

Tsalix Silverthorn and the Maelstrom of Tears

Chapter 1

Sunlight streamed through the windows placed high on the walls of the throne room. Some of the windows were adorned with stained-glass images, and the light passing through them cast a multitude of muted colors on the floor. Tsalix, Asur, and Kwerqus were ushered into the room. King Elosha, Queen Nadlee, Prince Johona, and Princess Angelica were already seated on their thrones.

"Welcome, my dear young friends." The king's white hair was secured beneath a crown while he stroked his beard with a vein-mapped hand. "I hope you have had a restful week in Hayeli."

"Aye," the three of them replied.

"If you are sufficiently rested, it is time to continue your journey."

Just a month ago, the three of them had been summoned to meet with Elosha, who had sent them on a quest to recover three talismans. They had recovered the black talisman from the top of Mount Jinee, on the north side of the kingdom, and brought it to the king. Then they had traveled across Shayeksten, the Desert of Desolation, to Mount Tsood, on the south, where they had recovered the blue talisman. Both quests had been fraught with danger and discomfort. Now they were about to leave for the final talisman, which was hidden somewhere on Mount Litso, to the west.

Johona said, "I wish there were some easier way for this task to be completed. Mount Litso is not a hospitable place. As you know, it is surrounded by the Sea of Tabass. There are only two ways to reach the yellow mountain. You must travel by sea, to its harbor. Or next to the harbor, go over a bridge that connects it to the mainland."

Tsalix said, "Which do you suggest?"

"The trail leading to the bridge is heavily patrolled by my brother Abadon's forces."

"Then it seems we must go by sea," Tsalix said.

Johona took a deep breath. "I suspect you are right. However, the Sea of Tabass has its own problem – the Maelstrom of Tears."

"When we were in Saond, Prince Uncia pointed out where the whirlpool lay."

"If it stayed in one place, there would be little problem. Everyone would know the safe routes around it. But it moves. It seems to have a will of its own." Johona paused. "Still, it seems safer route."

Kwercus scrunched his face. "Must we cross Shayeksten against to reach the sea?"

"Nay. There is an easier, if somewhat longer, way."

Nadlee stood. "May I?"

"Of course, Mother."

She retrieved a scroll from a table beneath one of the windows and unrolled it to reveal a map.

"If you take the road that leads northwest, to the Tohkal River, you will find that it branches. One branch leads you north, past the villages of Atsanh, Bitahkez, and Hagade, and eventually leads to Mount Jinee."

"I traveled that road," Kwercus said, "when I first came to Hayeli."

Nadlee nodded. "The other branch turns south and follows the river to its mouth, where it pours into the Sea of Tabass. There is a place to launch a boat. It is called the Bay of Nihlini."

Kwercus cleared his throat, "And is there somewhere we can acquire a boat?"

Angelica rose from her throne. "Perhaps we can make your way a bit simpler." She turned to her father, who handed her a bronze key hanging from a leather thong. "Tsalix completed a task for me on your last journey. Now, Kwercus Strongheart, I believe it is your turn."

She bade him approach her, and when he stood in front of the throne, she placed the thong around his neck.

Kwercus raised a brow. "A key, my lady?"

"Aye. It will unlock a door that lays concealed three leagues south of the junction of the trial."

"And how will I know where it is if it is concealed?"

Elosha said, "The key will guide you."

Kwercus waited for further information, and when none came, he stepped back and joined his friends.

"Thank you," he said.

"Kwercus, you might find this handy." Johona reached behind his throne and retrieved an axe.

Kwercus took the proffered gift with a smile.

"I feel more complete now," he said.

Kwercus was a woodsman, Asur a farmer, and Tsalix had been trained as a soldier in Johona's forces.

"Do you have more instructions for us?" Tsalix said.

Angelica returned to her throne. "Only this – be safe. Mount Litso will require all of your cunningness and strength."

Nadlee cleared her throat. "Know this, my brave warriors. You will find the talisman in time."