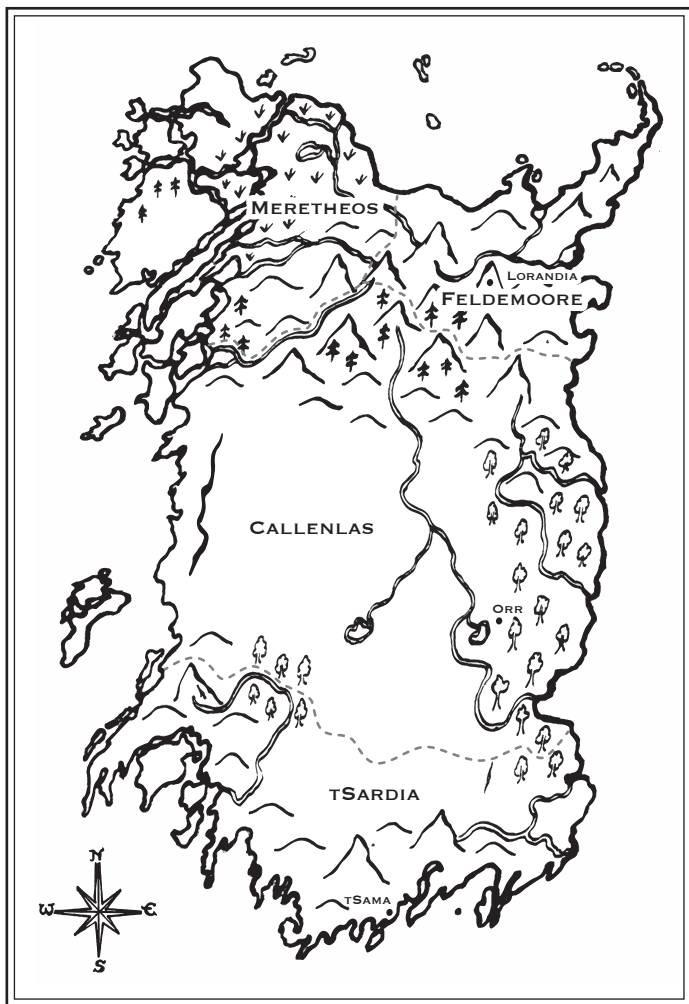
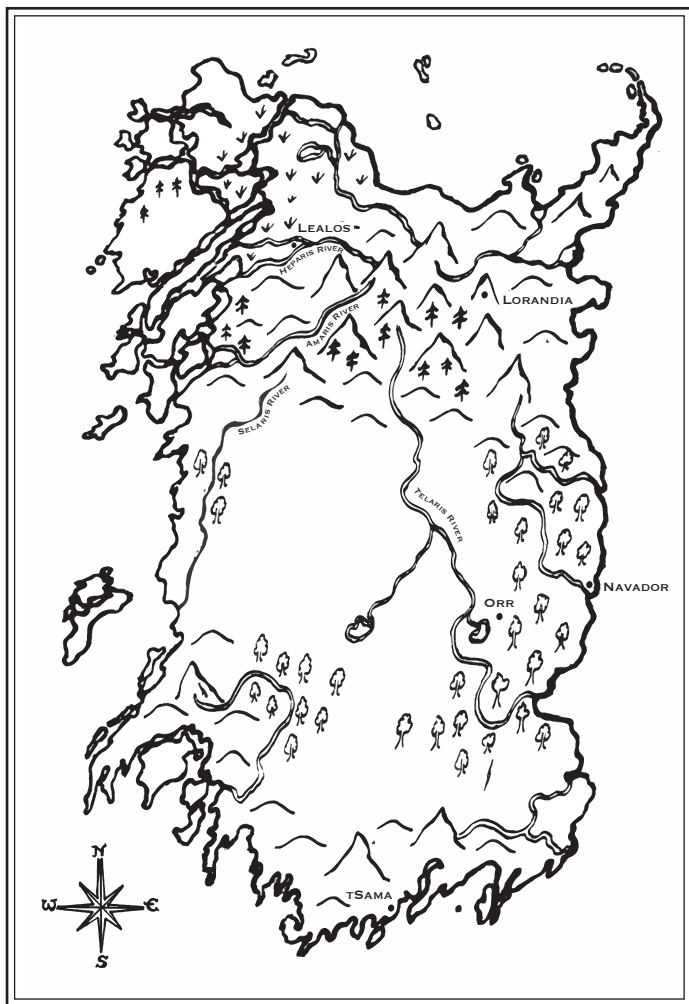


MAP FROM RUNA'S TIME



MAP FROM ELEOS'S TIME





CHAPTER 1

Runa.

The voice broke like a wave into her consciousness, drawing her from a deep sleep.

Runa, I'm sorry to wake you.

Usually alert even when sleeping in her own bedchamber in Feldemoore, Runa groaned and turned over. She had been working with newly sworn skyriders all day, running from dragon to dragon to fend off disaster, or at least the loss of an arm. Only one rider had come away with singed hair and Runa was counting it a successful day. But she was exhausted.

I must speak with you.

Runa dragged her attention to the Sender.

It's still *dark*, she managed to Send, then realised it was King Elijor, and sat up in bed. *My King!*

Runa could feel his presence shimmering like light on water and, despite the miles between them, she sensed the warmth in his voice. Unlike most distant Sendings, his were crystal clear, like the light of the stars on a cloudless winter night.

I assume it's urgent, Runa Sent. She had worked hard on mind arts in her training, but still struggled. It was the King who covered the miles of land and sea that lay between them.

I am afraid so. You heard, I presume, of the death of the King of tSardia?

Runa, still fighting sleep, forced her sluggish brain to focus. Yes, she had heard of the sudden death of King Lakesh, several months ago now. His daughter had become Queen of tSardia at only twenty-three.

Queen Junal has been quite militant in declaring her right to the throne of Callenlas. My Ambassador in tSama has met with the Queen, but while she professes to want friendship, I believe she is intent on war. The King's anger flickered orange in his Sending. We have worked so hard to keep the peace between our lands. I will not allow another conflict to trouble my people in Callenlas.

Ten years had passed since Runa and Zaphreth got caught up in the most recent conflict between tSardia and Callenlas. How could the peace crumble already, when lives had been given to establish it?

What can I do, my King? she asked. As a skyrider, her main task now was to help train other novice riders. Perhaps the King wanted her to step up the training programme and involve more recruits or return to Orr to work with the novice skyriders there.

I want you to go to Orr, and speak to my Master of Histories, Elior replied.

History? Runa could not hide her dismay.

I do not have time to explain now. You must trust me, Runa, as your King and as your friend. Master Horgin will meet you tomorrow, in the library at Orr.

Runa twisted her mouth, hesitant.

My King, you know history is ... Runa searched for a diplomatic way to say, boring, dull, awful. ... *not my best subject.*

The King's amusement did not help Runa.

Trust me, was all he said. His laughter quickly died. *I know I need not impress upon you how important it is that we prevent this war.*

Runa's stomach clenched, and a shadow fell over her mind.

I know, she replied.

May the light of the stars guide you, Runa.

I hear and obey, my King.



CHAPTER 2

In the gathering dusk, Runa steered Shari slightly east, towards the glimmering lights of Orr. She had been unable to leave her duties in Lorandia at short notice and had spent most of the day with her novice riders before flying south. Now, she was tired, and longing for bed. She could see the torches on the ground to guide riders to the landing field, just outside the city walls.

Shari touched down nimbly, shaking her wings and head before crouching so Runa could slip off. She left Shari in the capable hands of one of the dragon-tenders, then jogged to the narrow gate; a city entrance reserved for riders. To her irritation, she found the door locked. She rapped on the wood.

“Open up,” she called.

“Who seeks admittance?” asked a voice from the other side of the door.

“Runa, Skyrider of Feldemoore,” Runa sighed. “You knew I was coming!”

She heard the sound of the bolts being drawn, but as she tapped her foot, two more dragons swept down onto the landing field, one a blue like Shari, the other a formidable black. In the distance, against the setting Day-Star, she could see the silhouette of a third flying towards the city.

“What’s going on?” she asked as the door creaked open. She recognised the guard, a new recruit to the King’s service. “You shouldn’t lock the door until dark.”

“Extra security measures, my Lady,” the guard said, bobbing a funny, brisk bow. He was wearing full battle gear: an oversized helmet that sat just above his eyeline, a breastplate over a chain-mail shirt, and a large spear that kept getting in the way as Runa tried to squeeze past in the narrow passage.

“What for?”

But the guard’s gaze fell on the two riders now approaching the door behind Runa. “Who seeks admittance?” he demanded again, his voice quivering.

Mystified, Runa made her way along the stone passage. It ran beneath the city, leading directly to the palace itself, so that skyriders could quickly come and go. There was no room to keep dragons inside the city itself, with its narrow streets and crowded housing.

Emerging into the lower rooms of the palace, Runa intended to head for the library to find the Master of Histories. She quickly perceived that there was more afoot than extra security measures. The palace was busy. In the lower rooms, servants and novices scurried about, carrying armfuls of folded standards, stacks of spears, and baskets of provisions. As Runa climbed to the higher rooms, she found an unusual number of riders standing about, talking in serious voices, looking over lists, and giving instructions to eager-faced novices.

A sense of foreboding crept into Runa's belly, like a slowly wakening worm. She knew only too well what preparations for military action looked like.

Across the room she spotted Kels, one of the skyriders who had trained with her.

"Runa," he grinned, offering her his palm, which she met distractedly with her own.

“Why is everyone preparing for battle?” she asked quietly.

“tSardia,” he whispered back, grin fading. “We heard today that they’ve moved forces towards the border.”

Runa’s stomach-worm woke fully, baring sharp teeth.

“I thought the Queen sought a peaceful solution?” she said.

Kels shrugged.

“That’s what tSardia claims.” His voice was bleak. “But the troops are there.”

Runa pressed her lips together and fought to keep her breathing calm. Since becoming a skyrider, she had been involved in a few small skirmishes with pirates in the south, and flesh-traders in Feldemoore. War was another thing entirely. Runa fought to keep the vivid memories of the last war from filling her head. The scrape of metal against bone. The screams of young men pierced with arrows or blades. The rows of dead, laid out after the battle.

Runa stepped back from Kels and the group of riders. She moved to the window and drew in a gulp of air, trying to steady herself against the stone

ledge. Through the glass, she could see the plains of Callenlas stretching south-west, pastureland, fields, and then, beyond her sight, the tSardian desert. Was it really only ten years since she had hidden with Zaphreth, while Elior battled the dark star, Lur?

Glancing back at the busy room, she could see riders-in-training waiting to be sent on errands, while newly qualified riders hung about in nervous clusters. They looked so young. How many would return, should war break out?

A surge of anger flared inside Runa. This war had to be stopped.