

Prologue

Two thousand years ago, the Turakhor swept down across the moors and over the Mountains of the Northern Winds, into the valley of the River Shulos. The people of the valley were farmers in scattered villages; the Turakhor slaughtered and subjugated them with ease. After their united strength had conquered the valley, the warriors of the Turakhor turned upon each other, fighting for control of the remaining peasants and the lush farmland.

After almost thirteen centuries of infighting, five distinct clans had appeared, each with their own niche in the valley. The borders had been static for almost fifty years before a truce finally resolved the war and set them in stone, establishing a confederation of five kingdoms. Although there were some shakeups within each clan and ruling house, for seven centuries they held the valley in relative prosperity, the occasional border scrapes settled by a council of the kings and their alliances cemented through intermarriages.

The confederation lasted only seven centuries, for but ten years ago, the native peasants of the valley rose up against the Turakhor and drove them back across the mountains, scattering them to the four winds upon the moors.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Guys

Kerric settled into the shade of a natural hedgerow, watching the sheep in the shallow valley below. He was too old to be watching the flocks, he frowned to himself. Too old, too experienced, and trained for more important things. He had younger cousins better suited to such a boy's task—

His eyes narrowed as they followed an errant shadow along the opposite ridge. Where were the dogs? His frown deepened. First indolent cousins, now equally lazy dogs? He slunk out from his bit of shade and through the heath, slipping into the flock to scout out the anomaly. The shadow moved again, and he froze, trying to pick its owner out from the sun-blasted heath, swearing under his breath when he finally did. A moor-cat. Just what he *didn't* want to be dealing with in the heat of the day. He slid an arrow from the quiver across his lower back.

The cat was downwind, yet somehow oblivious to his presence among the sheep, which were equally unaware of the cat. He grimaced slightly to himself as he nocked the arrow on his short bow, wondering if he really *did* smell that much like the flock already. The cat was creeping forward at a measured pace, punctuated at regular intervals by pauses; Kerric tracked it steadily until he was certain of the pattern, then let the arrow loose.

The sheep scattered as the cat screamed, and Kerric swore; regrouping them was not going to be pleasant, especially with blood in the air. He stood and trotted first to the twitching cat, cutting its throat with his belt knife. Then he turned to survey the sheep. Where *were* those damned dogs?

The sun was setting as he drove the sheep back to the pens at camp, counting them as they went through the gate. When the count matched the one he'd taken when he started out that morning, he headed for the hut he shared with his mother. She stood, startled, when he threw the moor-cat's skin down to one side of the doorway.

"What happened?" she asked, stopping him before he could go inside.

"Nothing, Ma. I saw it first. Where were the boys today? And the dogs? This isn't my job, damn it."

"I don't know, Kerry. I don't control your cousins."

He wiped some of the dust from his face on the inside of his sleeve. "It's like the house broke apart," he said quietly. "No one gives a damn about anything but his own well-being."

"Your uncles are reluctant to recognize you," his mother said.

"The Lady Ariana, Queen of Lorelin, should not have been pushed aside."

"And without your father, what could we have done?" she admonished. He rubbed the stubble along his jaw pensively.

"I was not a boy when we left the Shulos Valley, Ma."

"To your uncles, you will never be anything but a boy."

"Then one day they may rue their blindness."

"Jos!"

The young man loading pack mules secured the last tie on the mule at hand and turned to face the rider.

"Hey, Eran. Did you need something?"

"You remember Kerric Lorelin?"

Josua's brows furrowed. "Yeah. What about him?"

"He wants to see us at the trading post during the spring market."

"What for?"

“I don’t know, but Chad Aronel and Roderic Sheryn are supposed to be there too.”

“You don’t think he’d be crazy enough to suggest going back, do you?”

“I don’t know if crazy would be a requirement. There’s a general understanding on the northern moors that Kerric got shorted out by his uncles when they set up and divided up shares, and he doesn’t have the brothers to back his claims.”

“Kerric would be king of Lorelin if we were still in the valley. How can they get away with that?”

Eran shrugged, turning his horse. “Would you be loading mules if you were still in the valley, Jos? I don’t think so. If nothing else, we’ll get a couple free rounds out of him, so I say, there’s no harm in showing up.”

Josua nodded slightly. “All right. Though I’ve business to finish out first.”

“I’ll see you there, then, cousin.”

Chapter 2: The Market

Kerric stood atop the rough stone wall of the trading post as the spring market opened. His mother had stayed home again, and he knew well enough why. He had offered to move out so she could marry again, but she wouldn't hear of it, so her romance was limited to the market times, when he was gone and her beau was at the home camp as one of the guards.

He had watched the other four arrive, uncertain if they would agree to see him, but no one came to the market without some kind of business to conduct, so he doubted anything would happen the first several days. His business—selling sheep, wool, and some of his mother's weaving—would be conducted by his uncles. He had given up several years before trying to get a firm grip on it; he knew they were cheating him, and that they weren't above killing him if he got too insistent about straightening everything out. Some days he wondered if his father had been any better, or if his sense of equity came from his mother.

Towards noon he headed down into the market to find some shade, tired of prolonging his sunburn any further, and he finally settled across from the makeshift pen where the Corin horses were corralled. Eran Corin was almost seven years younger than he, but he was well adjusted to the nuances of dealing his stock. Kerric's mother knew, though his uncles didn't yet, that he was going to buy himself a horse at this market. He'd been saving for it for six years, money that should have gone to trinkets for girls, in his mother's opinion, but Kerric had given up on finding a girl on the moors who would accept him. As the market settled down while people went back to their tents to eat, Kerric settled his eyes on a bluish roan. He hadn't had, or even sat, a horse in almost eight years, but he was determined to get one, at the very least before he had to go back to herding sheep. After several minutes, Eran noticed his gaze and drifted over to him.

“See something you like?”

“Oh, several,” Kerric said mildly. “But my funds are limited, so I'll wait and see what scrubs you have left later on.”

“Well, you'll have trouble then, friend. Corins don't have any scrubs.”

“That would be a problem, then.”

“What did you want to see all of us about?” Eran asked, lowering his voice a little. Kerric shifted his gaze from the horse to glance at the younger man.

“I'll wait till everyone can get together at once,” he said. “It'll be easier to lay out if everyone's there to ask questions.”

A frown hovered at the corners of Eran's mouth. “It'd be nice to have the opportunity to ruminate on it first.”

“Well,” Kerric said, standing, “I bothered coming to buy a horse. Beyond that, I'm still kicking a lot of things around myself. I need to put more than one head to it, so when you all can get together, I'll be available.”

He headed back out of the central market to where his uncles had set up camp, drawing several stern glances as he walked into the cluster of tents.

“Always come begging to us when you need something, hm?” one said as Kerric stopped to gauge the quality of one of the contents of one of the cooking pots.

“No, I just came to see if I should eat elsewhere,” he said, putting the ladle back with a grimace. “The answer was yes, I think. Besides,” he said as he turned to go hunt up some food. “If I were to up and leave like you all are pushing me to, who would watch the sheep?”

He savored their somewhat concerned silence as he headed out of earshot. The last thing they wanted was to lose the opportunity to exploit him, even if he fought them every step of the

way. If he left, his cousins *would* have to tend the flocks, and that meant his uncles would have to find a way to make them do so. A very unpleasant situation, indeed.

Kerric stopped opposite the southerners' booths in the market. Their presence—and their power—had increased over the ten years they had been coming to the markets on the moors. They bought a lot of wool—too much, really—and just enough of the woven goods to maintain a majority in that market. Even though the five clans had really specialized—Lorelin in wool production, Tiar in weaving, Corin in horses, Aronel in pottery, and Sheryn in beef and leathern goods—they still relied on trade from the south, from the valley, for grain and many craft works. He recognized a lot of the cotton goods the southerners brought as being from the western Shulos valley, and many of the brass pieces were undoubtedly from the lake district. Did they dominate valley trade as they did on the moors?

Roderic Sheryn approached him that evening while he was leaning on the fence of the Corins' corrals, watching the blue roan.

"Where did you want us to meet you?" he asked. Kerric shifted slightly.

"Oh, somewhere quiet. I'd rather keep it quiet till I have a better grasp of the overall picture."

"How quiet?"

"Where the prying ears will be heard before they can hear too much," Kerric said. "Hey, Eran."

The younger man drifted over. "What can I do for you?"

"Is there anything I should know about that roan?"

"Other than you've been staring at him for close to six hours?"

"Yeah."

"In what context?"

"You want to know if something bad would change my mind?" Kerric said. "Probably not. As long as I can afford him, probably not."

"He's a little headstrong," Eran said, glancing back at the horse.

"You should be investing in a woman, not a horse," Roderic said.

"That's what my ma keeps saying," Kerric said. "She keeps ignoring that most of the women on the moors think my brain's baked, and those who don't are taken. It somewhat complicates matters. Besides. If it takes me six years to put together the money for a horse, a woman would take sixty. So." He pulled out a small leather pouch. "Name a price, Eran, and we'll see how far off I was."

"Oh, let's say fifteen saliks," Eran said. "He's not a bad horse."

"Pretty close, then. I'll come get him tomorrow morning so I don't have to explain tonight." He tossed Eran the pouch and headed for the hollow on the far side of the post where he'd set up his little camp. The post was almost fifteen full acres, enclosed by a twenty foot stone wall about ten feet thick, with a gate in the northern and southern walls. There was a well, several stands of trees, and the central market structure of booths and corrals. Kerric dropped next to his bedroll in the hollow of willows by the little-known spring. He'd given Eran almost twenty saliks even; hopefully he would take the hint and throw in a saddle. Dealing with both Eran and Roderic would drive the price closer to twenty-five, and twenty-five was a little steep when he was intending to get his mother something to help make up for that he was going to be gone most of the summer.

Kerric found the horse saddled and waiting for him the next morning. He gave Eran a

brief grin.

“Was that good enough?” he said.

“More than,” Eran said, handing him the reins. “Are you sure about this? How long’s it been since you were on a horse?”

“I’m still young enough to take a fall or two,” Kerric said. “So, then. I’ll be back this evening, probably. If everyone’s ready, we’ll talk tonight. If not, later, hm? But for now, I’ll see how my new friend is. Does he have a name?”

“Only if you count ‘son of a bitch.’”

“Well, we’ll see if Sonny likes to chase rabbits, then,” Kerric said. He secured his bedroll and pulled himself easily into the saddle, more easily than he expected. “We’ll see how sore I am tonight.”

Kerric rode the horse out of the trading post and onto the moors, putting him through his paces and discovering, when he did, that the “headstrong” part came in when trying to get the horse to change direction at a faster gait. He hemmed about it to himself as he slowed the horse down.

“Well, Sonny,” he said, “we’re going to have to work this out. You see, I used to be able to take down a buck from the back of someone like you at a run, and I’d like to be able to do so again. To do that, I need you to move with me, and without the rein. It’ll take some time, but I think we can do it.”

Eran was chuckling when Kerric rode back into the post that evening with a pair of rabbits hanging off his saddle.

“What?” Kerric said, dropping off the horse beside the corral.

“You haven’t sat a horse in how long?”

“But I can still hit a mark from one. I’ve been walking for eight years, Eran. It gets pretty damned old, especially when sheep spook so easily.”

“If you intend to spend the rest of your life herding sheep, I’ll be very surprised.”

“If I don’t do something soon, I probably will be. Everyone else still busy, or no?”

“I think Jos still has some deals to close tomorrow morning, but that’s about it.”

Kerric nodded slightly. “All right. I’ll probably be around most of tomorrow afternoon, then.”

“Anywhere in particular we should meet with you?”

“Oh, the little clump of willows along the west wall works well enough.”

“Will do.”

Chapter 3: The Plan

A warm, drizzling rain had settled over the trading camp by sunset the next day, and Kerric had erected a lean-to in the willow stand with a waxed cotton tarp, using it to both shield his little fire and keep his horse mostly dry. The other four men showed up shortly, Josua toting a roast ham and Chad with a heavy clay jar.

“Where did you manage to find a ham up here?” Kerric said as Josua fixed it on a short stake by the fire.

“Probably the same place you managed to snag that tarp,” Josua replied.

“The cider was acquired in the clear,” Chad said.

“Yes,” Eran said, “but it’s *cider*. You could’ve come up with some decent ale if you’d tried hard enough.”

“Well, it’s something,” Kerric said. “Go ahead and settle; I’ve got a lot for you all to kick around.”

“It’s been a long time since we were all in one place,” Chad said.

“That hasn’t been completely accidental,” Kerric said. “It’s dangerous to get together a lot of former princes when they’re all fatherless and still relatively young. They get ambitious.”

“We’ve got a fairly good thing going up here, Kerric,” Roderic said. “We don’t need to do anything rash.”

“No? Well, some of us have a good thing going. Some don’t. For every Turakhor who’s making a decent living, there are twenty who are barely getting enough to eat. Clans and houses that used to be solid are tearing themselves apart.”

“If you’re just bitter about what Lorelin’s done to you, that’s fine, Kerric,” Chad said, “but don’t take the rest of us down with you.”

“I’m not really concerned with that. It’s irritating, yes, but there’s just me. I don’t have younger brothers or sisters to look after, just Ma, and my ma can take care of herself well enough if something does happen to me. I’m concerned with the Turakhor as a whole. What’s going to happen to us ten years from now if we stay here on the moors?”

“We can’t go back to the valley,” Josua said. “That’s not even possible.”

“Don’t worry about that for the moment. Just look at what’s happening to us as a whole. Unless we want the clans to break completely and go their separate ways. Before the Turakhor ever went into the valley, they were just a loose bunch of tribes. And if we don’t do something, we’ll just end back up at that point. Do we *want* to go back to that? To warring against each other over watering holes?” Kerric said. “It’s so damned stupid, but when your entire life is sheep and cattle and horses...”

“You’re assuming it’ll happen,” Chad said.

“It’s already started. Lorelin has clashed with Sheryn off and on the past two years over the overlap in the southern edge of Lorelin’s normal grazing grounds and the northern edge of Sheryn’s. It’s pointless. It took us thirteen hundred years to stop fighting over land in the valley; before that, we had always fought over land up here.”

“How do you know that?” Roderic said. “How do you know the tribes never got along?”

“Because before my brother was killed, I was trained in the religious orders. And sitting on the moors staring at sheep for ten years has given me a lot of time to remember all of it. They united long enough to take the Shulos valley because of a winter so bad that to stay on the moors would have wiped them out. I want to go back into the valley, yes, but not alone, and not with an army.”

“Why bother?” Eran said. “What does the valley have that we can’t get if we need it?”

“Grain, and better winters,” Kerric said. “Our people have never been farmers. We could be if we tried, but I doubt that will happen anytime soon. I want to go back into the valley, just the five of us, to scout it out.”

“Why all of us?” Chad said.

“Because even if you were too young to have used it ten years ago, all of you *can* use a blade. I don’t know what we’ll run into. But I’m looking at going down there for say, four or five months, and seeing what the situation is. If nothing else, the wool is better when they’re eating grass and not heath. And so is the beef, for that matter.”

“Even if we went back into the valley to look around, why bother dragging the entirety of the Turakhor there, as well?”

“Well, we wouldn’t have to,” Kerric said. “There are several options, though, if we go look around and decide it’s feasible to get our people back off these moors.”

“They aren’t going to listen to us, Kerric,” Roderic said. “Even if we do find something better. You see it clearest in your case, in that your uncles wouldn’t really give a damn if you were dead or not. But the rest of us—well, we’ve got some moderate financial success, but that’s about it. If they were going to be listening to anyone, it would be you. You’re old enough, and at least proven in battle. But Chad and Jos and I weren’t even fourteen when we left the valley, and Eran was barely twelve. It’ll be a while before we have any clout within even our houses, much less our clans.”

“Well, let me lay out the options first, and then I’ll lay out my concerns,” Kerric said. “If we were to decide, after our looking around, that we should reconquer the valley—which I think is the least likely to happen, and the most unfeasible if we do go back—we could either renew the old system, or come up with something new. But as I said, I think it’s unlikely that will happen. At the very least, I think we should look into better trading arrangements with the valley, whether we go back or not. If all or most of the Turakhor go back into the valley, I would suggest we set up on the inner slopes of the mountains, where there are very few or no farmers. That would be the option with the least potential for immediate conflict. And if we ever did decide we wanted to take back what was ours for two thousand years, we’d be fairly well poised to. If only part of the people want to go, I would say to set up a sort of colony, a presence in the valley, if just to give us a foothold to maintain trade.”

“You’re thinking of the southerners,” Eran said, nodding slightly.

“Exactly. I want to know what kind of presence *they* have in the valley. I want to know how badly they’re screwing us over,” Kerric said. “Because face it, they’re merchants. They have to be getting a good deal. But I’m worried about more than that. Too few men are doing well up here. They’re making too many people dependent upon them. The Turakhor have always been warriors, and for a long time herders, for the most part. There’s too damn many of us to really keep that up without spreading much further to the north and west than we have. The more we spread out, the more disparate we become, the more likely it is that cousins will be warring with cousins. The last thing I want to see the Turakhor relapse to is internal war. At that point, we become more subject to control by outside forces than we already are. The valley has always had that problem. They’re just a bunch of villages, and they rarely watch out for each other.”

“Which makes them nice and easy to conquer bit by bit,” Roderic said.

“Yes—and if that happens to us?” He waited; they were quiet. “These southerners concern me. I don’t know what they want, but I know they trade directly with the valley. Why can’t we? Why do we need a middleman eating our profits?”

“You don’t have profits, Kerric,” Eran said. “But I know what you’re saying. If nothing else, we need to scout our economic interests in the valley, and if the climate seems right to go back either in peace or war, it’s worth considering. God knows what eating heath is doing to the quality of the livestock.”

“You seem to forget, though,” Roderic said, “that they drove us out on the point of a spear. Why would they want us back?”

“That,” Kerric said, “depends on what the southerners are doing to *them*. And I very much doubt the villages that united long enough to push us out stayed united long enough to do more than divide up their land again. But I can’t know until I look, and I’d rather not ride into a lynch mob without a couple good arms to back me.”

“How long have you been kicking this around? The Shulosa don’t like us, and not all of us are particularly fond of them,” Chad said. Kerric was quiet for a moment, stoking the fire up a little against the drizzle that had managed to drift to it.

“Well, I first took concern when the traditions that would have given me a voice in my house broke down. The traditions that would have at least given my mother a respectable allowance from her brother-in-laws. I should be getting fifteen or twenty percent of the cut, especially when you consider I’m watching the entirety of my house’s damned flock alone and do about half the shearing. Instead I get about five. That was the start. The southerners’ increased interest in buying raw wool concerned me further, enough that I started saving for a horse. And why? Because if they’re buying raw wool, it means someone besides Tiar is making the cloth.”

“Who, though?” Josua said. “Ninety-five percent of the valley farms.”

“Someone,” Kerric said, “which is enough to mean that it’s money not coming to your people. They’re probably losing Tiar more money than they are any of the rest of us.”

“How would any of this help the poverty problem we seem to be developing?” Chad said.

“That, yeah.” Kerric was quiet for a moment. “Well, it won’t, exactly. If we can get better trade arrangements, it will increase the amount of money and goods to go around, but the poverty will only be fixed when the men who control the money spread it out fairly. When we first got up here, the men who had been at the top before grabbed up all our assets, for the most part, and they’ve held onto them, even though, in reality, things like the flocks and the land and so forth always belonged to each clan as a whole. At this point, Lorelin’s flocks are all herded by house, the clan is spread out by house around the northern moors, and the profits are split first by house, then within the house. The selling is done on a clan level, though. I’m getting about five percent of what would be the house’s share, but I know my uncles are taking more than what is theirs to divide among themselves. They’re screwing over everyone in Lorelin, and at the moment I can’t do a damned thing about it.”

“Why would moving into the valley help at all when there are already too many of us?” Josua said.

“Because we could spread out within boundaries,” Roderic said, his chin in his hand, eyes on the fire. “The problem would be getting everyone to uproot again if it did seem plausible, getting them to go back when so many of them still want to punish the valley.”

“Well, we have to see if it’s plausible first,” Kerric said.

“Four or five months, you said?” Chad asked. Kerric nodded. “When did you want to start?”

“Meet back here in about three weeks, and we’ll start down,” Kerric said.

“Can you afford this trip?” Josua said.

“I’ve been saving for it. Besides. There’s deer to hunt down there.”