

THE DELIVERER

Book One in the Marenon Chronicles



Jason D. Morrow

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The Deliverer

Book One in the Marenon Chronicles

By Jason D. Morrow

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By Jen Lee

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Dedication

To my wife, Emily. You are the source of my inspiration, the love of my life. This is for you because you believe in me every single day. You make my heart whole.

The Marenon Chronicles

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If It Kills Me (Coming Soon)

Marenon



Lurns Mountains
Green Gate

Jarul

Elysium

The Gated Passage

Ezar Lake

Zasca River

Hanzad

Jekyll Rock

Canor

Blue Gate Mountain

Ocalon River

Farlaweer

Voelif

Mirage Hill

Clover Mountain

Berato

Voelif Dunes

Waterfield Lake

Midland Pass

Reyhus Meadow

Anwyn Forest

Timugo

Mudavé

Red Gate

Reemlock Mountains

Demon's Claw

A bullet shattered the back window of the flatbed truck nearly sending Silas Ainsle to his death two days early. It also allowed his grandfather, Garland, the opening to aim his double-barrel shotgun at the driver on their tail.

With a pull of the trigger he hit the front end of the pursuing vehicle, shattering the left headlight into a thousand tiny pieces. Silas glanced at the rearview mirror and saw the passenger bring his arm out to spit another flurry of bullets toward them. He swerved just as Garland let off another round from the shotgun, shooting wide.

“Silas!” the old man spat.

“What? They’re shooting faster than you can load!” Silas said as he sped along the clouded dirt road. The blood-red sun was setting all too quickly. Another bullet split the rearview mirror and they both ducked low.

“We’ve only got two shells left and they aren’t letting up on the trigger,” Garland yelled.

Silas frantically scanned the edges of the highway, searching for an alternate route where they could lose their trackers. If the sun went down before he could find a spot they wouldn’t have a chance. Silas’ attention snapped to the right when his grandfather pointed.

“Over there, you see that?” The road kept straight, but there was a small trail veering off to the right.

“Is it a path?” Silas asked.

“Yes, take it!” Garland said as he loaded his last two shells.

The dirt path seemed to go straight up the mountainside and Silas pressed the pedal to the floor. Trees obscured the direction the path took so he had no clue where it would lead them. For all Silas knew, they were headed off a cliff.

At seventeen, Silas had plenty of experience driving his grandfather’s truck, but recent events placed him behind the wheel having to maneuver like a professional. The truck behind them carried two men as well, but it was much heavier. The pursuers could stay behind Silas and Garland all day on the flat terrain, but going up the steep mountain would slow them considerably.

“Just don’t let up on the gas,” Garland said, daring to peer over the back of his seat at their pursuers.

Silas glanced at the fuel gauge and winced.

“We can’t make it far. Gas is leaking.”

Garland bit his lip. “Well, we’ll just have to keep going until this thing shuts off. The more we drive, the more distance we put between us and them.” Garland’s mouth curled into a devious grin as he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a blue jeweled medallion. “The more distance we put between us, the smaller the chance they have of ever seeing this thing.” He stroked the precious metal as the blue sapphire in it

center sparkled in the fading sunlight.

“When are you planning on telling me what that thing is anyway?”

“It’s something that doesn’t need to be in the hands of someone like Marcus and Theron.”

Silas shook his head. The old man had never told him what was so important about the medallion. In fact, Silas knew nothing about the medallion until the two pale-skinned men named Marcus and Theron appeared at their door in dark trench coats, demanding that Silas and Garland hand it over to them. They had threatened to use force if Garland and Silas didn’t cooperate. Silas, of course, had no idea what they were talking about. He left them standing on the porch of their home, and when Silas went to get Garland, he found his grandfather with two swords and a shotgun. From there it was a mad dash to the truck and a hot pursuit by Marcus and Theron. At some point they lost their pursuers but continued heading west to a place that Garland said he had prepared for such a day. For three days they traveled with little rest and few answers to Silas’ questions.

It had been only a couple of hours since Marcus and Theron had somehow found them again and Silas had not let up on the gas since. Garland asserted that they were near his hiding place.

The truck began to quiver to a dull purr as it trudged up the side of the mountain. The path crawled around the mountain instead of over it. With the tank spilling the last bit of precious fuel, he knew it would only be moments before he would have to pull the brake and leave the truck behind.

Marcus and Theron slowly faded out of sight with their heavy vehicle, but Silas stayed wary. The cliff’s edge was too close to the slogging wheels.

The gas in the tank lasted longer than he anticipated, but after several miles of driving uphill in the wide circle it finally, and calmly, coughed to an expected end. Silas pulled the brake and the two of them bolted out.

Garland held out a hand to shush Silas before he could say a word. He tilted his head as he listened for the other truck, but no sound could be heard. When he was satisfied, he slung the shotgun strap over his shoulder, secured the two swords under his armpit and pushed past Silas. He then opened the driver’s side door and unlatched the brake.

“What are you doing?” Silas asked, bewildered.

The truck began to roll down the mountain and both of them watched as it slid over the cliff, barely making a noise until its metal crumbled against the rock on the path further down. Garland scanned the terrain in front of them and wiped the sweat from the end of his nose. “We’re near the top. Let’s head for the middle ground into the woods. They’ll be hard pressed to find us in there.”

“We’re going to get lost, Gramps.”

“Don’t call me Gramps, you know I hate it.”

Silas was about to come back with something, but froze as they heard the faint

growling of a diesel engine tearing up the mountainside. Like a waking giant, the sound gradually became louder.

Garland tapped Silas for his attention and handed him a sword.

“You realize they’re carrying automatic weapons,” Silas said.

“And we only have two shells left,” Garland came back. “It might be all we can use against them. Come on.”

Silas fastened the strap of the sheath around his chest so the sword hung comfortably on his back and Garland did the same. Silas followed him into the woods having no idea where they were going. He was often surprised by his grandfather's active behavior. His drive to maintain possession of this mysterious medallion was uncanny, and that feeling was multiplied considering Silas had never even seen the item before.

The air was thinner and harder to breathe as they ran through the rough, wooded terrain. It was almost dark now, but Silas figured that could be used to their advantage.

Hopefully, Silas thought. Within a few minutes, they reached a rocky summit, a mesa from which they could see for miles, including the road below them. The truck rumbled into sight and drove steadily around the mountain closer to their position.

They lay on their bellies and crawled behind a series of bushes near the edge of the stone overlook. Their breaths were shallow for several long seconds, and then Garland finally broke the silence.

“Do you see that cave over there?” He pointed to Silas' left.

He traced his grandfather's gaze and almost said 'no' but finally caught a glimpse of the gaping hole in the side of the rock.

“Yeah, I see it.”

“That's the hideout.”

“Then why aren't we there?”

“We don't have time,” Garland said. “Theron and Marcus are close. We needed to be in that cave twenty minutes ago. Running through the woods will make too much noise and they'll surely find us before we can reach it.”

“Why wouldn't they keep looking for the truck?” Silas asked.

“If they didn't see that truck falling out of the sky, then they are less observant than we give them credit for.”

“So, what's the plan?” Silas wiped away an anxious sweat, as the rumbling of Marcus and Theron's truck got closer. His grandfather's eyes were fixed on the cave's entrance, unwavering.

“We take the fight to them,” Garland said. He turned to Silas and gave him a wide smile. “The hunters become the prey.”

Other mountains, with their shades of violet and orange in the setting sun, surrounded the peak where they sat. Silas knew they were somewhere in Colorado, but that was all. Although they were on the run for their lives, Garland didn't miss the chance to say it was a good opportunity in Silas' training. Even for an old man, Garland was

unrelenting in his endeavors to instruct Silas. Confronting Marcus or Theron, the ‘prey and destroying one of them was his final test after years of guidance. He had trained long and hard with Garland and had become an expert swordsman and fighter. He could track beasts with the best of them and his marksmanship was unmatched, but Silas had never killed a man.

Their quarry was eccentric to say the least. When Theron and Marcus came to the doorstep, Silas could tell they were trouble from the beginning, but he had no idea who they really were until Garland finally told him.

“They are Sleepers, men completely possessed by the Stühocs,” he had said.

As far as Silas could tell after listening to Garland’s explanation, “Stühocs” were a fabled group of creatures from another world, bent on finding one certain medallion.

Of course, Silas had never seen one of these individuals and had questioned the old man’s sanity on more than one occasion. Garland told him that the possessed were uncommon and not often seen, but their coming to him meant that it was time to finish Silas’ training.

The idea of the possessed was intriguing to Silas. All the Stühocs could do was implant ideas and wishes into the mind, making the possessed believe they wanted something so badly even if they cared nothing for it. When Silas asked where the Stühocs resided he only got a mumbled answer and a wave of the hand. This only added reason to doubt the creature’s existence, but with too many men trying to kill them, there wasn’t a lot of time for a better explanation.

The question then came, why did they want this medallion?

“Why haven’t you told me what is so special about it?”

Garland grimaced. “Not right now, Silas.”

“Why not now? You dragged me all the way out here because some possessed freaks are trying to get it. We’ve both nearly been killed multiple times! Please tell me there is something in that cave that will help us.”

Garland did not move. His eyes were fixed straight ahead as if choosing his words carefully in his mind. “It’s ... it’s very powerful, Silas.”

Silas rolled his eyes. “Does it keep the monsters away, Gramps?”

“Unfortunately it doesn’t,” Garland said.

Silas had expected a snide remark, but sensed a gravity in his grandfather’s tone. The conversation ended abruptly when they saw the truck come around the nearest bend. The shell-ridden machine finally rolled to a stop and for a moment there was complete silence. Not even the bugs made noise. Then, both doors opened immediately and the two men stepped out of the truck. They wore the same black trench coats as they had when they arrived at Silas’ home a few days before. Both of them held a machine gun in the right hand. Theron, the taller of the two, had been driving. He threw the butt of his half-finished cigarette to the ground and said something to the red-headed Marcus. Marcus nodded.

“What are they doing?” Silas whispered.

“They know we can't be too far and they know we weren't in the truck. The truck we left stopped there.”

Silas watched intently as Marcus and Theron walked slowly into the wooded area. Marcus lifted his head and sniffed as if he would be able to catch their scent.

Silas eagerly anticipated the darkness as he looked to the sun in the distance, its rays melting behind the hills.

Marcus and Theron had their guns ready to fire at anything that moved as they walked through the thick brush and small trees. Eventually the two of them crossed directly under Silas and Garland and were close enough for Silas to smell the stench of cigarette smoke. He looked at his grandfather and caught a quick wink. How Garland planned to get to the cave was a mystery.

Silas didn't know whether or not to believe his grandfather when he said the Stühocs had possessed these men. He wasn't even sure he believed there were such creatures as Stühocs. But possessed or not, they were there to hunt and kill.

The night fell upon them and Silas silently swore when he noticed Marcus and Theron had found the cave.

“Do they know what's in there?” Silas asked.

Garland said nothing for nearly a minute then answered. “I believe they may have known about it all along. I was just hoping that we could get there first.”

“What's in it that we need so badly?”

Garland looked at his grandson, the moonlight giving him just enough illumination to see his face clearly. “I can't tell you right now,” he said. “I swear to you when this is over, I will tell you everything.”

He didn't want to, but Silas accepted his grandfather's avoidance. There would be no point in arguing with him now.

After it was completely dark, Garland made them wait two more hours. Silas' body felt stiff and sore from lying on the rock surface for so long and his eyes felt as though weights dangled from each lid. His breathing became deeper just before Garland spoke, ripping him from a brief moment of comfort.

“They haven't moved,” he said. “They're waiting for us.”

“Then why don't we leave?” Silas whispered. “Let's steal their truck and go down the mountain.”

Garland shook his head. “No. We must fight them. They know that I need to get into the cave.” He pulled the shotgun to his side and set it next to Silas. “You take this. I'll confront them first. I know how the possessed think. When they see that I have a sword they will want to fight me with their own. A gun is weak in their eyes.”

“How do you know they carry blades?”

“They always carry blades,” Garland said. “Once their rifles are down, I want you to try and fire at them.” He pointed hard at Silas. “Don't shoot me by accident!”

“It’s a shotgun, Gramps, you better stay low.”

The situation felt too dangerous. Not only were they about to go in for the kill, they were setting themselves up for being killed as well. It was an impossible situation, but Silas had to follow his grandfather.

Climbing down the steep rock in the middle of the night was no easy task. Garland reached the ground first and did his best to steady Silas on his descent. He decided they would flank the cave from the left to avoid any noise made by walking through the dead leaves of the wooded ground. At the slow pace it took several minutes to find the dim pathway that led to the side of the cave. The two of them hunkered low, being mindful of their steps as not to alert Marcus or Theron. Surprise was key. After several minutes of moving slowly they finally reached their destination just yards from the cave opening and both of them knelt behind a bush. Silas wiped his wet, shaggy blonde hair to the side and gripped the shotgun. The sword weighed heavy on his back.

He watched as his grandfather surveyed the best way to enter, taking notice of the old man’s movements. He was looking his age. He was active and could hold his own against anyone, but the years that wore on his 70-year-old frame were beginning to bring him down. This was something Silas had begun to notice several years before. Garland was the only parent he had ever known. The change he had undergone over the past seventeen years was subtle but apparent. Silas hated the thought of losing his grandfather, but he knew old age was just a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. He didn't know what he would do without Garland.

These thoughts pulsed through his mind, as they were about to meet death face to face. What was about to take place could go terribly wrong. Not only may he lose his grandfather, but he too could die. He had only one more protest in him.

“Are you sure this is what we should do?”

Garland was still studying their approach. “Yes,” he said. He looked at Silas and slowly pulled the sword from its sheath. “Stay ten paces behind me. When I drop to the ground, fire your first shot where the threat is highest. Save your last shot for the other. From this distance, a shotgun will only wound them. After the second shot, come in with your sword and we will take them.

Silas nodded. He was as ready as he could be, considering. He gripped the gun tighter as his grandfather gave him another firm squeeze on the shoulder and stood from his crouch. He counted the steps until he reached ten paces. He immediately stopped when a deafening sound roared through the air. He jumped to the ground and expected his grandfather to do the same, but he didn't. Garland just stood there. The bang sounded again and Silas knew it was from a gun. Still, his grandfather stood motionless. Silas wanted to call out, but did not want to give away his position. Where had the shot come from? Garland then turned, revealing a stain of blood spreading across his shirt, and fell to his knees.

“No!” Silas cried, just above a whisper, seeing two gaping wounds crying out o

Garland's stomach. Silas could not stay where he was. With his gun in hand and the sword on his back he ran to his grandfather's side.

"Sil..., run Silas..."

"No, no, no, you can't die like this!" Where had the shot come from?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Theron and Marcus charging to where he held his dying grandfather. Silas lifted the gun and pulled back both hammers, but was too late. Marcus slapped the gun away and it fell to the ground harmlessly. He reached for his sword from behind, but was sharply kicked in the face before it could leave its sheath. Silas had been blinded with the kick. All he could see was black and could hear nothing but a loud ringing. With one last breath, he heaved and slipped out of consciousness.

When he woke, he wasn't sure if he had yet opened his eyes, but soon realized he was blindfolded. Ropes were tied tight against his wrists in front of him. His head felt as though a marching band had paraded on his skull and the trumpets were still blowing. He moved his arms to see if there was any chance of freeing himself. He was surprised to find that he wasn't tied to anything, although the knotted ropes around his wrists and legs made his escape feel impossible. After a few moments he mustered the strength to slide on his rear to a dirt wall. He rubbed his face against it. The rough edge scraped open his flesh, the dry dirt on his face becoming mud. Finally his eyes were free of the blindfold but his ability to see was not much better than before.

He was in a small room. It was dark except for a small stream of light coming through a hole in the door on the other side. Its source was weak and seemed to flicker as if it were a torch. Once his eyes were able to adjust, he looked down to find a lifeless body lying on the ground just feet away.

"Grandpa?" Silas whispered.

Silence.

"Grandpa!" He said more sharply.

Finally the body breathed to life, but the breath was shallow and ragged. "Silas," he said. His voice sounded almost as a memory. If Silas hadn't been listening for it, he would have never heard him. But he could hear and the sound was that of a dying man fighting a battle for every last breath. His wounds showed that he had been shot twice. How is he still alive? The image of his grandfather lying helpless on the bloodstained ground would be burned into his mind forever. He had never seen him in such a helpless state. He wished more than anything that they had not come to this mountain in the first place.

Silas sluggishly moved his body to his grandfather. Garland had been left there to die and Silas wished he could comfort him. With his hands and legs tied, he knelt next to him.

"I guess they got the medallion," Silas said.

A slight grin came across Garland's face. "No."

Silas cocked his head waiting for an explanation.

The sound Garland made was as though he was reaching for each word. “When they found that it wasn't on either of us,” he took a long pause to breathe, “they questioned me for ... for about twenty minutes. I wouldn't tell them anything, so they brought me in here.”

“How come they didn't find it? I saw you with it in the truck.”

“Exactly,” Garland said with a smile. “There's a hidden compartment behind the seat. If you didn't know about it, you'd never find it. I placed the medallion there when you weren't looking.”

For some reason a wave of relief fell over Silas, not because he was happy the medallion was temporarily safe, but that his grandfather wasn't about to die in vain. If either Marcus or Theron had their grimy hands on the medallion, Garland's death would be for nothing.

With the relief came a fountain of remorse flooding his body, resulting in a bleeding of tears. His grandfather, the only man who had ever cared anything about him, was about to die. There was no more time and Garland's death was inevitable. With him gone there was no one, no family or friends in this life. Silas was old enough to take care of himself, but that wasn't the problem. He was about to be truly alone.

Garland held up a hand when he noticed the tears rolling down Silas' face. “Silas, there is nothing you can do. I will be fine.”

“You're going to die.”

“It's not the end of the world, Silas.”

“I don't want to be alone. I need you here.”

“You won't be alone.”

Silas didn't know how Garland could say this. It wasn't true, but he wasn't going to make this harder than it was.

“Are you in pain?” he asked.

Garland smiled, but it turned into a agonizing grimace. “Yes.”

“I wish there was something I could do.”

“You need to listen to me,” Garland said. He took a deep breath, almost counting down the seconds. “You know where the medallion is. Don't tell them.”

Silas nodded, hanging on every word.

“These next couple of days are going to be difficult. They are not going to kill you as long as they think you know where the medallion is. If anything, tell them I hid it in the woods. It may buy you some time.” Garland swallowed hard. “They'll get impatient. They'll threaten to kill you and will eventually do so if you keep refusing. But by then you will hopefully have help. A protector.”

Silas began to interrupt, but Garland held up a finger. “Your protector will be here no later than two days. You must hold out until then.”

“How? Who?” Silas said.

“Just follow him, Silas. Do everything as he tells you. Take him to the medallion.”

and he will take you to safety.”

“How do you know this?”

“It was planned from the beginning.”

“What beginning?”

Garland let out a deep cough. Silas could tell the pain within him was becoming too much to endure. He knew he shouldn't be pestering his dying grandfather with questions, but there was so much left to learn.

There was a long pause as Garland gathered the strength to speak.

“Silas.”

He bent forward to hear his nearly soundless words.

“I never thought it would begin like this, dear boy,” he said.

A hot tear rolled down Silas' cheek as he clutched his grandfather's hand as much as his bound wrists would allow. Garland's fingers were releasing their ever-weakening grip. Silas tried to tell him not to talk, but the old man ignored him.

“There is something I need you to do.”

“Anything,” Silas said.

“Remain brave. The days ahead of you are the beginning of something great and terrible. Your future is uncertain, but one thing is for sure, you are powerful and the Stühocs know it.”

A look of confusion crossed Silas' face. What does he mean, powerful?

Garland's eyes widened. “The Stühocs have been waiting for this moment, Silas. Follow the one who can lead you home.”

His eyes slowly closed and in an instant, his grandfather was lifeless by Silas' side and his grip went limp.

“Grandpa, don't go.” The tears were uncontrollable now. “Please, don't go.”

Silas sat alone in the dark room. He was alone in the world. He had no one to help him and no one to care if he made it out alive. But according to his grandfather, he only needed to survive for two more days.

Julian Hobbes walked slowly in the night as he made his way to the entrance of the Green Pumpkin. An odd name for a pub, he thought. The place was notorious for hosting some of Marenon's most vile criminals. Julian hated being there. This wasn't the first time, either. Going to places like this was just another part of the mission. He knew the scum inside would sense that he was not their kind. He always tried to avoid the gazes that accompanied his arrival.

He had been there a week before and was only in a hurry to return now due to the nature of his mission. He had been sent to the Green Pumpkin to find Alric Thirsk. The man was well known and well traveled in these parts, probably because of jobs just like the one Julian had offered him. From what Julian knew, Alric's work, and that of his three-man crew, was not always criminal in nature, rather it consisted of whatever would bring in the money. Julian's eyebrows furrowed as he thought. Even in Marenon everything's about money. His father had always told him that was how it was in the old world too. Nevertheless, Alric and his crew were the best at what they did, and Julian could only accept the best.

The week before, Julian had presented Alric with his proposal as well as maps of the targeted area and other information he would need to complete the job. As expected Alric said he would have to discuss it with his crew and they would meet him a week later to give an answer. Julian had hoped to get an answer that day, but Alric wouldn't budge. Everything was done in collaboration with his crew.

Julian looked up and down the cobblestone streets of the city of Canor. Aside from the occasional horse and buggy, there was hardly a soul out that night. He could see the warm glow of the lanterns in the window of the Green Pumpkin and could hear the ruckus coming from inside. As he came to the door, he took a deep breath and felt for his dagger hidden underneath his cloak. He rubbed a hand through his dark, jaw-length hair and pulled the hood of his cloak over his head to shadow his face. An ominous look would draw more attention than he needed, but it could be enough to frighten anyone that might confront him. He took another deep breath and walked through the door.

At first, no one looked up at him. A fight in the back corner held most of the crowd's attention. Others were engaged in conversation and sucking down one drink after another. Perhaps he was being overcautious.

There stood a divide in the middle of the pub and Julian made his way past it. A private room in the far right corner was reserved for his party where the others would be waiting for him. The fight that held most of the pub's attention was a twisted brawl happening only feet from where Julian needed to be, however. This was no good. An attempt to walk through would drag him into the conflict.

The crowd was in a frenzy as the blood spurted and spit flew. The fight was going to end in a dead body if they didn't stop soon. Perhaps that was the point. Finally, on

opponent was able to pin the other to the ground. The man straddled him and swung his fists into the other's face mercilessly, one right after the other. The crowd shouted louder and louder, but it was nothing compared to Julian's voice inside his brain yelling for him to stop this madness. He knew he didn't need the attention he was going to get, but he felt he had no choice. The victim's eyes started to roll back and he would likely die. Julian didn't intervene. He walked over to the bloodthirsty fighter and placed a steady hand on his shoulder.

"Let him go," Julian said.

The attacker stopped and looked down at Julian's hand then to his face. The previously jeering crowd fell silent as the man stood and stepped inches from Julian's shadowed nose.

"What exactly are you planning to do if I don't?" the man grinned a yellow gap-filled grin, looking to his peers for encouragement. He found none.

Without warning, Julian grabbed the man's wrist and wrapped his arm behind his back, bringing the fighter to his knees. He cried out in surprise as Julian lifted his foot and kicked him in the middle of his back, snapping his arm like a twig. In the same motion he pulled out his dagger in readiness for a second attack from elsewhere. Not a soul moved. The entire pub sat motionless, trembling in fear of what Julian may be capable of doing to them. When he felt there was no attack coming, he sheathed his dagger back under his cloak, sheltering its visibility. Julian let out a silent shudder. It was too easy to let it happen. This was something he had always been trained to evade, a weakness his mentor had always told him to subdue. Whenever anger flooded into Julian's veins he could snap. His training could kick into motion and he had the potential to do something reckless. The problem in this situation was that he was harming the people he had sworn to protect. It troubled him even though he knew he had just saved someone's life. He looked down at the man with the broken arm. The rest of the crowd sat dumbstruck at what they had just witnessed.

"Get back to your drinks." It was just more than a whisper, but Julian's command jolted the crowd to nervous fidgeting among themselves. Julian pointed to the man who had been taking a beating when he arrived. "Someone get him help." Immediately two people rushed to the man's side to care for his wounds.

Julian's training had become a blessing and a curse. He was of the Dunarian Council, warriors who had taken an oath to destroy the Stühocs and restore peace to Marenon.

The Dunarian Council had long ago been appointed by the Human king of Marenon, during the days of Sir Barton Teague. Julian had never met Teague, but knew plenty about him. Teague had originally formed the council. He had petitioned the king for the eradication of the Stühocs from Marenon and the creation of a special group to carry it out. The king agreed and named Teague its leader. Eventually, war came about and the Dunarian Council was on the front lines. The war ended badly, resulting in the

king's death, Erellens closing off their borders to the North and the Stühocs gaining more power. Shortly after that, Barton Teague disappeared. The new king's successor had been friendly to the Dunarians, allowing them to continue their work. But in recent years that king had been killed and replaced by a tyrant who then declared the Dunarians outlaws.

Humans sympathizing with the Dunarian cause soon took up residence in Jekyll Rock after the war. The Erellens had given the fortress of Jekyll Rock to the council during the war, allowing the group quite a formidable base. The city housed several thousand soldiers and a thousand or more regular citizens. Anyone living within the city walls of Jekyll Rock considered themselves Dunarian. The soldiers were known as the Dunarian Order. The Dunarian Council was the law and leadership of the Order and the citizens. Julian had joined the Dunarian Order only five years before, but he had wanted to be a part of the Dunarians since he was younger. From a small boy he had grown to love and cherish the people that his father had spoken so highly of. He knew that the Dunarians were a part of something greater than Marenon's Human monarchy.

The king sitting on the throne now wanted to bring peace between the Humans and the Stühocs and restore trade and commerce with the Erellens. The Erellens, Julian could understand, but the Stühocs? The Stühocs deserved nothing but death, for all the Stühocs sought after was the destruction of anyone who wasn't part of them. Sure, the Stühocs may one day make peace with the Human king, but only to increase their fighting power. First the Erellens would be destroyed, and then the Humans would be next until all that would be left in Marenon were Stühocs. Preventing this sort of action was what being a part of the Dunarian Order was about, and Julian had been honored to serve.

The Dunarians thrived through the years, but mostly in secret. The group was smaller than it had ever been, yet this allowed for more covert operations for its soldiers. After rising in the ranks of the Dunarian Order, Julian became one of the youngest people to be elected to the council. What the council now planned was big and Julian played a vital role. He was only twenty-four years old now, but he was the best swordsman of the eight and his fighting mirrored that of his mentor Kaden Osric.

He hoped he didn't need to use his dagger in the next room where his party waited. He also hoped they hadn't slipped out the back window after seeing his quick fight on the feet from the door. As he crossed through the doorway he lowered his hood revealing his long, thin face and green eyes. If he had not been so fierce and determined he might have seemed handsome, but on this mission his aim was to drive fear. They must know that this mission cannot be taken lightly.

Alric Thirsk sat at the table on the other side of the room. Julian noticed the mercenary's dagger glinting in the lamplight. Alric's stare was stern and unwelcoming and he gave a look that dared someone to get too close. He looked the type to be devious enough for illegal jobs. He was shorter than Julian. His hair was cut close and he grew a thin black beard, making himself seem almost devilish. His demeanor was not contrary to

that assumption. Next to Alric sat a strikingly beautiful woman. She had to be barely Julian's age, perhaps a couple of years younger. Her hair was also black and was pulled back in a ponytail reaching the middle of her back. Her eyes bore into him as though she were ready to set him on fire with a word. Another member of the group was a man about twice the size and weight of Julian, all muscle. Days of unshaven stubble lay patched across his face. There was also a blonde, fair-skinned man, perhaps a little older than the woman. He looked Erellen to Julian, but that couldn't be possible. The Erellen hadn't left their borders to the North for years.

Alric pointed with the tip of his dagger to a seat at the end of the table. Slowly Julian walked to the chair and looked each of them in the eye.

"You really light up a room, don't you, pal?" Alric said with a smirk.

Julian ignored the comment. "Have you reached a decision?" he said getting straight to the point.

Alric looked at each member of his crew and then back to Julian. "First, I think you ought to know each member that you're dealing with."

Julian nodded once.

"This is Inga. She has a higher sensitivity to magic than I've seen in any Sorcerer. I can tell you the truth. It's proven to be an invaluable asset to completing our jobs." Inga gave a slight nod of recognition.

He motioned to the giant of a man. "This is Coffman. He could take ten arrows to the chest before going down." Coffman let out a low grunt, warning Julian not to overstep his bounds.

He then looked to the blonde man nearest to the window. "This is Lorcan Zamir and yes, your suspicions are correct, he is Erellen. He's spent hours going over the mission plans with me and neither of us can figure it out."

"Mr. Thirsk, I don't think you would have dragged your crew out here just to tell me that it can't be done, so please, get to the point." Julian said.

"Well, let's just be clear on exactly what you are asking for," Alric said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. "You want us to travel to Timugo, infiltrate the Anwyn's territory, steal some sort of medallion kept in one of their most sacred areas and somehow get it to you without being killed."

"I don't care if you're killed," Julian corrected, "just so long as I get the medallion."

"Right. Let me be real with you, friend," he said. Julian thought him to be an unusually vivid speaker, as if every sentence he spoke were of dire importance. "We need another man."

"That's not my problem," Julian said. "You find the man you need and you get it done."

"Fine. Let's talk price."

"Name it."

Alric looked at all the others as if to give anyone a last chance to object. “Ten thousand.”

Julian nodded. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Each,” Alric interrupted. “Ten thousand each.”

“You can’t be serious,” Julian said squinting. “How can you expect us to pay forty thousand?”

“Well, when you take into account that we need an extra man then it’s fifty thousand,” he said. “What you want is a suicide mission. We’ve gone over the schematics a hundred times, and there is no way to accomplish this mission without one of my crew getting caught or killed.”

“Is that what your Erellen friend has come up with?”

Julian stared at Lorcan Zamire as he shifted in his seat. “There has to be bait,” Lorcan said. “I don’t know how you got a map of the underground workings of Timugon, but if it’s correct at all then we don’t stand a chance of getting out with the medallion. The bait will go after a staff. It’s the staff of Uriah.” Lorcan took a deep breath then continued. “Trying to steal the staff will trigger an alarm and the fifth man will be caught leaving us the chance to slip in and get the medallion.”

Julian’s eyebrows furrowed. “If you only need someone to be captured then why the extra ten thousand?”

“No one will go on a job without seeing the money first. And anyway, running a job like this is a higher risk, so we demand higher funds.”

Julian nodded. Alric was right and they weren’t going to budge. The Dunarians had to go under the table with this sort of mission. Stealing the Anwyn’s medallion was cause for a war and the Dunarians were dwindling in numbers. Having the blame fall on a mercenary group would absolve the Dunarians if Alric and his crew happened to be caught.

“I’ll give you half now, and half when you hand over the medallion.”

“Just like that, eh?” Alric said. It sounded as if he were about to laugh. “What does this jewelry do anyway?”

“You have a job to do,” Julian said. “I give you the money, you get me the medallion.”

He stood abruptly. His sudden move caused all four of them to come to attention. Lorcan and Coffman grabbed for their weapons, then sheepishly calmed themselves when they realized Julian was only standing to leave.

“I don’t care much for your intrigue,” Julian said. “We just want to make sure you get it done.”

“Oh, it’ll get done.”

“Good. Then I will be back in a few moments with the money.”

It was Alric’s turn to stand. This time Julian inched his hand a little closer to his blade. “Actually, we’re going with you. We don’t want that kind of money in a place like

this.”

Julian thought for a moment that this might be a ploy to get him out of the public eye so they could rob him of his money and get paid without having to lift a finger. That normally wouldn't worry him too much, but with a magic user, an Erellen and brute force under Alric's command, Julian wasn't sure it was a fight he could win. He decided to take his chances, however. With a nod, he turned to leave the pub the way he had come. Eyes followed him and the group as they made their way through to the exit. A cold hush fell over every table as if all of the heat had been sucked out of the room.

“Fine impression you've made,” Alric muttered under his breath.

Julian walked out into the dark street, ever ready with his dagger tucked under his cloak. Eden would not be too far away. The moon lit their path and Julian led them to a large field on the outskirts of town. The night sky was bright and open and his company's footsteps fell heavy in the grass. Julian could sense a wariness in the others, a fear that they themselves may be walking into some sort of trap. They were used to undertakings that were usually sketchy at best, and for all they knew they were walking into a large group of the king's soldiers, only to be placed under arrest for previous crimes committed.

As soon as they were away from the soft glow of the city's lights, Julian lifted a chain from his neck that had been hidden beneath his cloak. He clutched a small cylindrical device at the chain's end, held it to his mouth and blew softly. From the device came a sound unlike a conventional whistle. It resounded through the plain with a much lower tone than anything so small should have made. It echoed for several long seconds and the onlookers waited in silence. Alric gave the others a skeptical look. Then, shooting from the sky, came a large beast with wings as long as a house. The massive flying animal was much like an eagle, yet twice the size of a horse. Its dark, brown wings tucked close to its sides as it landed and its head shot straight up to give a long, peculiar look to the new guests. Its feathers were soft to the touch, but strong. It was a sarian.

Julian heard the group behind him whispering. Above the rest he heard Coffman say, “A sarian? I haven't seen one of those in years.”

“This is Eden,” Julian said as he reached to the head of the bowing creature. He stroked her long neck as she glared at the others, daring them to step closer. “She's been mine for more than two years now.”

Inga was the next to speak. “It takes a special person to be able to ride a sarian. They aren't usually very trusting.”

“As a magic user I'm not surprised that you would know much about them,” Julian said. “It takes magic and agility to even get near one in the wild, much less train it. She goes everywhere I go.”

“That's all well and good,” Alric said, “but if you don't mind, I'm out here to see the money, not talk about your flying pet.”

Eden flashed her sharp beak. With a single swipe of her knife-like talons she could

slice through a man's body. Julian moved to the side of the creature and unlatched pocket on the saddle. He sorted through the pocket for a moment then threw a bag Alric's feet.

"It's twenty-five thousand. You'll get the rest when we get the medallion."

Alric hunched over the bag, counting for several moments then looked up and nodded. "We'll see you in five days then."

"And you remember the designated place?"

"Of course," Alric answered.

"If you don't show up I will assume that you've run off with the money," Julian said. "I will hunt you and spread your entrails all over Canor, you understand?" He said the words coolly and without malice. He wanted them to know he meant what he said without sounding rough or evil.

"Fine," Alric said. Without another word spoken, the group turned and left the field.

Julian mounted Eden and whispered in her ear. "Let's go home, girl."

The next part of his mission would be the most dangerous.

Silas Ainsley's grandfather was dead and he knew it was only a matter of time before he would be killed too. Marcus and Theron had taken Garland's body away several hours after he had died. Marcus had questioned Silas for hours, often times hitting him and slapping him. Once or twice, Silas offered a lie leading the men on a wild goose chase to find the medallion. They told him that if he did it again that they would end his life. They gave him twelve hours in the dark to think about it.

Silas tried to imagine what his captors did over the course of two days, but it was difficult to see in the dimly lit room and they rarely walked by. Trying to listen in on their conversations was no good either because the door muffled their sounds. Silas was so exhausted that he was starting to hear noises that weren't even there.

It had been two days since his capture and in that time he had not been fed, and water had been given to him only once. He was weak and without hope. He began to think that the help his grandfather had promised was a figment of his imagination or just the words of a dying man who had lost his grip on reality. Marcus and Theron would eventually decide to kill Silas and that would be the end of it.

One night, or morning, Silas didn't know which, it was Theron's turn to question him about the medallion. On orders from Garland, Silas pretended to know nothing about it. Theron said it was a powerful tool and that he needed it. After a few slaps to the face and a threat of longer time in the room without food or water, he was gone. Silas expected him to return, but he did not.

The ropes dug deep into his wrists and he wished he could at least try to escape, but there was no use. He would be dead before he made it through the door. He tried to reconstruct the path he took when the men dragged him and his grandfather to the room. It was a long passageway, and it went through several levels. The fact that he passed through several times along the way didn't help the reconstruction either. There was no way to remember. He knew it began on a mountainside and tunneled downward. Old gold mines littered these parts of the mountains. Now, two goons used one of them as a hideout to keep their hostage. Probably as good a place as any, Silas thought. He wondered where it was here that his grandfather had been trying to reach.

Sleep was scarce and when he did, he was plagued with nightmares. Silas ultimately came to the conclusion that if they were going to kill him then they should just do it. What was the use keeping him here? As he lay contemplating his fate, he was jerked from his thoughts by the sound of footsteps nearing his door. The faint glow of a torch grew into a bright flickering under the door as the bearer came closer. The door swung open and Silas had to shut his eyes to keep from being blinded.

"It's time," the gruff voice spoke. It was Theron.

Roughly, Theron grabbed Silas by the neckline of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. The dim light in the corridor was blinding to Silas' dilated pupils. He had to force

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