

Excerpt from the Arqiyyon Volume I: *These Hours of Bones and Ash*

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Chapter One

Escape

She was not dead. Addled and bruised, she lay still for a moment, inventorying her aches. A wrenched ankle. A purpling shoulder. A throbbing hip. Darkness pounded her temples like fists. Leaning over her, the hunchbacked mountain of Ulor, saddle-shaped and wreathed in gloom. She had fallen into one of its many crevices, on her back in a rocky cradle on its slope. *Get up!* She kicked her legs and braced her elbows against the rocks, trying to right herself again. The sound clawing from her throat was an animal's. Climbing out of this crevice was like being born. Finally, its grip loosened and she scabbled down the edge of the chasm, flying faster still down the mountain.

The girl appeared little more than sixteen, scurrying down a path gleaming in the moonlight like a pallid scar. She scrambled, sometimes on all fours, but always looking back, the flinty caws of her pursuers close behind. Clumps of razor-sharp sword-grass sliced at her exposed shins and hid the path's unexpected end. The spiteful Ulor had obscured this drop with brush and scant saplings as if to encourage recklessness, craving the mixed fear and surprise of the sudden, inevitable fall. Seeking a hiding place, the fugitive launched herself into the scrub and without warning, the solid footing of Ulor disappeared, toppling her headlong over the rocky cliff.

The fall was not far. Shaken, but at least not paralyzed, she struggled up again, keeling through the blackness. In this palpable Dark, something was moving. She knew already the bird-like head, the long beak, curved downwards, the leathery skin, the hunched and protruding spine. The talons of its fingers, grooved with blood, a marriage of beast and man. Though she could not see it, this monster stood between her and the river. Her fingers found, in the fur sack at her hip, a sling she had used to hunt all this time on the hostile plains. Instinct drove her fingers to secure a smooth rock into the sling's cup. She let a bullet fly. Listened as it skittered into the distance; a light *plink* as it hit the river. She seated another bullet, preparing to work the sling. Unbidden, she remembered how to catch a hare. Only, this time, she was the hare.

The beast watching her did not know which way she would flee, though she was certain it could see her, even in this Dark. She listened for the barely perceptible rustle of its movement: a tossing of its head or the scraping of a talon against the pebbles and shells of the shore. Nothing. The void pulsating around her felt empty, except for one small pocket. At this, she aimed her second stone. Even before the bullet had found its mark, she scuttled to her right, skirting the malicious mass, toward what she hoped was the river. The beast stumbled in the mud-slick, the razor-sharp oyster shells pebbling the muddy beach clamping shut as its leathery hands came down upon them. A horrible chattering echoed from the rocky mountain slope. The monster yowled, more in anger than pain. Somehow, her feet found speed, even over the sucking mud. Within minutes she was at the water. The enemy had multiplied. They ranged the banks of the Runa

Lorba—the Slow River— crowing to each other. The fugitive dove into the frigid stream with a splash and a gasp. Her arms sliced through the water, her wiry muscles straining. The heavy, poorly-tanned garments of hide she wore weighed her down. Her small pack filled with water, its heaviness threatening to pull her under like the steel weight on a fishing line. Desperate to save it, she tucked the sack under one arm and struck out with the other, thrashing through the turgid current. The sludge and treefall damming the Runa Lorba thwarted her crossing to the other side, so she followed as closely as she could to its eastern edge. She would be safest in the water. The birdmen feared all rivers, save one: the poisoned Tibeth that sliced west-to-east through their desolate home in the North. This she knew. This knowledge gave her hope.

More than once, a serpent swept against her shins. Or perhaps it was only riverweed. Suddenly, a crocodile, its jaws cluttered with teeth, writhed from the pitch, its scaly armor grazing her shoulder. She struck out at the beast, dropping her precious pouch in the struggle. When her fist dashed against its coarse hide, she realized her assailant was only a fallen trunk of pine, bruised with river sediment. Just in time, she grasped the pouch as it slipped away from her, and wrangled herself gasping onto the slime-surfaced raft. Through the night she clung to this barge on its slow travail downstream.

Chapter Two

Field of Fire

When the fugitive awoke curled in the brackish roots of a muscus tree upon the banks of the Runa Lorba, the morning sun had already risen, eager to be about its business of drying the surrounding plateau into cracked hardtop. Eastward in the distance, the pass of Bin-Bhathir toiled upward between humped boulders toward the Peak of Cratis. To the west, the Runa Lorba wound sluggishly through the plateau. Ulor grimaced in the southern distance, obscured in its laurels of early morning fog. Her legs were numb and stiff with cold. Thirst snarled in her throat. Her hands and forearms were caked with dried muck and blood, her clothing saturated with foul-smelling water. She was tired. She stank. Matted and crusted, her hair fell over her shoulders and clung, still wet, to the back of her neck. She longed to drink from the river that slumped along beside her; but the sap from the *muscus* trees lining the river for miles had poisoned the water. Animal corpses dotted the river here and there like boulders around which the currents eddied. There they had died, far from home, overwhelmed by their thirst. She struggled to her knees, and then listed to her feet. The first few steps were agonizing, every muscle at war with her iron will. Still, she toiled on throughout the morning and the blistering heat of the afternoon, following the curve of the Runa Lorba, stopping to uproot and drain the succulent plants so sparse on the plateau whenever she chanced upon them. Near evening, her vision began to blur and the muscles in her legs shook. A shadow grew in the periphery of her right eye, and passed over her field of vision like a bird flying between her and the sun. She faltered and found she had not the strength to rise again.



I stand at the edge of a precipice. A hot, black wind shudders up the rocks and stirs my skin. Far below, a river of fire: the many torches of a twisted and ravaging army. They agitate like ants on a hive at midday. I yearn to be alone and safe, the cool breath of grass beneath me. But under the soles of my bare feet, only sharp stones. Behind me swells a frightening and yet somehow familiar heat. An indescribable whisper, not fully a voice, beckons me. When it says my name, what can only be called 'my soul' makes a rending sound; wind cleaving a banner from its moorings. Slowly, I turn, afraid to look behind, but unable to avoid the looking. Facing the voice, I see nothing. I cannot see. I cannot see. I touch my eyes finding only gored holes.

The fugitive awakened suddenly, scuttling backward, pressing her sweat-damp body against the rough bark of a tree near where she had fallen. A scuffling noise had startled her, followed by the chilling caterwaul of a mountain leopard. A yelp and a low growl nearby as sharp teeth tore at what she imagined through her tightly-closed eyes could be a mountain goat or deer. She opened her eyes, diving into the tangle of muscus roots, seeking purchase among those trees nearest the water. If the cat had seen her, it had not taken much notice. For a long time, the sound of the leopard feasting punctuated

the short intakes of her breath. Within the pouch at her hip, her hand sought a stone. Its smooth exterior worked between her fingers calmed her somewhat, despite the meaty chewing sound and the grating of teeth over marrow.

On the heels of her dream, the shriek of the leopard was even more chilling. Already, it was slipping away, like light sifting through shadows in the low-hanging branches of fog. Only a feeling of blindness and unnamable doom remained. After a time, the cat moved on, skulking down the shore, stopping to lap a few drops of the Runa Lorba's poisoned stream. *Soon it will be dead.* She thought, shuddering. *Soon, we will all be dead.*

Dawn was threading through the sky. Wind plunged from the mountains like the shuttle on a loom. When she emerged from the safety of her burrow, the crows were already circling the leopard's kill, attracted by the smell of warm, copper-tinged blood. The girl hugged her pack closer to her, her hand still on one of the smooth stones. All day, the terrain was studded with roots and tiny saplings. They poked their poisonous heads through the dirt, stretching their tendrils toward the Runa Lorba. Several times, the fugitive fell against them, tripping over the half-buried roots of the *muscus* forest. She howled like an animal.

The journey seemed achingly slow. Finally, the girl reached the end of the *muscus* forest that had grown continually thicker as she followed the river's banks. Through gnarled branches, she perceived the squat, rotting hull of an old ferry house ahead of her. Its pier had been eaten away by the clotted river, leaving only its wooden skeleton wading into the current. There was no longer a scow or a boatman to ferry travelers back and forth across its waters. Perhaps there were no longer travelers. For some time, the girl watched the boathouse from the cover of the trees. All the while, it remained dead, no one coming or going. At last, certain it was abandoned, she limped toward the ferry house, staying as near as possible to the river. She felt a strange safety in its cold, unfeeling current.

Inside, the ferry house smelled of the decay of damp wood. The floor had been laid with wide planks, some rotting away, collapsing in places to reveal the thick, damp dirt beneath. Berths had been built into the interior walls of the ferry house. These berths surrounded a yawning fire pit hollowed several feet deep into the ground and lined with flat, wide stones. The late afternoon sun filtered through a chimney-hole in the ceiling, shining down on the charred bones of a months-old fire. Though there were no longer any signs of the boatman who must have once lived here, someone, she thought, had stayed the night at the ferry house not too long distant. Outside, the rutted furrows of wagon wheels and the hoof prints of sheep, goats and oxen crisscrossed the area around the ferry house, leading away from the river's edge and into the mountains where the slight ribbon of a road staggered upward into the Xhendi's peaks. Not too long before, a caravan had passed this way. Its tracks came from a shallow ford in the river. At that spot, the girl waded a short distance into the Runa Lorba, finding its depth at this distance to be less than the height of her knees. She gazed across the ford's expanse. Beyond this, there were no doubt cities. Places to get food. People who might be able to help her. She frowned, abruptly swaddled in the feeling she had forgotten something *very* important. *Help me do what?* she thought.

Troubled, the girl returned to the ferry house, barring the door against the coming night as best she could. Wind shoveled through the joists of the wide-slatted walls. She shivered. She had lain down upon one of the berths to sleep when, in the dimness, her eye caught the outline of a trap door obscured in a corner of the floor. She knelt beside it and brushed the dust from the seams, her hand trembling with cold. Prying the door open was a difficult task. After several broken fingernails, she had to use her bone knife to widen the crack and jimmy open the door. Her toil was worth it. In the cache, a worthy store of mouth-watering food had been hidden. Salted herring, barley loaves, pickled eggs and cabbages, nuts, a few casks of ale. She lay down on her belly, shoving dirty fingers again and again into the hoard, ferrying the food into her mouth, hardly stopping to breathe. When she had finally finished eating, the sun was in full evening display, its horde of golden, pink and purple banners drifting like an invading army toward twilight.

The next day, the fugitive decided to quit the comfort of the ferry house. Her pouch was laden with as much food as she could carry: dried meat and nuts and a fair share of barley loaves. Her pack was bulging like a pregnant cow's belly by the time she had finished stuffing it. The *drengal* bladder she used for water was filled with the rich, dark ale from the cache.

Glancing over her shoulder one last time, she stepped through the lintel of the ferry house and started for the ford. No sooner had she reached the river, than a fork of lightning sung through the dawn, a maul of thunder at its heels. A few fat drops of rain splattered the ground at her feet and the Runa Lorba lurched between its banks in a torrent of wet and gray. She had barely reached the ferry house when the sky unleashed the full fury of its deluge.



Arnō Urmainen's Testament:

On the eve of the Great War, I was the athadai of a scanty band of merchants, pickpockets and thieves, young men unfit for military service through deficiencies of birthright or of character, and whores. Among our company were also two cooks, a seamstress and a chronicler whose job it was to see to our patents of travel and our bills of lading. My benefactor, Lorcan Gudal, a baron of Ma-hameth'Kil, had commissioned ten armed guards for our small party as well. Six months of the year we spent traveling abroad, beyond the hostile plains of the Fon S'ul to the exotic lands of the East: Haldaria, Limosfan, Breria and Hannosh. The cities of Arom and Carribide were closed to us in those days because of a plague that had befallen them. At any rate, Carribide is a four day journey by ship, and my meager caravan could seldom afford to venture there plague or no plague. The blockade of Arom, however, was quite a blow, for only there could I find aeshai olives which fetch a pretty purse, particularly in Renatha-Geth. Thus, plague ate up a good share of my profits before they were even made. Many things I saw abroad: cities built without streets where citizens are borne only upon sloops and scows, gondolas and rowboats. Shepherds whose sheep carry pelts so heavy that their back legs must be supported by platforms with wheels in which they roll about

through the grazing fields. I have seen goats that crumple at the slightest disturbance and eagles large enough to carry wolves. There are women in Hannosh whose breasts are bandaged and whose clothes are so masculine in appearance that they cannot be singled out from the men. But these tales pale in comparison to the ill omens I witnessed upon the plains of the Fon S'ul in the late summer of an Tir. 385. The wave of this ambush preceded the tide of the Great War, a conflict that would prove the doom of our time. This was how the war began:

If the traveler should journey fifteen days from West to East, Haldaria is the first city he should come to. Between Haldaria and the Xhendi Mountains that mark the borders of Calcaida, land of the free people, there are no other cities. The traveler may meet nomadic encampments of Haldari or even Aromites or Azulis who must cross the desert with wares they bring up from the south. But no walled city or permanent village can be found. At the height of *feat*, that is to say 'summer', when my companions and I had reached our fourteenth day of traveling the Kai-Thal—that desert called "Sea of Sand"—we could discern Cratis, the highest peak of the Xhendi, beneath its misty coronet. At its feet, the pass of Bin-Bhathir is cut, winding over the mountain and into the *dha-ma*, the uninhabited and severe plateau that borders our kingdom, *tirmanum ren ari harkenii*. We had just passed through the valley—called by the Bedouins Qel Vetan—and were in sight of the oasis there. The Caladani named this way station Wallac, meaning hoard, but it is known by the Jaheirae as Mator-Makesh, Hope and Desperation. When I had crested the brow of the low hill on the western-most edge of the valley, I halted the company. The first assault upon our party was the smell of death. The second, the sound of crows. Far into the horizon, the corpses of mutilated animals bloated in the heat—sheep and goats, oxen and some horses. Most had been lying there for so long their bursting carcasses were partially covered with sand. Some of the animals had rotting flesh still sutured to their bones. Others, devoid of substance, lay on their backs or sides, their empty carcasses like the frames of burned out houses, dust devils swirling through their joists and beams. Sun-bleached, fleshless jaws were twisted in grotesque laughter. Gazing over the carnage at Wallac, I recalled one of my earliest memories, until now utterly forgotten. At the age of six, my father carried me to the lake called Edel where the salmon hopscotched up the cascading falls into the Runa Dart. On our way, we were waylaid several days by a violent storm so that when we arrived, the spawning had already ended. There on the banks of the waterway, the foul odor of rotting fish made my stomach heave. At my feet, two fish lay head to head, their eyes pecked out. A path lead between their bodies, which gleamed dully like the pillars of a ghastly gate. The shoal was saturated with the dead and the dying. Disturbed by our presence at their feast, the crows turned their heads, flapping their ominous wings and laughing at us.

Here, on the hill overlooking Wallac, I stood still as a doe, watching the same flapping crows with my longtime companion and *athad'ori*, Vittorio, at my left shoulder.

"What happened here?" he said, knowing I knew as little as he. Still, it helped him to give voice to his thoughts. He was always plainspoken. Already, the handlers were disembarking from the wagons and the guards were dismounting their horses. Before their boots had touched the sand at their feet, I was halfway down the slope, approaching the watering hole. Carcasses polluted the water—more than forty. I was not looking at an oasis, but a mass grave: a stinking, clotted cesspool. Kneeling, I picked up a

piece of old bone, turning it over in my hand absently while I examined the putrid and viscous spring. We were already five days past our expected arrival time at Wallac due to an attack by a thieving Carrick party that had left three of our guards wounded and one dead. We had lost an expensive store of silk in that skirmish, enough to significantly reduce the wages of the caravan entire. And now, this. Vittorio had left my side to examine the perimeter. I could see him a short distance off, looking toward the south, shielding his eyes with his hand, kneeling at intervals to examine something close to the ground. When he returned, he remarked that there were disengaged beams and a few shattered felloes: the remains of several wagons.

“There aren’t any human bones,” he said, somewhat satisfied. “Whatever caravan it was, the *atha* must have left this place.” I was only somewhat relieved. Just as Vittorio had related to me his finding, Tobe, a boy of sixteen from Suursekht, a village of ironworkers, appeared at my right shoulder.

“The whores and cooks are both grumbling for a good stuffing,” he said. “Should I tell them to lift their skirts or clench their arseholes?” Tobe says this with the same slight wink that gives all his statements the feeling of a jest. Despite the despair of our situation, I found it impossible not to smile. This is his most useful gift.

“Perhaps our buried stores have been saved,” I said. “Though from the looks of it, even if we find a meal, we’ll have nothing to wash it down with.” He glanced at the polluted pool and attempted a shrug. Clapping me on the shoulder, Tobe answered cheerfully, “We’ve had worse.”

The guards who were still well enough to ride had fanned out in the four directions of the compass. Their task was to assess the level of carnage and bring me their reports. I had not ordered the wagons to approach Wallac from the hill, hoping to spare the injured and the women the overwhelming stench. The bondswomen and the whores huddled on the brow of the hill, their calloused hands on their ruddy throats or crossed against their ample waists. Breem Calipan, my young foreman, had already taken the Kelkirks in hand, commanding half of them to feed and water the oxen as much as they were able from our dwindling stores. Straightaway, six of the slaves broke from the hill led by one called Dig, equipped with shovels and picks from the supply wagon. A few hundred yards from the foothill, Dig stopped and knelt, passing a hand over the ground. At the spot indicated by a mound of sandstone bricks, he took up his implement and began evacuating a pit. Sunburned and hulking, his powerful forearms flexed with each plunge of the spade. His fellow slaves followed suit using whatever tool they had at their command. Before long, Dig knelt again, pulling a wooden cache from the hole with the help of his companion, Stone, who was strong but stupid. In this cache were the food stores we had buried for our return journey. With a wave of his hand, Dig summoned Breem who came striding down the hill. I watched as my foreman knelt to investigate the box and thought I saw his shoulders slump wearily. I had sent Tobe to instruct the handlers to stay with their wagons, arms at the ready, in case we should be visited unawares by those responsible for the carnage to which we were now all witness. I perceived him atop the hill with his twin brother, Sinōn, dark and serious. Their attention was fixed on Breem. They whispered to each other without turning their gaze from the scene unfolding below.

I stared into the cache hardly understanding what I beheld there. What was a full cache when we first passed through Wallac on our way to Haldaria, was now an empty, yawning chasm. Each cache had met the same fate. Every morsel of food had been stripped from our stores. All that remained were empty sacks and chests, deflated and forlorn. Further inspection revealed two jugs of wine and one of ale in all our buried hoards that had escaped the looting.

“What are we going to do?” asked Breem, turning somewhat pale despite his ruddiness. Shaking my head, I called to Vittoro and we retreated to the edge of the cesspool.

“Nothing?” he said when I informed him of Breem’s discovery. “Nothing at all?” I shook my head.

“It is obvious we cannot stay here,” he said, echoing my thoughts. “I have a bad feeling about this place.” So did I. “We should press forward as soon as possible.”

“Suppose the way to Bin Bhathir is unsafe? What if we should meet with doom before we reach the foothills?” I spoke of the Xhendi, whose peaks we had yet to scale before reaching the safety of Calcaida.

“If we go by the southwest road,” Vittoro was saying, “We’ll be forced to travel for ten more days through Kai-Thal to reach the southern part of the mountains. Then, we’ll need at least six more days just to clear the peaks.”

“We could come into Tim’pur that way,” I said. Vittoro snorted.

“There’s no coin to be made in Tim’pur,” he scoffed. “The nobility there is all but ruined. Nothing but shattered family lines in threadbare silks and with scanty purses.” I knew this to be true.

“But from there, we could attain the Prince’s City, at least.”

“And risk uprising by the insurgent Kelkirks? The southern reaches are dangerous.”

“Our slaves are different than those savages in the south. They are loyal to us.”

“You trust that they will not revile us if given the chance?” Vittoro glanced toward our slaves who were squatting on the ground near one of the depleted caches. “I could not, were I the *athadai*,” he shrugged. Vittoro distrusted the slaves in the manner common to the high-born and they were wary of him. A lord of Littabürga, Vittoro had hidden his nobility from the rest of the company. Still, he strode and spoke in the manner of the gentry: unknowingly commanding by his mannerisms all the reverence due his station. He knew no other demeanor. His gaze focused on the only slave girl present with the company. With her manly features—broad shoulders, stout thighs and a wide face—she could hardly be called a girl. Her forearms were as strong as Dig’s, and her neck as thick as a Carrick ship’s mast. Slitted eyes and thin lips added to the severity of her perpetual scowl. I had once seen her throttle a pickpocket with a skein of reedy rope despite his pleas for leniency. She had tightened the garrote until the poor bastard had pissed himself, yellow runnels polluting the ground at his feet. That was the only time I could remember hearing her laugh. For this, her companions had nicknamed her Mercy. Her value as a worker was unequaled by any of the other women among the company. As strong as any man, she labored and cursed alongside her fellows, and taunted the whores with the most foul-mouthed of the men. When she caught my lieutenant appraising her, she turned to her squirrely companion, Noose, who was absently thrusting his pick over and over into the dust beside him. She whispered something hotly in his ear and then

laughed a laugh like a crow's.

"I suppose we do not have time to take the southern road even if we wished," I conceded. "We'll not make the Fortieth Day celebrations if we take a longer route. Even if the path to Bin-Bhathir is unsafe, we are in no less danger if we skirt the Kai-Thal without water." Vittorio agreed. Still, I felt uneasy. The slaves' eyes seemed to follow us maliciously every step we tread; everywhere dead animal carcasses swelled and stank in the heat; and in every inch of the sky above us, the circling crows, crows, crows.