

TALES OF THE LORE VALLEY

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THE WIND RIDERS

by

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Book 1 of the Wind Riders Chronicles

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The Wind Riders

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Kris Kramer, the author of this work, is part of the4threalm.com, a group of writers who work, edit, critique and publish collaboratively. He would like to invite you to see more of his work, along with that of several other talented people, at the site below. And be sure to participate in the discussion. We're nothing without our readers, and we want to know what you think!

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For Cassidy

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Excerpts from *The Histories of Iador by Autilis*

Prologue

Words are a terribly wonderful thing. Or perhaps they're wonderfully terrible. I think either description will find ample supporters, although I usually find myself leaning more toward the former. How else, but through the almighty power of words, could I relate to you, my readers, the tales I have to tell? Or keep alive the exploits of valiant and worthy heroes whose names should be remembered and celebrated?

Let these words convey to you stories of fearless men and women flying sleek magical ships through the air; a heartbroken warrior and a desperate wizard caught in the throes of prophecy; a captive man and woman, once enemies, who bring peace to their people; a battle in the mountains that unites long-bitter enemies; a city of the dead that leads to a new life. And all these heroes surrounded by the specter of war against a great enemy, one that arrived from a place we knew only as Beyond, and the people who rallied together to face not only that enemy, but their

own history and fears as well. And because of their resolve, the world was changed forever.

But who am I, you ask? I am no one important. I am merely a chronicler of a time long passed, albeit a time that shaped the world as it exists today. I am here only to tell you of a place that was never quite what most thought it to be. A land at the top of the world, surrounded by vast, unending water, and filled with people who never suspected the role they would have to play. A meager collection of nations and kingdoms, with names like Trohm, the Outerlands, the Senin Valley, and the Lore Valley. It is the Lore who carries the title of these stories, however, because that is where this tale truly begins, and where it ultimately ends.

*-Autilis, Excerpts from his Tales of the Lore Valley,
Volume 1*

Chapter 1 - The Mission

Somewhere deep in the majestic Lore Mountains, just south of the fabled Lore Valley, a Wind Rider named Iago lay quiet and still on the hard, rock-strewn ground, appearing to all the world to be restfully sleeping, though that was far from the truth. Jagged sandstone hills surrounded him, casting shadows across the narrow vale he'd chosen to hide in this afternoon. He didn't notice the light breeze blowing through the canyon, or feel the slight kick of dust it carried over his face. In fact, he was unmindful of anything, save the aches in his body, and in his conscience.

The muscles in his back throbbed, but not from the rocky terrain poking through his shirt. He'd spent the morning leading rigorous weapons training with his Landers, trying to keep himself focused on something of meaning. His men obliged during the training, and he had a number of bruises about his arms and legs because of it, but none of it was enough

to make him forget the trouble he'd wrought, or lessen the burden on his conscience. Afterward, he'd spent some time double-checking weapon and armor inventories, but none of it helped clear his mind. So sometime after midday he'd found a spot a good distance away from the camp where he could be alone to think. His thoughts lately were not ones he chose to share, so he stayed away from the others when they became especially upsetting. And though they troubled him greatly, he was not ready to leave those thoughts when Alaan finally got close enough to shout his name.

"Master Iago!"

He'd heard the footsteps a hundred paces away. The young boy, Alaan, purposely stomped on every big rock in his path as he walked up the hill. Iago had no doubt the boy was here to summon him to the Pilot's Council to discuss his request to help. That would be welcome. He needed something useful to occupy his tortured mind. He took a deep breath, lifted his head and put away his troubles. He would have the rest of his life to concern himself with those.

For now, he forced a calm look on his face and turned to Alaan, who stood a few paces away.

"Master Iago, the Pilot's Council has called for you, I mean they-" Alaan paused, thinking of the word, "summoned you."

"Thank you, Alaan." Iago dragged himself off the ground with a grunt. His body, while not terribly old, had been through much in his hard life, especially in the last year, and there was never a part of him that wasn't sore or hurting. "Go tell them I'm on my way."

"Yes sir, Master Iago!" Alaan bounded down the hill the same way he'd come up, determined to put his mark on every large stone in his path. Iago brushed the dirt off his pants and rubbed the back of his bald head, then decided to take a more relaxed route. He followed the gentler slope in front of him, wondering anxiously whether the Council had actually decided to go through with his risky idea. None of the current members of the Pilot's Council knew him very well, so Iago would have to earn their trust, especially for an endeavor such as this. He knew there were still whispers about him in the camp. Whispers that weren't entirely false.

The path curved around to his left, following the sloping side of the hill that led straight into the small, rock-strewn valley that the Wind Riders now called home. Tall, gritty hills bordered each side of the narrow valley, providing excellent cover, and the flat valley floor allowed enough room to put up several dozen small green and brown-colored tents. In the center of the camp stood a few larger tents, including the one used by the Pilot's Council for meetings and discussions, as well as an indoor teaching room for the Pilots in camp. Iago headed for that one, knowing the Pilot's Council had been meeting there for the last several hours.

The tents, however, were not what drew his attention. His eyes were reluctantly drawn to the three large, wooden ships sitting on the ground. Called Karawan, these were the magical vessels the Wind Riders used to sail through the skies. One, the Goldenbird, lay on its side with a large fire-blackened hole in the hull, damaged beyond repair from the attack two weeks ago. The other two, the Blue Hawk and the Red Lark, sat on either edge of the center of camp, still operational, but with little reason, or

motivation, to use them at the moment. Each Karawan was roughly eighty feet long and a quarter of that wide. The deck and hull looked similar to an actual seaworthy sailing ship except for the flat bottom, which allowed the ship to land on the ground. A mast came up from the rear third of each ship, extending about ten feet above the deck, with a flag hanging from the top, in its center the silhouette of a hawk soaring on a solid white background. Wooden crates had been stacked next to the two usable Karawan and two young former slaves from the mining caravans, Davin and Ingran, loaded ropes, wood and weapons from those crates onto the Blue Hawk.

The mast allowed the ships to fly. Iago didn't know how or why, but he knew that much. Each mast ran down into the base of the ship and curved forward, extending all the way to the ship's bow and provided part of the internal structure of the vessel. The mast was enchanted using Air Magic and the Pilots were trained to control their ship using the mast as a magical rudder. The Goldenbird could easily have its hull repaired, but if the mast had been damaged, and

he assumed it was, then the ship would not fly again. It would have to be rebuilt from scratch.

Iago looked away. He hated to see only two working Karawan when two weeks ago there had been seven. The Tyran attack had cost them five of their ships and left over half their number dead or scattered. He heard someone say last week that a hundred and twenty people were left in the camp, and only six of them were Pilots or Pilots-in-training. The Wind Riders used to have over twenty Pilots and over four hundred people.

As he reached the center of camp, he stopped just outside the tent and again brushed the dirt off his clothes. He wore a thin, sleeveless, brown tunic, favored by Anzarins because of the heat of the wastelands surrounding all the Anzarin cities. Scars of various length and size covered his arms and torso, as well as his face. He would never be mistaken for a handsome man, not with all the damage his body had taken over the years. He looked dangerous, like a back-alley thug that many of the slavers they encountered would hire, yet something in his dark brown eyes undermined that tough exterior. Roni and

Senak, two men from a Lander squad other than Iago's, stood outside the tent wearing the customary gear of a Wind Riders Lander - dark blue tunic, brown pants, sturdy leather boots, a sheathed sword on one side of their leather belt and a small hand axe strapped on the other. They nodded at him, standing somewhat at attention, and after Iago straightened his own tunic the two Landers opened the tent flaps for him to enter.

Iago stepped inside the tent and waited at the entrance as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, and the people inside finished their conversation. Three members of the Pilot's Council, the ruling body of the Wind Riders, waited before him, seated on the far side of a narrow wooden table in the middle of the darkened tent. Each wore the traditional uniform of a Pilot, a light blue robe over sand-colored tunic and pants, and a silver chain around their neck from which hung a small hawk medallion.

Iago waited only a moment before Avina, the Pilot-Captain of the Wind Riders, looked up and smiled at him.

"Good morning to you, Iago."

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