

CITY OF BRIDGES - EXCERPT

THE SEVEN PORTALS
BOOK 1

ANDRE JONES



The lanky rider climbed from the strange saddle. He was heavily bearded, with long, fair hair pulled into a ponytail that draped down his back to his belt. His clothing comprised leather trousers, a tunic with sheepskin lining and gloves reaching to his elbows. In his knee-high boots, Feiron judged him to be a little taller than Leonie, and the mask covering his eyes gave him a bug-like look.

“Hello there.” His mild Tesakian accent finishing on a high note. He was about to jump down from the rock when the wyvern made a sound, more like a bark, or a cough. “Oops, nearly forgot.” He turned and gave the beast a good scratch in the centre of its long snout between the amber eyes.

The air vibrated; the wyvern purred.

“She loves this,” the rider said over his shoulder. After a few moments of scratching, he turned and lightly jumped to the ground, approaching with long, easy strides.

“Sorry if we alarmed you.”

“Is it safe?” Feiron fought the urge to run and hide.

“Oh yes, as long as you mean no harm. Rare as these occasions are, there’s a standing agreement not to eat my visitors. It gives them a bad name if they do.”

“Well met. I gather you’re the trainer of wyverns?” Feiron asked.

He flashed a smile. “I am Philbert.” He bowed deeply, then shook hands, only to realise he still wore his goggles. “Sorry. I forget I have them on sometimes.” Removing them showed startling green eyes. “I’m so glad I finally get to speak to a traveller. They don’t stay long--”

He was cut off by a soft hiss.

“All right, alright. May I also introduce Dorn, last daughter of Axorg, first chosen of Noldor, and my wing

commander.” He turned, flamboyantly waving an arm in the wyvern’s direction.

“You name it?”

Again, the wyvern inclined her head. She winked.

Unsure how to respond, Feiron gave a quick wave. “While meeting with you is very exciting, I’m afraid my companion here is in dire need of your help.” Feiron indicated Leonie in the coracle.

“Your companion? She is injured?” The rider sounded sincere, noticing the cuts and gashes. “That is sad news. I’m limited in any aid, but will gladly help if I can. Dorn, what can you sense?”

The wyvern turned her gaze towards the prone figure in the coracle. *While she has severe physical injuries, I am more concerned with her mental state. Her mind is intact but unreachable. I cannot sense anything from the illios.*

Philbert looked around. “How did you come to be here, considering the state of your friend, and no mounts to be seen?”

“I can understand your confusion, but can easily explain – however implausible the tale may sound to you.” Feiron had been wondering how much to reveal about their latest incident and was at a loss. “Umm... a wyvern moved us here.”

“What’s that you say?” Phil’s head snapped up in surprise. “Dorn. Listen.”

I hear. The wyvern responded at once. Her massive head swung around; amber eyes drilled into Feiron.

“Normally we can detect other wyverns in the area,” Phil continued.

“I’m no expert, but I don’t believe this was your typical wyvern. He was an elemental, to be precise,” Feiron added.

“This is truly fascinating. Did this wyvern elemental have a name?”

“Not that he shared, no.”

“Can you describe him?”

Feiron glanced at Dorn. “Massive, about three times Dorn’s size. Black – when he wasn’t invisible. He also had amber eyes. Does he sound familiar?”

Axorg, Dorn replied in surprise.

“Axorg? Can this be?” Phil shook his head in wonder.

It is rare, Dorn responded. *It is said that those of great age and with certain qualities can attain transcendence.*

That would be him. Phil nodded. *Axorg is now immortal?*

Feiron watched Philbert. “I gather you’re using mind-speak?”

“What? Oh, yes. You cannot hear us? My apologies for the oversight.”

Feiron sighed. “Axorg wrote in the sand with a stick.”

“This is an extraordinary tale.” Phil looked from Feiron to the prone figure in the coracle. “I didn’t consider teaching the wyverns to write,” he muttered.

Why would Axorg have any interest in our affairs? Dorn asked. *Transcendents are no longer of this plane.*

Phil repeated the question for Feiron’s benefit.

“I cannot explain his motives,” the illios replied. “He said he was keeping a watch on the happenings on the ‘astral plane’. It also appears prophecy may play a part. Have you heard of the Temple of Opsyss?”

“Vaguely. If I remember correctly, they tried to start a sect in Tesak. The Tesak’i would have none of it.”

“So, you know what they do?”

“Not really. A cult that worships the dark arts, I guess? Did Axorg show the help he thought we could provide?”

“The head cleric possessed my colleague, Leonie, apparently using mind control.”

She needs to be shielded from further violation? Dorn prompted.

Feiron nodded after Phil repeated the question aloud. “I believe so. Leonie has been like this for over a day now. Her body has been sorely abused. Perhaps her mind too.”

A chilly gust of wind swirled around the clearing; the looming clouds indicated rain.

“I think we should move. We will take you both to the lair so we are out of the elements, and talk in comfort.”

“Will you be able to transport us in the coracle? Axorg used telekinesis.”

“I see. Dorn?”

Of course.

They doused the fires and Feiron once again slipped into the coracle. This trip was much shorter and wasn't long before other inquisitive wyverns gathered to see the newcomers. The spectacle entranced Feiron; creatures so large, yet so agile. They ducked and weaved, swiftly circling around them until a loud growl emanated from Dorn. In seconds, they dispersed, back to the smoke cloud looming high above.

As the coracle with the strangers bobbed closer to the volcano, the shadowy area of a deep crevice became more defined. Soon, a cave entrance became visible, appearing too small for such large creatures as the wyverns. But, as they neared, the true size became clear. The edifice containing the volcano was massive; its real dimensions obscured by the mountainous terrain surrounding it.

“The locals call it Hell's Maw,” Philbert called down over the wind. “We call it home.”

Dorn landed on the ledge and Phil leapt off with prac-

tised grace. The coracle bobbed in through the entrance, gliding silently passed the rough walls and gently settled inside. The long and narrow path curved into a huge, irregular shaped cave. Dark sand and small rocks covered the floor. Multicoloured scales, piled to the side of the floor by the passing of wyverns over the years, contrasted with the dark rock.

Phil strode in behind him, followed by Dorn. “We don’t normally get visitors here, but I’m sure it won’t take long to organise a place to rest.”

“I’m sure Leonie will be happy with whatever you can provide. I only require a barrel or container of some description to sleep.”

“I find these are very handy – for beds and storage.” Phil removed pots and jars from a cavity within the wall. “They were bubbles formed in the magma decades ago. They’re all over the place and many sizes. Sleeping on the floor can be a hazard if a wyvern steps on you.”

After locating a couple of fur blankets, Phil placed within the niche. Together, Phil and Feiron lifted Leonie into place.

“Very handy.” Feiron noted the smooth walls of the niche as he fussed over Leonie, bunching the blanket on the edge and ensuring she wouldn’t roll out. At no stage did she moan or move – other than her breathing; she was as limp as jelly. He reached into his backpack, opened the jar of miwalli and generously applied it to all her cuts and abrasions. “She normally heals very well, but I’m sure this won’t hurt.”

Leaving Leonie to rest, Philbert showed Feiron around the lair. It was a brief tour. The trainer slept towards the rear of the cave, in a niche similar to that of Leonie. One area of the cave was a bit wider, and there was a fire pit with

cooking utensils stored nearby in the myriad of smooth, irregularly shaped alcoves.

As they settled by the fire, Feiron spoke. "First, I'd like to thank you for taking us in under such extraordinary circumstances." He had considered what to tell, or not tell, his host, finally deciding – as always – the truth was best.

Axorg saw reason to assist. To honour him, so shall we. Dorn answered before Philbert could.

He repeated her response aloud to the illios.

Feiron gazed upwards, considering what to say. Sloping walls, with ridges and ledges on all sides, obscured the ceiling. Light filtered from above, indicating a hidden opening. It was along these rocky outcrops the wyverns rested. Through the rising smoke of the fire, dozens of large eyes returned his gaze. Dorn was the closest being one of the eldest and largest, while the younger, smaller wyverns rested higher up.

"We were heading to Qelay," Feiron started. "Leonie has a task, to deliver an important book to the hroltahgs there." He then went on into detail about recent events. "The Seer's Codex contains prophecies, or foretellings if you prefer, that may – or may not – come to pass." Feiron quickly retrieved the codex from the coracle, placing it in Philbert's hands.

The rider almost dropped it. "It's heavy. If what you say is true, the knowledge contained within could gain a person some unique insights." Phil examined the book as he spoke. "Knowing the future would give power over others."

"Precisely. We know several people have already died in attempts to obtain it. Knowing of this book's existence could put you in great danger."

"My dear chap, I'm surrounded by a cloud of protective and inquisitive wyverns. No one and nothing could get close enough to cause us any harm."



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