

## CHAPTER ONE: THE FIERY HILLS

For an instant, only an instant, I again lived the mindless terror first experienced in the invisible barrier of evil mygs past when my foot first touched the gray, hard-packed sand of the Feroonian shore. But the overpowering sensation passed quickly, leaving the slight disquieting feeling that would likely be the least we could expect during our time, however long or short, upon this dark land. The others felt it also, I knew, but none cried out or said a word. We hauled the outrigger about a bivaik from the water, where almost as one we crumpled to the sand, victims of overwhelming fatigue both physical and mental.

Silence ruled for a while as we watched Ithantikor, now just slightly less than full, rise majestically over the waves in the distance. Makkal and Drienne, both of whom recovered more rapidly than the rest of us, had distributed rations of food and water from our meager supply, and despite our deprivation we ate absently as we tried to regroup our thoughts. Vassio finally broke the silence, the manner in which he did so snapping us all from our individual thoughts.

“Dencentus and the others cannot be dead!” the scientist roared as he smacked his open palm against the hard sand, the echo bouncing off nearby sea cliffs. “Surely they are somewhere along this wretched coast. The sea was as a lake during our own passage from Grekota. Why should it have been so different for them? One of us lost track of the proper course, to be sure.”

“Vassio, calm yourself,” Bartus snapped. “You have been at sea often enough to know of its capriciousness. Where a still surface might be in evidence one moment, a violent whirlpool could appear the next. Gently rippling waves could re-form as titans such as the ones that destroyed the dy-clon boat, or even as water spouts, the like of which could splinter vessels like this. Jaw tabons, pthannars...the list is endless. Hammot rode with us during our own passage, surely he did. But as for the others...we can only pray that you are right, my friend, though we have no choice but to assume the worst.”

“The course set by Kendivak and the kev was simple to follow,” Makkal added. “Be assured that we did not stray from it for a moment. As for Kendivak, the most skilled seaman since perhaps Simmin and Tekob themselves, he would have found his way here even with a brain fogged by an excess of Pecctanian ale. Only misfortune could have carried them from their path.”

“Vassio, all of us worry about their unknown fate, you cannot doubt that,” I stated calmly. “But if nothing else, it would be unlike Jennithusians to disobey the orders of our kev. We must set emotions aside and go forth in order to seek an answer to the puzzling disappearances in Vialk. Look at it this way: if the others somehow survived, but for some reason were unable to rendezvous with us on the coast, then even right now they might be journeying inland to continue the quest. Who is to say that we may not yet be reunited with them at a later time?”

My statement might have been a longshot, or perhaps wishful thinking, but for the moment it gave all of us some straw to clutch at, and the tension in the camp eased. Vassio gazed at me with a sheepish expression.

“Of course you are right, Dannus, as are all of you,” he said. “I apologize for my words. In recent mygs we have encountered tragedy heaped upon tragedy, and of necessity we have carried on in spite of them. After a time this tends to weigh heavily on one’s state of mind. It will not be repeated, I assure you.”

Drienne, with a sad-eyed smile, placed a comforting hand on the scientist’s shoulder, and once more we settled down to finish our sparse meal. With the incident past I soon became aware of the bone-numbing chill of the Feroonian night, a pervading iciness quite unlike the warm Jennithusian evenings, and a far cry from the sultry nights of Phaltiir. The shredded remains of my waistcoat and shirt had been left on Grekota, as had those of Trovian and Bartus. Makkal’s once gaudy seaman’s vest, now little more than strips of cloth, still clung to his back, but barely. Only the garments of Vassio and Drienne had miraculously suffered little during the devastation on the Island of Stones. But in spite of the waistcoat she wore the young beauty still shuddered, for her body had long since grown accustomed to the tropic isle on which she had been born. Her proximity to the understanding Vassio appeared to alleviate some of the discomfort, but only a little.

“Do we dare light a fire?” Trovian asked.

"I doubt that we could be any more isolated than we are here," Bartus replied. "What have we to lose?"

"We have little to lose but no fuel to burn," Makkal stated dryly. "The question therefore becomes academic."

"Before we concede too readily, let's search the beach to see what we can find," I said. "If nothing else, the activity might serve to ease the chill a bit."

All agreed, and individually we spread out across the drab beach in varying directions. I ventured inland about five bivaiks from the water line, where, despite my skepticism, I discovered a large piece of driftwood that had likely been cast ashore by an immense wave a long time ago. About a third of it was wedged tightly in the sand, but after extricating it and examining it closely I concluded that the wood was dry enough to burn.

I had not noticed it before, but as I made ready to lift the bulky piece of wood and return it to the camp my attention became diverted by an unusual occurrence far to the west. By Ithantikor's pale light I could make out the range of low, rugged promontories we had initially viewed before setting foot on land. The outlines of individual peaks were clearly marked by streaks of reddish fire, luminous fingers of flame that would occasionally intensify to dazzling brilliance before subsiding to a dull glow. The fiery strips danced throughout the hills, producing an almost hypnotic effect that appeared to endow the range with a life of its own. I gazed at the sky atop the hills for signs of lykus, but the clouds that normally bore the devastating bolts were not in evidence, eliminating the possibility that a blaze had been started by one of them. Besides, what could exist to burn on those jagged peaks? A few sparse shrubs, or an occasional tree? And why would it stretch as far as one could see to the north and the south? No, too coincidental. The ceaseless glow, the unchanging patterns made me conclude that the fires existed from within, though I could not even begin to guess why. Perhaps Vassio would have an idea.

After a while I tore my gaze away from the mesmerizing sight, and with a grunt I hefted the wood in my arms and carried it the short distance to our encampment. I called up and down the strand to the others, all of whom immediately returned. Makkal and Trovian bore assorted small bits of flotsam, while the efforts of the others had proven fruitless. I pointed out the sight that had held my attention, though I need not have bothered, for I saw that all had become aware of it.

"What can it be?" Drienne asked.

"Within the Monthok Mountains, on our own continent's northern coast, a strange promontory unlike any other exists," Bartus related. "In my foolhardy youth I joined an unauthorized expedition in search of more plentiful fishing grounds, a venture that nearly ended in disaster, though this is unimportant. From one vaik out, as close as we dared approach the rugged shore, we could clearly discern the odd mountain, which rose tavaiks above those within its immediate sphere. Its sides were streaked with black, its broad, flat top rent asunder, like some huge gaping maw. Curls of smoke occasionally wafted high above this opening, as if someone had set a campfire ablaze deep in its bowels. But not until night had engulfed us, and we sat at anchor, could we see the reddish streaks that poured over the lip of the bowl like some fiery liquid and snaked down the sides of this peak. Not until now had I seen its like again. The glow from these hills before us is no different, of this I am certain."

"A volcano!" I exclaimed. "You are speaking of a lava flow. Yeah, that's what this appears to be."

I had used words from the language of my past world, being unaware of any Maldrinium equivalents, and this confused the others. But after offering them all that I knew regarding volcanoes, which was little more than I remembered from the books of my youth, it became a bit clearer. Vassio, ever the scientist, was by far the most fascinated, and he hurled questions beyond my ability to answer. Only after he had picked my brain clean of facts did he stop.

"Molten fire from beneath the earth," he stated, almost dreamily. "I have heard rumors regarding the mountain of which you speak, Bartus, but never considered it to be more than a seafarer's fable. And on our own continent, besides! What untapped power there must be..." His voice trailed off as Drienne took a firm hold on his arm, and he immediately realized that his thoughts had strayed. "But what of these fiery hills before us?" he continued. "Can a—volcano exist here?"

The question appeared to be addressed to me, so I shook my head. "I saw nothing that remotely resembled one, though my attention has not been on those hills during the past myg. What about you, Bartus?"

“I recall glancing up at the range often during our search for the others,” the sailor replied. “Nowhere did I notice anything like what I observed in the Monthok range.”

“Besides,” I added, “the molten streaks exist up and down the length of the range for as far as we can see.” I indicated this with a sweep of my finger. “It is beyond my understanding, I assure you.”

“I suggest that we dwell on it no longer, but instead see if we can start a fire,” the shivering Makkal said. “We will learn the nature of those hills soon enough, since it is likely that we will have to cross them.”

“Cross them?” Drienne exclaimed. “Is there no other way for us to go?”

“These coastal mountains stretch southward as far as we can see,” the young seaman replied, “thus eliminating that route from consideration. We know what exists to the north for a long way, and to retrace the path would be an exercise in futility. Behind us, the Black Straits. What is left? Unless some alternative presents itself along the way, crossing those strange hills appears a certainty.”

Drienne glanced at Vassio, who nodded. “Makkal speaks the truth. But with luck we may yet discover an opening through which we can pass safely.” Images of the mountains on Grekota flashed before all of us, but none chose to say anything. Vassio continued: “Stack the wood here, and I will attempt to ignite it.”

The skillful scientist, with Drienne at his side, worked diligently for a while, and soon a sufficient, sputtering blaze cast eerie shadows on the gray sand that surrounded us. We huddled around the fire as closely as we dared, and it did not take long for the welcome warmth to ease the numbing chill in our bones. We divided the watch, with Bartus assuming the first shift, and after a final bemused look at the fiery hills to the west I shut my eyes and slept surprisingly well for more than two kimygs, when my own turn came. Our first night on the Feroonian Continent passed uneventfully.

None of us ate any food from our rapidly dwindling stores the next morning, though we each allowed ourselves a few sips of water. The sun had barely topped the waves of the Black Straits as we concealed the Phaltiirian outrigger in a rock-strewn, natural cave located at the base of a nearby sea cliff. To me this seemed a futile gesture, for I believed that we would not depart the Feroonian Continent in this vessel, if we departed at all. But the effort, in which all of us shared, expended little time, and once done we quickly forgot about it. We gathered our few belongings, including the crude spear that had somehow remained with us throughout, and set out across the gray sand toward the uninviting Feroonian interior.

In the daylight the phenomenon of the flaming hills could not be seen. No signs of volcanic formations were in evidence anywhere along the lengthy range, at least not from this distance. To all intent and purpose we trekked toward an insignificant strip of low promontories, yet I knew that not one among us approached the strange hills without some concern.

By the early part of the afternoon the topography had barely altered. To the south of us the towering coastal mountains had begun to veer away slightly, the base of the nearest one about a tavaik further along. Northward the monotonous gray sand stretched endlessly beyond our vision, like some vast, foreboding desert, though without the searing heat that one associates with such terrain. In fact, the climate had become bearable, quite unlike the numbing chill of the past night. Without our fire, which had not burned itself out until shortly before dawn, we would have been sorely pressed to withstand the bitter cold. I hoped that we would not have to face the prospect again, that beyond the hills the nights would prove more agreeable, or that wood for burning might become more accessible if such were not the case. But as the afternoon dragged on I came to realize, as I'm sure the others did, that we might not be given the chance to learn of this, at least not on that particular myg.

From the edge of the water the jagged range had appeared relatively close, and I estimated that we would reach its edge by the middle of the afternoon, an approximation with which all concurred. But something—whether the ever-present dull mist or another inexplicable whim of nature—played deceptive tricks with our judgment, and shortly before Maldrinium's inky dusk enveloped us we found ourselves at least three or four vaiks short of our immediate goal. We might have continued, but it would have meant dealing with the hills during the night, and this fact, coupled with the fatigue brought about from our tedious hike, proved a strong deterrent. Once again we established a crude camp, where we ate some of our dwindling food for the first time that myg.

Xava and Oriot, Maldrinium's lesser moons, had completed barely a quarter of their journeys before we realized that the biting chill, which we had braced ourselves against as best we could by huddling close together, was not to be on that night. It occurred to me that kimygs earlier I had found myself perspiring

slightly, but I believed it to be from fatigue. Now I knew that this warmth had to do with our proximity to the fiery hills, and I mentioned it to the others.

“By Hammot, you are right, Dannus!” Trovian roared as he separated himself from our comrades. I could see that he sweated profusely. “I thought perhaps that fever had taken me.”

The others began removing their heavier garments, all except Drienne, who appeared comfortable in her heavy waistcoat. I believed that she might have done so regardless of the circumstances, for Vassio had long since discussed with her the slightly more modest ways of the Jennithusians. But being used to such stifling heat she did not appear burdened in the least.

“How ironic,” Bartus said. “We prepare ourselves for cold, and yet encounter the opposite. So strongly did we concentrate on it that not until we were told otherwise did our minds accept it, though our bodies, quite obviously, have long been aware of the change.”

Once again we observed the remarkable light show that emanated from the flaming hills, our proximity making it all the more spectacular. Had it not been for the Feroonian night chill we might have roasted where we sat, but the two offset each other enough to render the climate only slightly less than ideal. Despite the awe-inspiring splendor of the range I found the thought of crossing them in the morning a bit unnerving, yet I knew that the choices were limited. Not even the least hint of life had made itself evident over the long vaiks of gray wasteland. Occasional rifts had appeared in the lofty mountains to the south of us, yet none dared even consider tackling them. Our journey had carried us due west, while the mountains continued to angle away, the encampment now a quarter of a vaik from their foothills. With the fiery hills aglow we could clearly see where the two joined, about three vaiks to the southwest. There would be no circumventing this rugged range, of this I felt certain.

The two sailors, Trovian and I had endured the routine ministrations of the ever-concerned Vassio since departing Grekota, and that night proved no exception. However, the wounds and other various injuries we had suffered on the Island of Stones were all healing quite well, despite his grumblings regarding our lack of proper care, and the examination was at best cursory. For a short while thereafter we observed the many shapes and designs formed by the trickling lava, until fatigue made rest a necessity. But unlike the previous night it did not prove that easy in coming, at least for me, and at dawn I still felt weary. From the almost surly dispositions of all save Trovian I guessed the same to be true. As long as I had known the husky Sellak miner I always found myself amazed at his ability to fall asleep under the most adverse conditions, as he had done here.

Even this close to the strange hills they appeared little out of the ordinary by sunlight, though as we neared their base the intense heat grew to almost sauna-like proportions. We had not discovered a potentially simple passage through the range from any distance, nor did our plans call for skirting the perimeter in search of one. Instead we walked toward what looked to be the least lofty of the nearest hills, one with enough hand- and footholds.

The dull sand that we had crossed for endless vaiks was so tightly packed that at first we did not notice the change beneath our feet, not until we breathed the acrid scent of burning rubber. We now walked on a surface of solid rock, the heat of which had begun to melt the soles of our boots. Small flames appeared at the feet of Drienne, who wore the thin, crudely carved sandals of Phaltiir. Vassio immediately lifted her up, while Makkal snuffed the fire with his rolled-up vest. We then retraced our steps about half a tavaik, until we stood upon the relative safety of the gravel.

“It appears that we are to be stopped before we even begin,” Bartus stated dryly.

“A shame,” Trovian replied, “for this hill appears even less steep than it had from farther away. The handholds would not matter, for the flesh would surely be seared from our bones.”

“Could we negotiate the knoll without the use of our hands?” Makkal asked.

“From what we see before us, it’s a possibility,” I replied. “But we have no idea of what lies beyond it. Also, if the heat is this intense here, what must it be like farther along? I’m afraid that our boots would not endure the crossing. And Drienne’s sandals would be incinerated in no time.”

“Then we have no other choice but to journey north,” Vassio moaned. “But how many mygs will be lost if we do so, and what assurances would we have that it would be different there?” He turned away in disgust.

“Might I offer a plan?” Drienne said. All eyes turned to her. “These Phaltiirian pouches in which we carry our food and water are fabricated from the skin of jaw tabons, which are captured by the pthannars.

They are quite thick, as you can see, and are resistant to nearly everything. Were we to cover our feet with them we may yet traverse the hill safely.”

“But in what will we carry our supplies?” Makkal asked.

“If we can’t reach the far side then food and water won’t matter,” I said. “With no other options it seems the best chance we have, so I’m in favor of it. What do the rest of you say?”

They all agreed, but Bartus appeared a bit puzzled. “Do we have enough of the pouches for all of us?”

“I see ten of them,” Drienne replied as she removed one from her own shoulder. “And here I have five that are empty, ones that I saved in the hope of being able to refill them. It appears that we are adequately equipped.”

We ate the rest of the nuts and dried meats in what we hoped would not be our last meal. The water, what little remained, we poured into a single pouch, which it barely filled. To our relief it proved unnecessary to remove our boots, for the Phaltirian pouches easily covered them. We tied them around our ankles with their own leather thongs, and after a few hesitant steps we found that they did not slow our footing in the least.

“Allow me the remaining pair for my hands,” Trovian said as we again approached the base. “If Dannus is correct then the footing might be less than ideal farther on. This will enable me to negotiate the distance, and with the rope I can pull the rest of you along, so that your hands need not touch the searing stones.”

The miner put on the pouches, which appeared as loose-fitting mittens, and he slung the rope, which had been carried by Makkal, over his shoulder. Once more we left the hard-packed gravel for the stone surface, and after traversing an uneasy bivaik we closely examined the effectiveness of the pouches. The bottoms were a bit blackened, but the thick skins proved incredibly tough, as Drienne had said, and I believed that they would work, hopefully for a reasonable length of time. Accordingly we hastened our steps, and we soon stood at the base of the hill.

Initially the western slope angled upward slightly, the surface so pocked with indentations that we managed an unbroken tavaik of sure footing. Makkal and Bartus, both far from their watery element, maintained their composure well, at no time outwardly displaying the tension I knew that they shared. I imagine that all of us were also highly strung, for the least misstep could send one tumbling to the base, there to arrive as little more than a heap of charred bones.

After what seemed forever we topped what I had hoped to be the summit, only to find ourselves upon a broad plateau, a brief respite at best before the hill continued upward for a considerable distance, this time at a sharper angle. Here we did not hesitate for even a moment, for despite the density of the pouches on our feet they had already begun to show some wear.

As we hurried to the second incline we noted a broad, bubbling pool of molten rock about two bivaiks to our left. Fingers of smoke wafted upward from it, while tiny geysers spewed the fiery liquid a few ruvaiks out from its core. A second such pool appeared to our right, a third just beyond it, and by the time we reached the base of the next slope we found ourselves bypassing one after another. This precaution, while consuming precious time, had to be done, lest we venture too close to the spurting streams of death.

Once upon the incline the number of pools lessened, but those that did exist on the side of the hill appeared far more potentially deadly, for the lava that spewed out from the depths of the molten ponds trickled down toward us. For the initial two bivaiks we stepped carefully over the fiery streams, which further threatened our already precarious footing. Then, as I had feared, the hillside became far too steep to negotiate without using our hands. Here Trovian acted quickly and decisively.

“I will climb there,” he said, indicating a ledge about three bivaiks farther up. “Dannus, you will hold one end of the rope, and I will tie the other around me. I could take it with me and cast it down to you, but one miss and it will be quickly incinerated. Pay it out slowly, and whatever you do, allow no slack. Now, let us hurry.”

Bartus tied the knot around the miner’s waist, one that would hold tightly but could hastily be undone. While the rest of us moved about to prevent the pouches from being eaten through, Trovian began his ascent. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a simple enough climb, but on these flaming hills each ruvaik came at great peril. With his fingers confined in the mitten-like pouches Trovian utilized every crevice, each indentation, every small outcropping to haul himself farther up the slope. He nearly stumbled once, and I heard a few stifled gasps as he slid backward a short distance, while I hastily drew in the slack

from the rope. But his sheathed heel found a fortunate barrier in the form of a deeply embedded stone, and for the moment he checked his fall.

Trovian had bypassed two lava pools during the early part of his climb, and this, coupled with my own necessity to move about, caused us much concern, lest one of the thin geysers sever the precious rope. But Hammot had so far ascended with him, and he now stood half a bivaik from the ledge. With his right hand encased in the now considerably charred sheath, he sought a narrow, horizontal rift only ruvaiks above his head, and once secured he pulled himself up a bit farther. His next handhold would have been a broad outcropping of knobby stones slightly to the left, from which I believed that he could boost himself to the safety of the ledge.

None of us could have warned him, for our position impeded our view. Even his proximity was insufficient to disclose the molten pool that bubbled just behind the cluster of stones. Trovian's hand was inches from the outcropping when the twin geysers of searing death spurted over the rocks in a broad arc, where for a moment they appeared to hang suspended. From behind I heard Drienne cry out, but my eyes remained fixed on the scene of impending disaster.