

CHAPTER 1

Hardship

The blessing had become a curse! Exhausted, overburdened horses cried out in panic. Angry shouts of exasperated men echoed through the woods. Tempers blazed.

In the early morning light it became painfully apparent that the mighty forces of the House of Hiram had not traveled as far as they needed. They had, in fact, not progressed at all. The carefully made plans of the Lord Hiram and his ten sons were in danger of failing. As unimaginable as it was, it seemed that Triton King of Illumius would face the treacherous Fedale alone while the Lord Hiram's army stood defeated by muddy, wooded slopes.

The paths and trails that led through the woods and over nearby hills proved adequate for men on foot or for horses riding single file. But they could not be used easily by the countless wagons needed to haul weapons, food, water, tents, signal flags, birdcages, medicines, anvils and forges, troops, women and children, supplies, and all the rest that made up the camp.

When they had first arrived here they had come by sea, landed on shore and set-up camp only a few miles from their landing site. The terrain from the ocean to the campsite had offered no problem for the wagons and carts used to move equipment. But beyond the campsite were steep slopes and heavy, thick woodlands. These very things were the reason the site had been chosen. At the time it was felt that the area's inaccessibility from the King's Highway was a blessing. Now, the blessing looked like a curse.

Another important difference was that the camp had been built in phases, but it was now being moved all at once. In the beginning, materials were delivered by sea, in relatively small amounts. A ship, after all, has only so much cargo space. Once on land, a single ship's worth of equipment and supplies presented a much smaller challenge than moving the entire camp all at once. Even when the entire cavalry was shipped by sea and landed nearby there was no problem. The route from shore to camp was an easy one for a horse and rider, much easier than traveling the steep slopes and forests between the camp and the King's Highway.

In the past, time had also been an ally; now it seemed to work against them. When the camp was

first being built, a good amount of supplies and people arrived via the King's Highway. The Lord Hiram's troops traveled in small groups, posing as merchants and tradesmen. Their wagons were secretly full of military equipment and provisions, but they brought only two or three wagons at a time. It had taken months to get everything all in place, little by little. Now, they were trying to transport everything at the same time.

The various units, eleven in all, had left camp in a pre-arranged order. The order was determined by the need for speed and protection. Ram, one of the four youngest of the ten brothers, was first in the long convoy. That was mainly because his machines and many of his troops were already in a forward encampment.

Following Ram, in the pre-arranged order, were the three brothers who had front line troops, Falcon, Shank and Kyler, and Tulmar, who carried vast quantities of weapons. So it was that the four eldest brothers were lined up, one after the other, behind Ram at the front of the convoy.

They had been placed at the front of the line because they would be in the best position to fight if any hostile troops were encountered. Unfortunately, this positioning did not provide a

defense against an attack on the flanks or the rear of the convoy. When the Lord Hiram had discussed the order of transit with his sons it was argued that the flanks of the line would be protected by the steep slopes and dense forest. What's more, it was argued, Reed's Greens would not allow any force to approach undetected. His troops formed a hidden circle around the whole convoy. This ring of Green protected the flanks and rear of the convoy. The front of the line, therefore, was seen as most likely to encounter hostility.

Following Ram and his four older brothers came Vine. He and his supply wagons were placed in the center of the convoy. This was done so that food and other supplies would be equally accessible to the front and the rear of the line.

Norrom, in charge of land and sea transportation and Herald, in charge of communications, were next. The majority of their troops were dispersed throughout the other groups. Norrom's men drove and maintained the wagons and teams used by all the other units. Herald's signalmen had likewise been assigned to all the other groups. Norrom maintained a command center from which he could dispatch fresh teams of horses or extra men in case a wagon tipped over or broke

down. Herald kept his trumpeters and a cadre of signalmen at the center to help however they might. He also had wagon upon wagon full of his precious messenger pigeons, and the bird keepers needed to care for them.

Next came the Lord Hiram's central command wagons and the entire White Guard, followed by Reed and Gannon. The Lord Hiram's position was close to Herald, to hasten transmitting information within the convoy, and close to Reed, to give quick access to information from outside the convoy. The position also provided the Lord Hiram with the greatest protection. An enemy attacking from the front would have to fight through almost the entire camp before getting to the Lord Hiram. An enemy attacking from behind, an unlikely possibility, would have to defeat Reed's Greens and the entire White Guard to get to the Lord Hiram. Herald, it was thought, would be able to signal for reinforcements, who would arrive in time to defeat any foe.

The arranged order made for a colorful, if not swift, convoy. An eagle flying high in the air, or perhaps a dragon, would see a long multicolored line of wagons, horsemen, and people on foot.

The beginning of the convoy was deep purple, followed by blood red, bright yellow, shimmering silver, fire orange and Vine's wine. Following theses "hot" colored troops came those wearing dark blue, sky blue, pure white, forest green, and finally Gannon's rainbow stripes. The colorful line slowly zigzagged its way up and down forested slopes, but the last five groups hardly moved all night. As it turned out, the closer one was to the rear of the convoy, the less one actually moved.

As they all traveled farther inland toward the King's Highway, rolling hills became steep slopes, meadows became dense forests and travel became slow and onerous.

Ram was the first to recognize the problem. He and his forces had labored hard and fast disassembling their great machines of war and loading them onto large, strong wagons. These wagons had been designed and built especially to carry Ram's heavy catapults, ramps, and towers. The theory was that Ram could travel quickly to the battlefield in Draamor and, once there, assemble his machines in just a day or two. The theory was flawed.

Ram had started moving out ahead of everyone else, by orders of the Lord Hiram. He was

confident he would be able to travel as far as everyone else did each day. In his heart, he hoped to be the first to arrive in Draamor.

Ram built his equipment and machines in a forward encampment away from the main camp. This, he felt, gave him the advantage of being a little ahead of schedule even before starting. "Everyone else will have to go up and over the first hill just to get to where we already are," he had told his men. "By then, we'll be well on our way."

It was not that easy. His first challenge was controlling the heavy wagons' decent down the steep hillside. He had not expected it to be so hard. Because of their weight, the wagons had to be slowed and driven cautiously or they would have careened down the hill.

The night dragged on. Progress was measured one wagon at a time. Once, it looked as if a wagon was certain to tip over, but the valiant teamwork of Ram's men prevailed. Using ropes and poles and sheer might they miraculously saved the wagon and its cargo. Ram was proud of his men for succeeding in bringing each wagon to the base of the hill without injury or loss. It was the challenge of the second hill that stopped him dead.

Once at the base of the hill the plan was for Ram to continue up the next hill, down again, and so forth, until they arrived in the forest next to the King's Highway. He then planned to march parallel to the highway, hidden in the forest, until they reached Draamor. To his horror, Ram discovered that the horses could not pull the heavy wagons up the next hillside. If coming down the first hill was next to impossible going up the second was impossible.

The upward path was too small for Ram's wagons so they had tried widening it, but it was no use. Then they tried to move up the slope over brush and bramble; again, useless. No matter what they did, the slope was too steep and the wagons were too heavy for the horses.

Sunrise found Ram's men exhausted, bitterly disappointed, and stuck between two hills. It was no better for anyone else in the convoy. Vine found that the wagons used to transport foodstuffs could either be packed efficiently for use of space, or effectively for use as portable kitchens, but not both. The light of day brought hungry, tired, cold soldiers to his place in the long line of wagons, looking for food. Vine realized he needed a way to

serve more food to more people in a shorter amount of time than ever before.

Previously, the camp had run in cycles. Some people were on duty, some were at rest; some were eating, and some were not. That made for of a manageable flow of hungry people. It was still a lot of work to have food ready for them at all hours of the day and night, but it was nothing like having food ready for everybody in camp at the same time. Now that they were on the move, everyone was trying to travel in the same direction at the same time. When they stopped they all wanted to eat at the same time, and then rest. The crowd was huge, hungry and tired; a perfect recipe for trouble. Vine did not enjoy serving that recipe.

Like Ram, Vine, and his other brothers, Herald found that his communication duties were hampered by the sheer size of the House of Hiram. The length of the line of troops, horses, and wagons trying to go up the first hill or down the first slope made quick and clear communication difficult for the signalmen. Ram and Falcon were the first to suffer from this lack of communication.

Falcon's men were the first to come upon Ram's men, who were trapped at the bottom of the first slope. The big wagons could neither go back

up the hill they had descended nor could they continue up the next hill. They sat as giant roadblocks.

The Red first tried to help get the wagons up the second hill. When that failed they tried to go around the wagons, so they could continue up the hill themselves. But the wagons were so numerous, the hill so steep and the path so narrow, they could not get through. Nothing worked. Finally, in desperation, they asked their signalmen to contact Falcon for orders. The orders never came. Both in daylight and at night, the hills and forest worked against Herald's men.

Signalmen had been attached to each of Hiram's son's units so that messages could go from group to group as they traveled. They discovered, however, that at night on the dense slopes, it was hard to tell the difference between campfires and signal fires. At dawn, signal mirrors were tried, but the giant shadows cast by hills and trees made mirrors useless. Signalmen in some units could see mirror flashes and receive the messages, but then could not transmit them to the next link in the signal chain.

Desperate, Herald tried signal flags, but the slopes, trees and dense brush blocked the line of

sight needed to read the flags. As a last resort, horsemen and runners were dispatched to go back and forth, up and down, with messages. It was ridiculously slow and confusing.

One message, however, was received by all the brothers: "The Lord Hiram desires to see all his sons, immediately."

So it was that the sons of Hiram began their early morning trek to meet with their father. As it turned out, the Lord Hiram's group had not moved very far from where the Pavilion had previously stood. He was not hard to find.

The first to arrive in answer to their father's summons were Vine, Reed, and Gannon, the Lord Hiram's youngest three sons. They found their father easily enough in the long column. Not only did the White Guard form a glittering, armed circle around the Lord Hiram and his wagons, but also the Lord Hiram's big white battle tent had already been erected.

Vine, Reed, and Gannon were easily admitted through the first line of the Service of Light, who were standing guard. As they approached the white tent, the three brothers spoke quietly together. They were not sure how to respond if their father's guards demanded them to

disarm again. Vine and Gannon thought they should give up their weapons out of respect for their father. He had made it clear that the White Guard was to be obeyed as they would obey him. Reed, however, was adamant that he needed to be armed in a time of war, and if it was a matter of protecting the Lord Hiram, ten armed sons could provide a lot of protection. No one mentioned the obvious fact that one armed renegade son could also be a huge threat.

They still had not come to an agreement as they walked toward the white command tent. Arriving at the tent, their way was blocked by a cadre of guards led by Preston, the same guard who had previously disarmed them. Reed stood resolute, meeting Preston's gaze with a determined scowl. Distracted by movement at his side, Reed glanced right only to find both Gannon and Vine handing over their swords without comment.

Vine, the eldest of the three, look at his brother and said, "Reed, we don't want to keep our father waiting."

Grudgingly, Reed unbuckled his belt and handed it and his sword to Preston.

"Thank you, my Lords," said the guard, respectfully. "The Lord Hiram awaits you within."

The guards moved aside and admitted the brothers into the initial room of the tent. The inside of this room was as sparse as the Pavilion was ornate. The room was brightly lit by five oil lamps hanging from the center support. Directly under the lamps were a small square table and a few chairs. Guards, armed with spears and swords stood at each of the room's four inner sides. On the far side of the room, opposite the entrance, hung a huge banner of the twin black hawks on a field of gold. It was, of course, the Lord Hiram's standard and also the veil separating this first room from the rest of the tent.

Reed, Vine and Gannon walked through the room, nodded to the guard standing in front of the twin black hawks, and were admitted through the veil into the next part of the tent. Neither Reed, Vine nor Gannon had ever seen this tent before, but the room in which they now stood was remarkably familiar to them. It was, in fact, just like the entry room before the inner chamber of the Pavilion.

They found themselves standing before the great veil of shields. This veil, like the one in the Pavilion, was decorated by ten metal shields. Each shield was etched with the emblem of the twin black hawks and colored according the each son's battle

flag. This was, in reality, the very same veil hanging in the very same room. The only difference was that this time no one removed their boots.

Six armed guards stood before the great veil of shields.

Reed checked the front of his uniform and quickly adjusted his cape. Gannon brushed his robes. Vine stood still and breathed deeply. When all seemed ready he nodded to a guard.

The heavy veil was drawn aside to reveal the inner chamber of the tent. It looked exactly like the round chamber within the Pavilion. It was, in fact, the round chamber from within Pavilion. In it hung the same colored silk banners and the same overhead lamps. It had the same white marble floor. On the floor, in the center of the room, was the same round white table. Opposite the entrance, resting in its elaborate holder was the Lord Hiram's great Golden Rod. A large scroll was open on the table. The Lord Hiram sat at the table studying the scroll.

As he entered the tent, Reed's attention was immediately drawn to the Golden Rod. He saw nothing else, including his father. The gold headpiece and the long rod glistened in the lamplight. Its engraved beauty was a stark contrast

to the rest of the tent. Reed's eyes paused for a moment on the headpiece. It was molded to resemble a slain dragon. His eyes then moved down the rod past scene upon scene of history of the House of Hiram. His eyes rested on the smooth metal surface following Falcon's birth scene; the place where his own birth scene could be engraved.

Unlike Reed, Vine and Gannon's full attention was directed to their father. They stood at attention, awaiting his pleasure. He barely looked up to acknowledge his sons.

"Vine, I am glad you are here; there is much to be done. We need to disperse food throughout the convoy," said the Lord Hiram. Then, looking at his two other sons, he continued, "Reed, Gannon, have you news of the others?"

At the sound of his name, Reed's mind was forced away from the Golden Rod. He finally noticed the guards, the table and the Lord Hiram. His mind raced to catch up.

"Yes Father," answered Reed, as quickly as possible. "Ram worked hard all night to get his wagons up the first slope and down the other side. All made it safely down."

Reed waited for his father to comment. He did not like to speak poorly about his brothers, even

to his father. Receiving no comment or even a glance from the Lord Hiram, he continued with the bad news.

“Ram is stuck at the base of the second slope. His wagons cannot go up the slope, nor can they return. They are blocking Falcon’s Reds from moving forward. Shank’s men have stopped on the downward side of the first slope. It is steep, but they have managed to secure their wagons against stones and trees. Kyler and the cavalry are waiting at the top of the first hill. The horses are safe there. Tulmar and his weapons are only about halfway up the first slope. You can still see them from here. Vine, Norrom, Herald, and Gannon have moved very little the whole night.” Reed did not include his father’s troops in the report.

The Lord Hiram looked up at him gravely and asked, “Anything else?”

“Ram, Falcon, Shank, Kyler and Tulmar are on their way here. I know nothing of Herald or Norrom.”

As Reed finished speaking, a disturbance erupted outside the tent. A booming voice could be heard arguing with Preston. As tensions rose so did the voices. There was the sudden sound of swords being drawn.

“I made those swords!” shouted the voice, followed by silence.

Within the inner chamber the three brothers turned and stared at the back of the great veil as if they could see through it. On the other side of the veil six guards moved to form a line. They held their spears at ready, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the entrance. No one could pass into the inner chamber without first passing the guards. Sitting at his table, the Lord Hiram seemed unconcerned.

“Fine!” came the somewhat subdued voice.

“Thank you,” came Preston’s respectful voice. “The Lord Hiram awaits you within.”

In moments, Tulmar was standing before the great veil of shields. Unarmed, he was surprised to be greeted by six spear points.

“What?” asked Tulmar, incredulously. Seeing that Tulmar posed no threat the guards allowed him to pass through the veil into the inner chamber. The huge man blushed, acknowledged his brothers with a glance, and asked his father, “Am I late?”

“No,” said the Lord Hiram, coolly. “We were just speaking of you, Falcon and your younger brothers. What do you know of them?”

“I have heard that Ram and Falcon left the bottom of the second slope in response to your summons. They worked their way up to the top of the hill and have joined Shank and Kyler on their way down here. I heard nothing of Herald or Norrom.”

“Thank you,” replied the Lord Hiram and turned to his younger son.

“Vine,” said Hiram. “As I mentioned a moment ago, there is much to be done. I need you to disperse food and drink throughout the convoy. Look how difficult it is just getting my ten sons together in one location,” The brothers looked at each other and nodded, not quite sure where this was leading to.

“Why are only four of my sons here? Where are the other six?” Hiram didn’t sound like he wanted an answer, and he didn’t stop for one. “You four are here because you were nearest my tent. Ram, Falcon, Shank and Kyler are not here because they are the farthest from my tent. They have the farthest and hardest way to come.” No one wanted to mention that Herald and Norrom’s groups were nearby, and they were also missing.

“Ram will have to backtrack all the distance he traveled last night in order to get here this

morning. All the distance he traveled last night will have to be undone.” The Lord Hiram watched as the full scope of the problem began to occur to his sons.

“Then, when we are done, he will have to retrace his steps all over again, just to get back to where he was in the first place. He will be exhausted at the end of the day, and he will be no further along for his trouble.”

Vine nodded in understanding. The Lord Hiram looked at him and said, “The problem with the food is ten times worse.”

“Yes, I see,” agreed Vine, looking directly at his father.

“Vine,” said the Lord Hiram, “you have to first understand the problem before you can fix the problem.”

“Yes, sir” said Vine smartly.

“You see,” continued the Lord Hiram, “to get to the food wagons the troops in the front of the line have to backtrack through the slopes and forests they already passed. The troops in the rear have to conquer slopes and forests that are before them.” The Lord Hiram watched his son carefully. He wanted to make sure Vine really did understand the problem. Pausing for a moment he added,

“Then, once they are done eating, both groups have to do it all over again in reverse.”

Vine shook his head, sadly. He was beginning to see how poorly he had planned. “Forgive me Father,” said Vine. “It was a bad plan.”

“We have all made grave mistakes in our planning,” said the Lord Hiram kindly. “Now is the time to correct them, and move on.”

“What shall we do, Father?” Vine was willing to follow any advice or command given by the Lord Hiram.

“Vine, your food wagons should not be kept in the middle of the line, they should be spread throughout the convoy,” began the Lord Hiram. “Each of your brothers and the Service of Light should have enough wagons to offer food and drink to the people in their unit.”

Vine nodded. He knew immediately that he would have to delegate much more responsibility than he was used to. Ten times more, to be exact.

“May I add something?” asked Gannon.

The Lord Hiram looked intently at his youngest son before saying, “Yes, of course.”

“I don’t think you should distribute the wagons over the whole convoy equally,” began

Gannon, a little timidly. "I think you will need to put more wagons in the units that are fully manned, like Falcon's and Ram's, and less wagons in other units whose men are already spread out, like Herald's and Reed's."

The Lord Hiram smiled and nodded at his youngest son, as did Vine. Tulmar wrinkled his brow in concentration, but finally nodded in agreement. For a moment, Reed looked askance at Gannon, and then smiled and said, "I guess the tutors of logic and mathematics have paid off." They all laughed and patted Gannon on the back.

"May I add one more thing?" asked Gannon, growing in confidence.

"Maybe you should stop while you're ahead," said Tulmar, only half joking, but the Lord Hiram said, "Yes, what is it?"

"I think Vine should put extra supply wagons at the front of the convoy with Ram."

All waited for Gannon to explain. He suddenly felt shy.

Finally, Vine said, "Why?"

"That way," he said, softly, "whenever a unit needs more supplies, they can signal up to the front of the line and the supply wagon can leave the needed provisions behind. No one will have to go

backwards on the trail carrying heavy supplies. It will save the effort and help speed things up by having no one on the trail going the opposite direction.”

The brothers all stood amazed at their youngest brother’s sound thinking. The Lord Hiram laughed out loud in joy.

“So be it,” he declared smiling proudly.

At that very moment the voice of Preston was heard outside the tent, loudly proclaiming, “the Lord Hiram awaits you within.”

The great veil opened to reveal Ram, Falcon, Shank and Kyler. Their boots were covered in mud, their uniforms were soiled and their hair was disheveled. Amazingly, they had spent time and energy cleaning themselves up before approaching the tent, but they had not accomplished much.

“Please come in,” said the Lord Hiram pleasantly. Nothing was said about their appearance. He was in a much better mood now than when Vine, Reed and Gannon first arrived. “I am so glad you are here,” he began as the four entered and arranged themselves at their places around the table. “We were just hearing from my newest counselor,” he said smiling. Reed and Tulmar laughed, Gannon blushed, and the four

newcomers looked around the tent trying to understand whom he meant.

“May I present to you,” said the Lord Hiram in mock seriousness, “the Lord Gannon, youngest and perhaps smartest of the House of Hiram.” The four older brothers smiled at their little brother, but had no idea of their father’s meaning. No one cared to enlighten them.

The Lord Hiram clapped loudly. The servant’s veil opened and a guard stepped in. “It is time for breakfast,” he said. The guard silently nodded and retreated. In a few moments Andörsen, the Lord Hiram’s food taster, entered the chamber followed by servants carrying trays of dried fruit, cheese, bread and hot tea. The fragrance of the strong tea soon filled the room.

There were eleven mugs on the tray. Once everyone was served tea two mugs still remained. The Lord Hiram looked at them thoughtfully and asked, “Have any of you news about Herald and Norrom?”

Ram, Falcon, Shank and Kyler shook their heads, looked at their younger brothers and then back to their father. Apparently, no one knew anything about Herald and Norrom. The same thought entered everyone’s mind at the same time.

Herald and Norrom were positioned as close to the Lord Hiram's place in line as were Reed and Gannon. They were the two closest in the line ahead of the Lord Hiram; Reed and Gannon were the two closest behind him. Their place in the convoy had hardly moved all night.

"They should have been here by now," said Falcon. He spoke what they all were thinking.



The mountain pass to Draamor was unlike anything Quasar or Nemo had ever seen. It was totally void of life and light. Not even insects or maggots lived in the foul pass. It reeked of death.

Quasar and Nemo had started early, just as the first light of dawn blushed upon the horizon. As they traveled deeper into the pass it darkened as if the dawn had been lost. Everything was dark and murky. It was still dark in the pass long after the sun fully rose.

The pass was very narrow with giant rock walls on either side. They were so tall that the sun peeked in each day for only about an hour on either side of high noon. Other than that the pass was cold and dark. It had the feel of twilight most of

the day and midnight the rest of the time. It was like a deep fracture through the mountain; sheer, jagged, echoing and narrow. Some places were so tight that two men riding side by side could reach out their arms and touch the walls on both sides. The walls were moist with dank water that seeped from solid rock high above, and oozed down the gray face of the mountain wall. Moss and long stringy vines hung from the rock. The ground on which they walked was as thick and soggy as a bog.

“What I hate most about this place is the relentless darkness,” said Nemo suddenly.

They had ridden for so long in silence that his voice startled Quasar. Looking back, he was surprised to see that Nemo had stopped his horse and was looking up, straining to see a glimpse of sunlight.

“The relentless darkness and that putrid smell,” Nemo continued.

Quasar made no comment, but just kept on going.

“The relentless darkness, that putrid smell and the foul dampness, that’s what I hate most about this place.”

“Well, apart from that, how do you like the view?” asked Quasar, his voice full of disbelief.

"I hate the darkness, that smell, the dampness, and the view of endless slimy rocks," answered Nemo. He was in as foul a mood as the swampy bog through which they rode.

"No," said Quasar smiling back at Nemo, "how do you like the view?" he asked again.

Looking forward, it seemed to Nemo that Quasar had stopped his horse in a rare pool of light. The path curved sharply to the left. Nemo could see nothing beyond his friend. He urged his horse into a walk. As he slowly caught up with Quasar a breeze blew fresh air onto his face. Nemo stopped his horse at the bend of the curve next to his friend and looked out.

"Finally," sighed Nemo.

There before them in the afternoon sun, was the valley of Draamor. It was bleak and barren, but it had open space, light and air. Compared to the rancid crack they had just come through, this was paradise.

"Now," said Quasar, "all we have to do is get down this cliff, find the dragon and kill her."

"Or die trying," added Nemo, as he gazed down the precipice to the rocks below.

Quasar looked at his sullen friend. "Did your parents ever call you "Son-shine?"

Nemo looked at Quasar as if he had lost his mind. “No.”

“I wonder why,” said Quasar to himself with a chuckle.

They both dismounted and stood for a moment, holding tightly to their horses’ reigns. It felt like something could spook the horses at any moment and they would either run off the cliff or back into the mountain pass. Neither was a good idea. Nemo took a few steps forward onto a large flat slab overhanging the side of the mountain and looked down. He shook his head. Quasar walked his horse around the bend, passing a huge boulder.

“This won’t be as hard as it looks,” said Quasar happily. “There’s a path here.” Quasar was trying hard to keep a positive attitude, knowing that attitude has a lot to do with success or failure.

Nemo followed Quasar and peered around the rock. “You call that a path?” said Nemo, gloom saturating his voice.

“Well, we won’t be able to ride down it,” said Quasar, “but I know my horse would be able to walk it.” There was a slight challenge in his voice.

“My horse would be able to make it!” said Nemo, rising to the bait.

“Great! Let’s go,” said Quasar, inwardly very pleased with himself.

Without any further comment Quasar started down the treacherous path. In reality, he wished Nemo was leading, because Nemo was unusually good at this kind of thing; however, his attitude had so soured in the mountain pass that Quasar was a little worried.

They spent much of the afternoon going down the path. Though their progress was slow and hard, the open space, fresh air, and light made them feel clean and alive. Before them stretched a long, narrow valley, the end of which they could not see. At that far end was the port city of Three Rivers and access to the sea.

Though not lush by any means, the valley still had trees and brush and other signs of life. There was even green foliage along the banks of a river that snaked through it. On the right side of the valley, when looking out from the path, there was a true highway. On the left side, the side nearest the pass, there was something that looked like an old road.

At one point the mountain path widened enough for Nemo to pass his friend and take the

lead. Quasar smiled, happy that Nemo's spirit had returned to normal.

They both concentrated so much on the downward path that they rarely looked up. Had they done so, they might have noticed a large black form silhouetted far in the distance, flying high in the sky. Fortunately for them, the dragon was facing away from their mountain path.



As they eagerly ate breakfast Reed noticed that his father ate nothing until Andörsen, the food taster, sampled it. Cheese, bread and fruit were all sampled by the old man and then given to the Lord Hiram. He even drank tea from the Lord Hiram's own mug, before Hiram would drink it himself. Reed frowned, but then returned his attention to the Golden Rod.

Thinking himself unobserved, he moved to the rod and let his fingers rub over the family engravings. Lost in thought, he gradually became aware of a presence close behind him to his right. Glancing over his shoulder he was shocked to find his father standing close by.

“Would you like to hold it?” asked the Lord Hiram, so low that only Reed could hear him.

Reed only shook his head no.

“Yes you would,” said his father. “Pick it up.” It was a command, cold as steel.

“As you wish, my Lord,” answered Reed. He quickly glanced around the chamber. His brothers seemed occupied with breakfast and the scroll. Reaching out he slowly wrapped his fingers around the gold covered rod, feeling indentations made by the fingers of those who had ruled before his father. Taking a deep breath he lifted the Golden Rod from its stand. It weighed more than he imagined and was top heavy. He almost knocked the holder over.

The Lord Hiram looked at his son, second to last in the line of ascension.

“It’s heavy,” said Reed, quietly.

“It is heavier than you could ever imagine,” replied the Lord Hiram. “A burden that I hope you will never have to endure.”

Reed nodded and carefully returned the rod to its rightful place.

Though his head was bent and his hands moved in a fashion suggesting he was fixing himself tea, Falcon watched Reed, his father and the Golden Rod. Falcon, the firstborn, frowned. He had never

seen any of his brothers hold the Golden Rod. It was an honor that he himself had not yet received.

As Reed returned the rod to its stand, Falcon rejoined his brothers around the table. The tea was left behind.

“Father,” said Gannon, suddenly. “May I ask a question?”

Reed and the Lord Hiram turned quickly to face Gannon. The others stopped what they were doing and gave him their attention.

“What is it?” asked the Lord Hiram, moving to his chair and sitting down.

Andörsen approached with a fresh mug of tea. The Lord Hiram motioned him away with a slight wave of his hand. Breakfast ended with that gesture. Andörsen called for the servants who silently removed the trays. He bowed to the Lord Hiram and departed.

“While we await Herald and Norrom, may we discuss my unit?” asked Gannon humbly.

“What do you have in mind?” asked the Lord Hiram. He looked at his youngest son in a new light.

“I think my unit has the same problem as Vine’s.”

Ram, Falcon, Shank, Tulmar, Kyler, Vine and Reed looked at their younger brother and then to their father.

“Do you understand the problem,” he asked seriously.

“I think I do,” answered Gannon.

“What, then, is the solution?” asked the Lord Hiram.

“The healing tents must be spread throughout the camp like Vine’s food wagons,” answered Gannon, succinctly.

Some of his brothers looked at one another, mildly amused. Reed had a hard time not looking at the Golden Rod. Falcon looked proudly at his little brother.

“Go on,” ordered the Lord Hiram

“My healing tents and the wagons are at the very end of the convoy. The wounded or sick cannot be expected to travel to the end of the convoy for healing.” Gannon paused to let the full meaning of the problem sink in. “If they were strong enough to make the trip, they wouldn’t need healing,” he added. Gannon looked down, aware that only his father and Falcon were giving him the respect his idea deserved. As he spoke, however, things changed. No one was amused any longer.

Even Reed stopped his fantasy and turned his attention to Gannon. It was clear to everyone that another flaw in their original plan had been discovered.

“If my healing tents and wagons were assigned to each unit, like Vine’s food wagons, then the wounded or sick could be treated right where they were.” Gannon decided he had said enough.

The Lord Hiram looked at his other sons. “What do you think?” he asked. He had already decided Gannon was right, but he needed to learn what his other sons were thinking. Ram was the first to speak. “We have been lucky so far,” he said simply. “Last night, several of my men were almost crushed by wagons. If any had been hurt we would not have been able to help them and the healers would not have been able to come in time to do any good.”

Tulmar nodded his head, in agreement, but said nothing. Shank, Kyler, Falcon, and Reed all began speaking at the same time.

“Good job, Gannon.”

“Those old-beards are rubbing off on you.”

“I’m proud of you brother.”

“Your idea is gold, good, I mean.”

“I’m proud of you too, son,” said the Lord Hiram. “You understood the problem and then found a solution to the problem, before anyone else even saw the problem.” Gannon looked at his family and smiled. There were backslaps, handshakes and hugs all around.

“Now my young professor,” said the Lord Hiram, “what do we do about Ram’s heavy wagons?”

“I wish I knew,” said Gannon, who then remained quiet among a myriad of suggestions.

Finally, Ram said, “I think if we put large pulleys at the top of each slope we can use the slope to pull the wagons up.

Tulmar put both hands on his head as if his head hurt. Even the Lord Hiram looked puzzled. “Explain, please,” he asked.

“We can put my biggest pulleys at the top of each slope, strapped to trees, or whatever. Then, we tie one end of a rope to a wagon at the bottom and the other end of the rope to a cart at the top of the slope, running the rope through the pulley wheels, of course.” Ram looked around the table. Everyone wanted to understand, but mostly they frowned in confusion.

“We load the cart with rocks and send it down the slope. As the cart comes down the slope it helps pull the wagon up the slope. We’ll need the horses to pull at the same time.” He looked around the group to see if they understood the plan. It seemed perfect to him.

“So, the weight of the cart helps balance the weight of the wagons?” asked Falcon.

“Something like that,” answered Ram.

“What happens when the cart gets to the bottom?” asked Kyler.

“Once at the bottom, the cart would be emptied and brought back up the slope. We fill it again with rocks and dirt, and tie the rope to the next wagon.”

Kyler tried to picture it.

“It seems like it could work,” said Shank thinking out loud, “but very, very slowly.”

“How long would it take for each wagon to go up the slope?” asked the Lord Hiram.

“I don’t know,” admitted Ram.

“How long would it take to bring an empty cart back up the slope?” asked the Lord Hiram. His brow was creased in concentration.

“I don’t know,” Ram admitted again.

“How many wagons do we have in total?” asked the Lord Hiram. He didn’t think anyone understood the problem yet.

“That’s a question for Norrom,” answered Ram. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable with all the questions.

“Alright, how many wagons do you have?” He was trying to be patient, but he was sure Ram had tried to fix the problem before fully understanding the problem.

“I have twenty-five special wagons and a number of the regular ones,” answered Ram quietly.

The Lord Hiram looked at the earnest face of his seventh son and said finally, “If no one has a better idea, then you should begin refining your plan, immediately. Think it through, picture it, work out the details in your mind before you use your hands. But you have to first understand the problem before you can fix the problem.”

“Yes sir,” answered Ram, feeling he had redeemed himself.

“Ram, remember,” said the Lord Hiram, “If not for speed, the kingdom will be lost.”

“I have a question,” said Gannon. The tent became totally quiet.

“What?” asked Ram, forgetting himself.

The Lord Hiram looked at Ram for a moment then nodded to Gannon to continue.

“How strong is your rope?” asked Gannon.

“What?” asked Ram.

“How strong is your rope?” said Gannon again. “If the rope is not strong enough to hold the full weight of the wagon,” he continued, “it will break and both the wagon and rock-filled cart will come crashing down the slope.”

Ram lowered his eyes. “Good point,” he said quietly. Without warning the veil opened and Norrom entered the chamber. He had not waited for the guard to announce his entrance.

“Forgive me father for being so late,” he said before anyone had time to react.

“We are glad you are well,” replied the Lord Hiram, surprised to see his son. “Is Herald with you?” he asked hopefully.

“He was,” answered Norrom. “He will be here shortly.”

“Where have you been?” asked the Lord Hiram. He tried hard to keep his voice neutral, but what had been worry now was beginning to become anger.

“I have a fix to the problem of Ram’s wagons,” said Norrom hastily. “But again, father, I

must ask your forgiveness. It was my idea to carry everything in wagons. It was a bad idea. I did not think it though. I should have known that we could not carry out in one day what it took us months to carry in."

"I see," said the Lord Hiram. Then he added, sincerely, "I too, should have known." Father and son smiled briefly at one another. "What is your solution?"

"Ram's large wagons are too heavy to go up the second slope or back up the slope they came down last night. They are stuck." Norrom looked around and saw that everyone was in agreement. "There is very little space between the two slopes. I went there myself this morning. All that is there is a little-used path that leads down to the river. But the space is wide enough for a wagon or two." Norrom looked to see if anyone understood what he was proposing. Not yet.

"Go on," said the Lord Hiram.

"The wagons are heavy, but why?" asked Norrom.

"They are filled with the ramps and towers and catapults that I made," answered Ram, proudly, perhaps defensively.

“Exactly,” said Norrom. “What did you use to make them?”

“My men,” answered Ram, frowning a little.

Norrom shook his head. “Not ‘who did you use to make them?’” he corrected. “What did you use to make them?”

“Trees,” answered Ram, feeling a little offended, but not sure why.

“Exactly,” said Norrom. “And the wagons, are they also not made of wood?” asked Norrom.

“Yes, of course they’re wood,” answered Ram. “What else would I use?”

“Exactly,” said Norrom.

He looked around at his brothers, but avoided his father.

“Don’t you see?” asked Norrom. “They’re wood. We drive them to the river and float them to the sea.” Norrom smiled with satisfaction as he spoke.

“We’re not heading to the sea, we’re going to the King’s Highway,” said Tulmar, thankful that he could finally say something. The tent was quiet for a moment.

“No, we’re not,” said Gannon quietly.

“What?” asked Tulmar.

“We’re not going to the King’s Highway,” answered Gannon, a light flashing brightly in his eyes. “We’re going to Draamor,” he continued. “The King’s Highway is but one way to get there.” Once again, the youngest son in the House of Hiram had their complete attention. “We are trying to fix the wrong problem. The problem is not getting the wagons over the slopes. The problem is not getting the wagons to the King’s Highway. The problem is getting Ram’s machines of war to Draamor in time for battle.” Gannon looked to his father for approval. He got a bright smile.

“Exactly,” shouted Norrom. “We take the troops and horses by way of the King’s Highway, for they can move quickly. The machines and other things too heavy to go by road we send over the sea. Then, in a few days, we meet and assemble for battle,” he said with complete confidence. Gannon became excited as he saw the simplicity and possible speed of the new plan. “While Ram’s wagons are floating down the river, we can bring the other wagons to the shore. The wagons that haven’t left camp yet, like mine, could be at the ocean before sundown today. We could load the ships as soon as they arrived.”

“Exactly,” said Norrom.

The Lord Hiram nodded eagerly. "How quickly can we signal the fleet on the island?" he asked. He had risen to his feet and was pacing around the table.

"Herald has already gone to check on the birds, sir," said Norrom. "Once we realized the wagons could be shipped by sea we thought you would want to contact the island. Herald went to check on the birds so that everything would be in order."

The other brothers smiled as they heard Herald's and Norrom's plan. It looked like their travel to Draamor would be better and faster than anticipated.

"Herald wanted to know how many messages we could send to the island before the birds had to be returned by ship. I am not sure where he is. I would have expected him before now," said Norrom. His concern was evident to all.

One of the House of Hiram's most closely guarded secrets was the fact that they had discovered an island just off the mainland. Over time, they had built a huge base on the island, including housing for troops, permanent healing tents, and two harbors. No one else lived on the island. A whole fleet of ships and a huge army were

stationed there. If need be, the island commander could be contacted via messenger pigeon. It was generally believed by those few who knew of the island, and by those who were stationed there, that the Lord Hiram could summon additional troops from the island in a matter of days. The truth was ships from the island could arrive at the mainland in just a few hours, depending on the tide and the weather.

The brothers all began talking at once, discussing who should go by sea and who should go on foot. They talked so loudly that they failed to hear the guard announce Herald's entrance. The great veil opened and Herald walked in. For a moment, no one even realized he was there. He stood without being acknowledged for several seconds.

Finally, Tulmar announced, "Here he is now!" All eyes turned to Herald. He stood; head bowed, dejected, carrying a cloth bag. He did not go to his place at the table. A hush filled the chamber.

"Herald, we are so glad to see you," said the Lord Hiram, smiling at his son. As he looked at his son, Hiram's smile disappeared.

“Norrom was just telling us about your plan,” he added cautiously.

Herald glanced at Norrom. It was obvious by the redness of his eyes that Herald had been crying. Without speaking he walked to his place at the table, opened his bag and dumped out its contents. Dead pigeons fell out of the bag, landing on the table, the map and all around their feet. The brothers jumped back in horror.

“What is the meaning of this?” shouted the Lord Hiram.

Everyone stared at Herald.

“Son, what has happened?” The Lord Hiram’s voice was that of a father, concerned for his son.

“They’re dead, father,” answered Herald, a childlike smallness in his voice. “They’re all dead.” His voice became strangely void of all emotion. “I went to check. I removed the covering on the first cage. They were all dead – then the next and again the next – cage upon cage, wagon upon wagon, they’re all dead; all dead.”

“Are you telling me we cannot send messages to the island?” asked the Lord Hiram.

“We cannot send messages to the island,” said Herald, in a flat voice. “We cannot contact the fleet or the troops.”

“What about the Queen?” asked Hiram, even though he already knew the answer.

“Sir,” said Herald, trying to regain his composure. “We cannot send messages to Mother, or Casandra, or anyone at home.”

Herald sighed deeply and then continued.

“We cannot contact the island or anyone on it. We cannot contact King Triton or anyone in Illumius. We cannot send messages to anyone. We are alone.”