwood. *She is suspicious*. His face didn't betray his thoughts as he spoke.

'No, this is my problem. I wouldn't want to burden Ghyll. He is still grieving over Olle's murder.'

Everyone looked down at the table. Ghyll's foster brother Olle had been a good friend and his unexpected death had saddened them all.

Fiercely, Torril sniffed at his cup. 'Goat's piss.' With a quick flick of the wrist he emptied the contents onto the straw under his stool. 'I knew something was troubling you. The whole week you've been walking around like a dog that can't poop. What's the problem?'

For a moment, no one spoke.

Zethir stirred. ‘Despraine.’

‘Ah!’ Torril clenched his fists on the tabletop. ‘The island of the drakenboat.’

Zethir nodded. ‘That suspicious drakenboat. When Ghyll couldn’t go himself, he passed the Despraine investigation on to my father at the King’s Heralds. Father sent one of our agents, Aleste. One of the best.’ Zethir paused for a moment and stared at a large fly which was perched awkwardly on the edge of his cup. ‘Her last message reported a safe arrival on the island. That was three weeks ago.’

‘And?’ Avelore still sat upright.

Zethir felt her eyes on him and kept his own gaze on the fly. ‘Three weeks is too long for a quick in-and-out. My father says I’m worrying about nothing. He won’t send someone else to check.’ He banged his fist on the table. ‘Curse it! I must know what happened.’

Avelore seemed surprised by his sudden outburst. ‘Why?’

Zethir winced, and his misery was visible for all. ‘Aleste is my big sister.’

On the other side of the table, Avelore made an involuntary movement. ‘Oh, gods!’ She touched Zethir’s sleeve with her fingertips. ‘Why do you think your father is wrong?’

‘Aleste has never missed a deadline before.’ Zethir’s hands clasped the mug as if he wanted to throw it, but he controlled himself. ‘She had a week to inspect the island, yet at the appointed time she didn’t show up, nor the next time the naval smallboat came for her. Something must have happened. Maybe she’s sick or hurt...’

He shook his head. ‘Aleste is one of our most experienced heralds. Just about everything I know, she has taught me.’

‘And now you want to find her,’ said Torril.

‘I must do something.’

Again, they were silent. On the other side of the inn rose the voices of the besotted mercenaries, shrill as crows around a half-eaten cadaver. Zethir stared at the fly wobbling over the table, dragging its beer-soaked wings.

‘What do you need from us?’ Avelore asked.

Zethir raised his head. ‘I can’t manage it on my own.’

Anliin, tucked away in the purple robe of his priesthood, hadn’t moved, only listened. Now he spoke for the first time. ‘What do you think to find in Despraine?’ His voice was strange; youthful, but with an undertone of darkness.

‘The Dar’khamorth,’ said Zethir.

Avelore drew a sharp breath. ‘Magma!’

Beside her, Torril jumped in his chair, and the table rocked. ‘Great! How will we get there?’

‘I want to hire a fishing boat at one of the ports along the coast to sail us over.’

Torril stroked his blond spikes and grinned. ‘Nice! And back?’

For a moment, Zethir smiled. ‘Surprise! Then the same boat will come and pick us up again.’

‘That sounds simple enough.’ Torril’s face tightened. ‘The Dar’khamorth!’ His fingers closed around the heavy tin mug in front of him.

‘Don’t do that,’ said Anliin.

Torril looked at the twisted metal in his hands. ‘Oh!’

‘Are you with me?’ Zethir asked.

‘Of course,’ said Avelore, and the boys both nodded. ‘As if we’d let you down!’

Heavy footsteps neared, and a shadow fell across the table. The four looked up at the flushed face of the largest of the five mercenaries. Two massive fists pounded down on the tabletop, and a pervasive smell of sour wine, garlic and stale sweat wafted over them. The wine had made him belligerent, Zethir saw; besotted enough to cause trouble.

‘Drink with us!’ roared the mercenary, and his smile showed a graveyard of brown teeth. He staggered a moment, and stared with bloodshot eyes at Avelore. ‘Little doll, we are lonely; drink with us!’

‘Excuse me, friend,’ said Zethir. ‘We were just leaving.’

‘Nobody refuses to drink with Ors!’ growled the man, jabbing a hairy finger in Zethir’s chest. ‘Nobody, cub, is that clear?’

Zethir forced himself to keep looking at the drunken warrior. From the corner of his eye, he saw Torril getting to his feet. *Damn, this is getting out of hand.*

Avelore tapped her index finger on the muscular hand of the mercenary. ‘Ors, you drink too much. All that wine kindles your blood.’ She ran her nails along the tendons of his arm and a trail of flames followed the movement. The man stared with bulging eyes. ‘There is a moment, Ors, when all that fire comes out and... sets... you... on... fire.’

With a strangled cry, the mercenary drew back. ‘Excuse me, magistra, I did not...’ He turned and fled back to his mates, who received him with loud laughter and more wine.

‘Bah,’ said Torril. ‘I wanted to play with him.’

‘We must not attract attention,’ said Zethir. ‘A tavern fight is not my idea of being invisible. Your turn will come.’ He looked at them one by one. ‘I want to leave tomorrow morning. Can you manage that?’

‘No problem,’ said Anliin, and the other two nodded in agreement.

Zethir sighed, from relief or regret, he did not know. ‘Thank you. At six past midnight at the temple of Zoander. Make sure nobody sees you leave the palace.’

After the three others had left, Zethir remained seated for a moment. He was ashamed of his plan. It wasn’t fair on his friends to drag them into such an uncertain adventure, and he was sure Ghyll wouldn’t approve. Yet, what else could he do? Quickly, he looked around. All seemed clear. He smelled his beer again and gagged. Swiftly, he too emptied his cup under the table, threw a silver coin beside the ruined mug, and left like a shadow.

‘Where is that damned boy?’ King Ghyllander paced through the empty throne room, his bad leg giving him a curiously lurching gait. ‘What is he up to, this time?’

Prince Zino of Opit had entered the hall by the back door, and listened with raised eyebrows to the grumbling of his host. ‘Ooh,’ said he. ‘You’re all worked up. What’s the matter?’

‘Torril is gone, and so are Anliin and Avelore.’ Ghyll kicked a leg of the throne. ‘Zethir didn’t sleep in his room last night, either.’

Zino pulled a bench toward him with his foot and sat his portly figure down. ‘Zethir? He’s been running around with a face full of woe, but he wouldn’t say what troubled him.’

Ghyll snarled a curse. Automatically he looked for his squire and cursed again. He beckoned to his page. ‘Ask Major Tibaun to come here.’

The child jumped up from his stool and ran with his message to the administrative wing.

Ghyll watched him go. *Why isn’ Torril like that?* he thought. *Obedient, quiet.* No, he didn’t mean that. There was no comparison. Astian was a little lamb and Torril a stubborn, impulsive bear. A loyal friend. What had he gotten himself into this time? With an angry growl, the young king resumed his pacing.

Major Tibaun appeared quickly, as if he’d been waiting for a summons.

Ghyll stared at the man through narrowed eyes. Tibaun’s face was smooth as ever, but the king sensed the man was worried.

‘No, Sire,’ said Tibaun. ‘I haven’t spoken to my son for a while. I assumed he was working for you and I didn’t pay much attention to his absence. Prince Torril is missing as well?’ He bowed his head, and Ghyll was sure the major knew more than he was letting on.

‘Torril, Anliin and the adepta Avelore,’ he said and sat down in his throne. ‘The girl is answerable to her Order, but the two boys are in my care and I want them back here.’

Tibaun was the head of the King’s Heralds, the innocent name for Rhidauna’s Intelligence Service. His son Tosias, known to the world by his alias Zethir, was Ghyll’s personal spy. Zethir came and went at his own discretion, so it wasn’t unusual for him to be gone for a while. Not Torril. Ghyll’s squire and a paladin-in-training had his place here, beside the throne. His bosom friend Anliin was a student priest in the temple of Greos. He wouldn’t leave his studies just for a lark. Altogether, this gave Ghyll an uncomfortable feeling. Something was going on, but what? *Olle, my brother; help me.* There was no answer; his big foster brother, his sounding board and shield, rested in the royal crypt, felled by a mad sorcerer’s hand. Ghyll slammed his fists together; the pain helped to keep his despair at bay.

‘Find them, Major Tibaun. Bring them here. In chains, for all I care.’

The chief herald bowed and his face betrayed his own torments. ‘As you command, Sire.’ He turned and left the throne room.

‘I’m sure they’re not gone for a prank,’ protested Zino. ‘Torril...’

‘Torril is a bullheaded young idiot with no sense of discipline or responsibility.’

Zino tried a smile. ‘You’re missing him already.’

‘I’ve been missing him all cursed morning,’ snapped the king. Zino was right, and that only increased his anger. ‘My squire should be here and not running off on Zethir’s wild adventures.’

‘Prince Torril is a loyal friend,’ the sword on Ghyll’s back said aloud. ‘He wouldn’t refuse if someone needed his help.’

Ghyll almost sprained his neck when he tried to look at Childegard’s grip. ‘When he comes back, I’ll chain him to the throne with his loyalty,’ he promised and strode to his office.