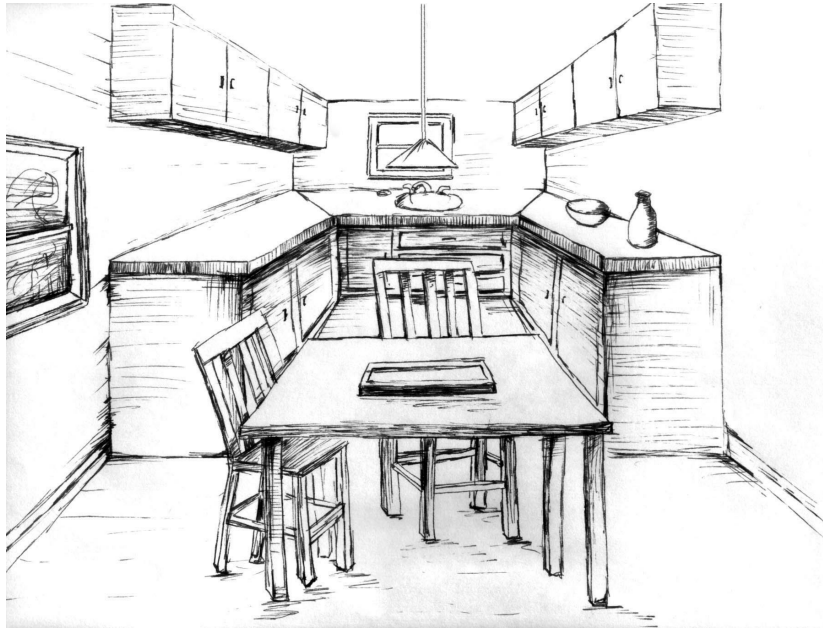


◦ Prologue ◦



*The only one who truly fears nothing, is
he who does not fear death.*

The Tessarandin, Book 3

Rindar was a dreamer...but as the most vivid dreams happen just before waking, he was suddenly aware that this was not a dream. He sat up, shook his head and shivered, partly because of the throbbing at the base of his skull and partly to wake himself into the gray dawn that filtered through the window to his left. He could not remember where he was.

He put his hands to his face, intending to sweep back his hair. There was blood everywhere. His hands were covered with it, and as he looked down, he saw that his shirt was caked and stiff to the touch. Spatters of it covered the rough wood floor where he sat sweating from the heat of the stuffy room.

He shook his head again and tried to stand up, struggling to remember any detail of how he had come to be where he was. He was on his

knees when the first flicker of remembrance darted through the clouds in his mind. The old man—

Rindar's memory descended on him suddenly, with violent urgency. In an involuntary motion his right hand went for the holster under his left arm where his hazarine should have been. It was empty. He rose to his feet, unsure where he wanted them to carry him. Thoughts of escape flooded his mind, but he was riveted to the floor, knowing that he could not leave the tiny kitchen without ridding himself of the blood. He reached for his hazarine again as an image of the old man flickered into his mind.

He scanned the small room from where he stood. The only door was behind him and it was still locked. In front of him was the table where he had confronted the old man, and the small carved box still sat on top of it where the man had offered it to him. The chair behind the table was pushed back carelessly, and beyond it, the tidy cupboards and sink seemed to be the only part of the room that had escaped the bloodbath, a bloodbath Rindar had no recollection of.

He moved carefully to the left of the table, past the empty waste bin on the floor; and as he passed the window, he glanced out onto the street two levels below. With the gray dawn had come the slow creep of the morning commute. Beings and vehicles pushed and shoved their way to some busy-ness that would occupy them for the rest of the day. Rindar would have to do his share, he knew, but not with blood on his hands; so he made his way to the small sink in the counter behind the chair. The faucet creaked as he turned on the water, and he scrubbed his hands in the cold trickle to remove the dried blood from under his fingernails.

The old man's eyes rose in his mind. There was something about them—the way he had stared, as if he could see Rindar's vorn in its entirety—deep into the very core of who he was. They had looked familiar and sad, but the most significant thing was the lack of fear. He had offered Rindar tea. Tea? At two in the morning with a hazarine leveled at his chest, the old man wanted to know if he wanted some tea.

Rindar hurried. As he scrubbed, he wondered where the old man could be. Perhaps he had gone for the marshals after knocking him out, or maybe someone had taken his body. He reached up to probe the lump on the back of his head. It was tender to the touch. If he had killed the man, how did he get the lump?

The smell of the half-dried blood was beginning to sicken Rindar. He carefully unbuttoned his shirt, stripping it off as if letting it touch any other part of his body would push him beyond his ability to restrain himself from retching into the sink. His thoughts slipped once again to his hazarine. He glanced over his shoulder as he dropped the shirt into the sink. Perhaps it was under the chair or the table. The hazarine had

misfired—that had happened before, but what disturbed him most was that the old man somehow knew that it would. “Put your hazarine down,” he had said. “It isn’t going to work anyway.”

The blood had not dried completely and softened under the flow of the tepid water from the spigot. Rindar scrubbed the cloth between his hands and wrung the water out of it repeatedly, letting the dark water run down the drain and disappear. The shirt would be wet but at least it would be clean.

His knife! He bent over to feel the sheath strapped to his left leg. That was gone too. A wave of panic overtook his vorn and reason slipped away. He grabbed the shirt and twisted it into a knot, trying to get the last drops out before he put it back on. He knew it would be cold, but still, he gasped involuntarily as he pulled it on. Moving quickly past the table, he went to his knees in a last effort to see if either the hazarine or knife was under something in the room. The blood on the floor stuck to his hands again. His heart raced.

To the sink again, scrubbing furiously as the nauseating smell overwhelmed his senses. Another wave of panic welled up inside. *Out!* it shouted. *Get out now!* He grabbed the carved box off the table. When he lifted it, he remembered the coins the man on the street had given him. He reached down and felt for them in his pocket. It seemed that they were all still there, but he did not have time to look at them. He shoved the carved box up under his arm and headed toward the door, noticing again through the fog of his fear that the door was still bolted from the inside. He worked the bolt free.

The hall was empty and quiet. The air seemed fresh compared to the stifling atmosphere of the bloody kitchen. Rindar moved quickly, descending the flight of stairs without a sound and running headlong through the small shop below the kitchen. He burst through the front door into the safety of the endless stream of beings.

Rindar moved east along the street, hugging the strange box. It smelled old, and its musty wooden scent wafted to his nostrils, mingled with the smell of the petrotruck exhaust and the peculiar odor of the city’s sidewalks. The chill of the slight breeze that pressed his shirt against his body made him shiver, and he clutched the box tighter as he began to trot.

When he came to the end of the second block, he had to stop to wait for the traffic that swirled through the huge crossroads of the central business district of Vindarill. On the bank tower across the square, the huge calendar board was being changed. “Eveldar,” it read across the top reminding anyone who watched that the third day of the week was just starting. Below that, the month and day were being changed to read “Ulzar 7.” Rindar stared at the man who was changing the placard, high above the street on the narrow catwalk below the board, marking the march of days

amid the wonders of the modern city. The tradition of the manual changing of the calendar seemed suddenly ironic. Eveldar: Ulrar 7.

Rindar looked around at the throngs of commuters. No one else *was* watching. The formal pronouncement of the new day was lost on the crush of beings whose day had started several hours before. When the traffic stopped, Rindar started trotting again, hurrying against the chill toward his empty room at the boarding house where he could get a dry shirt and several hours of sleep.



*In dreams we see the future, or maybe it's
the past,
Or maybe it's a tiny glimpse of insight
deep and vast.*

Old Mythinian Rhyme

Rindar hadn't seen the sun for the entire day. The morning drizzle on the window of his small compartment in the heart of Vindarill remained as it was most of the day and had obscured what little view he had of the brick wall across the alley.

Sleep had been nearly impossible, and what little he had managed to get was fitful and full of opaque thoughts and twisted glimpses into the events of the night before. Several times his dreams led him to the docks where hundreds of gulls tore at the carcass of the old man who sat without moving as they feasted on the flesh of his arms and back. Each time the man looked up at him, he would beckon Rindar to join him. Rindar would wake up shaking.

He got up just before dusk, stumbled down the hall to the bathroom he shared with the other residents of the boarding house and splashed his face with cold water to make sure he was fully awake. No one else was home, and he reflected thankfully on his solitude as he arranged his pack so that the strange box would fit into it.

He had not found the hazarine. Fortunately, he wore its holster under his work tunic so that no one would notice it was missing. He rarely needed it in the tunnels, and he knew that Minxa would have his if they ran into any trouble that night. The missing boot knife bothered him more, but he was not sure whether this was because he missed the security of it strapped to his leg or because he did not know where it was.

Rindar trudged to the sub transit station in the dim evening fog, going against the tide of beings heading back to their homes for the night. It was a short ride from the station to the downtown tunnel entrances where he planned to meet Minxa. Rindar found much com-

fort in his relationship with Minxa, though he often wondered why, for they were much the same and very different at the same time. Both were viddiks, a scurrilous epithet describing their ethnic heritage; and both were orphans, victims of the oppression routinely inflicted on indigenous Morlans by descendants of the Moorimans who had first come to Morlan hundreds of years before.

They had met in the boarding school where Rindar's mother had left him when he was seven. Minxa was a year older than Rindar, but their friendship had been immediate. All through school, they played together, studied together and then finally, had gotten a job together in the tunnels.

When they started working two years before, their supervisor had assigned them to the Search Detail, a band of young men whose task it was to search out the uncharted branches of the caves as the drillers discovered them. Each night, he joined the group, and they received their assignment to explore newly found passages. Minxa was his partner. They had spent countless hours together, charting the spurs to which they were assigned. It was dangerous work, but they were viddiks, and they considered themselves fortunate to have a job at all.

Along with the job came the hazarine. His handheld hazarine could deliver a bolt of energy sufficient to knock out or kill another being. Rindar was allowed to carry it legally for self-defense in the tunnels, but its use for any other purpose was highly illegal.

Minxa was leaning against one of the stone pillars at the entrance to the tunnels. "You feeling better?"

Rindar shook his head.

"You look terrible."

"I feel terrible."

"Can you work tonight?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Get off my back, will you?"

"Did you bring it?"

"Shhhhhh—it's in my pack," Rindar whispered to Minxa, shoving his thumb over his shoulder at the battered leather detail pack he had been given as part of the gear used in the cave. "Later!"

They said nothing else as they walked down the long stairs to the tram that would take them to the latest drilling operation. No one spoke on the tram. Rindar was not sure why; it was just a custom. When they came to a stop, the ten searchers clambered off the tram, and it disappeared back up the tunnel. Somewhere down one of the tunnels to his right, Rindar could hear the drilling machines grinding their way into the solid rock that supported the city.

He and Minxa got their assignment from their supervisor without ceremony, then scattered with the group for their night's work. They had barely started down the first hole when Minxa broke the uneasy silence. "So—so what happened?"

"When?"

"Last night—this morning..."

Rindar took his time. He was not sure exactly where to start; he never was. He had learned that he could probably start anywhere and eventually pull it all together, and Minxa did have a knack for patience as he sorted out his feelings. "I'm not sure exactly. I went after that guy you picked out the other day."

"And?"

"It was strange from the very start—"

"Strange?"

"Well, as I was leaving the transit station in the square, a man sitting on the curb asked me for money. When I told him I didn't have any, he stood up. He was huge."

"Did you see his face?"

"No. He was in the shadows and it was dark. I started to reach for my hazarine, and he asked, 'Would you like to have some money?' I backed away, headed on my way. 'If you bring the old wooden box to me, I will give you so much money that you will never have to work again,' he said. I kept walking, but he followed me. I drew my hazarine and turned to face him."

"You still couldn't see him?"

"No. Then he just stopped, held out his hands and said, 'The only thing the old man has is a wooden box, Rindar. If you get it for me, you will never have to work again.' His accent was very strange. I had never heard anything like it. Then he bent down, set five silver coins on the curb and backed away. 'This is a deposit,' he said as he held up a bag of coins and shook them. 'The rest is for you, if you bring me the box.' 'Who are you?' I asked. 'I am Vashtor; I will find you.' He backed into an alley and vanished."

"You took the coins?" Minxa asked.

"Yes, but when I woke up, two of them were gone."

"What do you mean, when you woke up?"

"Well, let me finish—"

They were walking through the low tunnels, waving their lights back and forth over the floor, walls and ceiling, looking for fissures that might lead somewhere else. Their job was to explore anything and everything they could crawl into. They had not found anything yet.

"I got to the shop about one...pitch black...I figured he would be sleeping, so I went into the kitchen first. I pushed the door open silently.

As I stepped through the door and started playing my light...well, he was sitting at the table—in the middle of the kitchen.”

“Sitting in the dark; just sitting?”

“It was almost as if he expected me...he knew my name.”

Minxa stopped and Rindar turned to face him. “What are you saying?” Minxa’s face was ashen and his jaw hung slack.

“I was standing just inside the door—I had shut it behind me—and he said, ‘Hello, Rindar.’ I started backing to the door and he said, ‘Don’t go, Rindar.’”

“What did you do?”

“C’mon, we need to keep moving.” Rindar waved to Minxa to follow, and they started down the tunnel again. “I froze. After a moment, I found the light switch. When I saw him behind the table, he seemed bigger than when we saw him earlier. Maybe it was because of his shadow.”

The clean floor of the tunnel was suddenly littered with fragments of stone. Rindar swung his light toward the ceiling. Directly above them, a fissure ran up and to the right; their first exploration for the night. “Help me get up there,” he said. Rindar was smaller than Minxa, and whenever they needed to go up, it was Minxa’s job to do the lifting. Rindar braced himself against the wall and stood up into Minxa’s cradled hands, reaching up to the walls of the crevice with his hands on the freshly broken stone. The handholds were good. In a matter of seconds, he had hauled himself up far enough to get his feet braced into the walls. “Shadow me until I find a landing.”

Minxa played his light up the crack ahead of him as Rindar toiled upward, stopping occasionally to use his own light. He was twenty feet above Minxa when he stopped. “I’m there,” he called, pulling off his pack and setting it on the shelf beside him. He uncoiled a rope from his pack, made a sling around a corner of the fractured stone and dropped the free end down to Minxa. In less than a minute, his friend was sitting beside him on the shelf above the tunnel.

“Which way?” Rindar asked. “Up or flat?”

“I want to know more about what happened last night.”

“I’ll finish when we get a break—up or flat?”

“On the flat. Don’t feel like climbing right now.” Minxa swung his legs up onto the shelf and rolled over onto his belly moving like a snake into the horizontal crack, barely high enough for his body to get through. “Shadow me.”

Rindar lay flat, cradling his lantern so the beam moved just in front of where Minxa wormed his way along about twenty feet in front of him. Minxa stopped suddenly and let out a low whistle. Rindar saw him scramble to his feet and watched Minxa’s lantern playing around the walls briefly before Minxa bent down where Rindar could see his aston-

ished face. "C'mon, you gotta see this."

He didn't need to be told twice. Rindar was good at this, and it was only moments before he had covered the distance to where Minxa stood. They were in a small room, perhaps five paces in diameter and just tall enough so that if they jumped they could have touched the stone overhead. They had been in many stone rooms before, but this was unusual in that it seemed to have been deliberately shaped. It was nearly circular and the ceiling was slightly arched. The floor of the room had fallen just enough to create the crack that they had used as an entrance. The crack continued on the other side. In the center of the room was a stone cylinder about the height of a small table and half the diameter of the room. It was difficult to tell whether it was a natural formation or not.

"This is just weird," whispered Minxa. "We're in the middle of solid rock!"

Rindar had a sudden thought. He slung his pack from his back and dropped it onto the stone table. He opened it, pulled the carved box from inside and set it carefully on the stone table, pushing his pack onto the floor. "Open it," he said.

"Me? Why me?"

"I don't know. Just open it."

Minxa flipped open the stand on his lantern and set it on the table so that the beam illuminated the intricately carved box. The angle of the light intensified the relief of the carved surface. He shook his head, "You're crazy."

"Maybe."

Minxa's hands lifted the cover of the box and slid it to the right, laying it gently on the table. "All right, it's open."

"Take out the paper—and unfold it."

"Why me?"

"It has to be you—c'mon."

Minxa sighed, "All right, but you owe me one." He worked his index fingers under the edge of the folded material in the box until he was able to lift it gently. Rindar watched as he unfolded it and laid it flat on the stone. Rindar lifted his own lamp into position opposite Minxa's.

It was clearly a map, perhaps three-feet long and two-feet wide. As it settled to the table, the folds almost disappeared, and it lay nearly flat on the uneven stone surface. Rindar had never seen anything like it in detail or decoration. He looked at it closely, and the closer he looked, the more detail there was, almost as if the depth of it was infinite.

Ancient symbols decorated its border, each perfectly inked onto the surface in small circles, but it was unclear what the proper orientation of it was since most of the glyphs were unrecognizable. In one corner

was a simplified drawing of Asolar, Tessalindria's sun, and opposite it a globe that looked exactly like Tessalindria itself. In the other corners were perfect drawings of Tal and Meekar, the twin Tessalindrian moons.

"What is it?" Minxa asked.

"It's a map," Rindar replied, "and I have this vague feeling I should know more about it—something distant." Without thinking, he reached over and touched the image of Asolar in the corner. A wave of light swept over the map's surface. Minxa jumped back. A moment later Rindar touched the sun again, and another wave of light moved across its surface, leaving a faint glow behind it. Rindar turned off his lamp and reached across to turn off Minxa's.

Minxa caught his hand. "Don't."

Rindar looked up. "I know what it is, Minxa," he said, "and if I am right, what we have here—" He did not know what his next words should be.

"What?"

"It's Lonama's map." Even as he said it, Rindar felt a shudder run through him.

"Whose map?"

"Lonama's map. Do you remember any history—the legends—there was always this map that—"

"How do you know this is it?"

"It has to be. Turn off your light for just a minute." As Minxa reached for his light, Rindar touched Asolar again, holding his finger on it for a moment. The map glowed orange in the total darkness of the rock chamber. Rindar could see every detail.

"This is incredible!" exclaimed Minxa. The warm glow of the map illuminated Minxa's face and body enough so that his expression of disbelief was readily discernable.

Rindar looked back down. "Any idea what it's a map of?" he asked, leaning closer to see the details. Odd shapes and jagged pathways branched out from a small circular center, and two faint blotches of light emanated from the edges of the center circle. They both stared at the map, struggling to discern its contents.

It was Minxa who realized it first, but he had barely opened his mouth when Rindar suddenly knew what it was: "It's a map of this cave!" they said simultaneously.

Rindar was troubled. He felt a creeping fear inside as he looked up into Minxa's eyes. He saw it there too. He wondered how the old man could have had a map of this part of the tunnels. The tunnel below had only been drilled out yesterday while Rindar slept, after their encounter. It was impossible.

Impossible. The old man had said something about things that were

impossible: "Sometimes the greatest truth is discovered when we are forced to accept the impossible."

Minxa interrupted his thoughts. "This is beyond strange. What did you call this thing? Whose map?"

It all came together in a twisted jumble of thoughts. "Lonama's map. Now it's coming back."

"What?"

"Lonama's map is a map of Tesselindria. It contains everything. If I remember correctly, it even contains information about different times. Most people do not believe it ever existed—but this fits—look," he said pointing to the center of the map. "When we opened it up, it centered on where we are. Right here in the middle is this little room we are standing in; that is the tunnel where we entered, and here is the crack down to the tunnel. Even the tunnel that was just drilled today is there!"

Minxa ran his finger over the jagged path leading in the opposite direction. "It looks as if it leads to another room just like this, and there's another beyond that, and—" His finger trailed off the edge of the map. "And it's oriented perfectly!"

Rindar grabbed the corner of the map and gave it a quick pull, rotating the entire piece slightly on the table. The twisting paths and rooms remained where they were. "Incredible! Turn on your light; we have some exploring to do." He picked up the map in the middle where it would fold as he lifted it. It yielded to his touch, and as he raised it from the table it folded perfectly, its light extinguishing as it did so. It seemed to Rindar that the map folded itself. As he laid it in the box, it fit perfectly into the shallow recess in the wood. "To the next room," he said as he slung his pack over his shoulder. "We'll check it again there."



*The brightest truth is often discovered in
the darkness.*

*Sessasha
It Is Said*

Rindar was already ahead of him, moving fast along the rough floor, confident in what he had seen in the map—that down the next crack was another chamber. Minxa was anxious. There was something about the map that unsettled him, and he still had not heard the details of how Rindar had acquired it. Something big had happened, and Rindar was reluctant to give up the story.

Minxa lay on his back this time. With the ceiling so close, he had to turn his head sideways to get through the lowest part. No matter how

many times he did this, it still chilled him when he thought about the tons of rock resting an inch above his head.

"It's here!" Rindar's voice was full of excitement. "It's exactly like the other one." Minxa could see the splashes of light on the rock around him as Rindar shadowed him. In less than a minute, he stood beside his friend. Rindar opened the box and laid the map out so the corner with the sun was closest to Minxa. Minxa reached out and put his finger on it. Nothing happened.

Rindar looked up at Minxa, then reached across and touched the same spot. The map flashed orange and its light illuminated their faces. Minxa was not sure exactly what he felt, but it was something he didn't like and could not shrug off. It was some scramble of resentment, fear and anger.

Rindar bent to study the map, apparently unaware of Minxa's feelings. "Exactly what we thought," he said. "There's the chamber we came from—there's the next one—look at this!" Minxa bent to see what Rindar was pointing at. His fingertip touched the middle of the room they were in. "Those smudges of light—in the other chamber. They're *here* now."

Rindar was right. Before Minxa had time to think, Rindar ran around the table so that he stood beside him. One of the small smudges of light moved so the two smudges were right beside each other. "That's us—do you see it—that's us!" The excitement seemed to overwhelm his voice for a moment. "Never in my wildest—"

Rindar was interrupted by a faint sound echoing into the small chamber. It sounded like a piece of metal falling into a crevice in the rocks, and it came from where they had been. They looked at each other, and Minxa saw Rindar's index finger go to his lips as he reached into his tunic for his hazarine with his other hand. A frown swept over his face as he pulled his hand out a moment later. It was empty. Rindar started to pick up the map and then pressed it suddenly onto the stone again. Sliding his hand along the route they had taken to get where they were, he traced back to a point where he found two faint smudges of light, almost off the edge of the map; then quickly moving his hand the other way, he pointed to where they had to go: the next chamber.

Rindar grabbed the map and folded it into the box. As he dropped the lid into place, he signaled, "*Hand signs!*" Minxa and Rindar had developed a way to talk by pressing signs into each other's palms.

"*All right, silent,*" Minxa signed back.

"*Lights out.*" Minxa switched off his light as soon as Rindar had stuffed the map into his pack. They moved toward the passage he had indicated. It was dangerous to travel in the dark like this, but not a new experience for Minxa. The sensation was always the same. The difference

this time was that Minxa did not know why; he trusted Rindar's sense of alarm, though he did not feel it. By agreement, Minxa followed. The awareness of danger in the tunnels was something that was never questioned, and Minxa knew he would have to wait to find out what it was about. For now, he followed.

Rindar already stood over the map when Minxa arrived in the third chamber. It was barely glowing so that it cast no shadow, and Rindar was only faintly illuminated by its glow. He stared down at it. The first of the two smudges of light was in the crack leading to the first chamber and the other was still on the shelf above the fissure. Rindar's finger was tracing a route beyond the chamber where they were. Several cracks led in various directions; one of them was vertical and very narrow, leading off at right angles to the direction they had been traveling.

"Where hazarine?" Minxa asked.

"Later." Rindar folded the map and stuffed it into his pack again. The darkness swallowed them. Minxa felt a tug on his shirt in the direction of the vertical crack. They squirmed into it. "Up," Rindar pushed into his palm. It was slow and difficult in the dark, but after about ten feet, the crack opened onto a narrow shelf. The crack turned so that they could not see back down into the chamber. "Stop. Quiet. Hiding. Listen." They were both breathing heavily.

"Who?" Minxa asked.

"Listen!"

They sat still on the narrow shelf. As they waited in the darkness, Minxa's thoughts swirled through his mind. He wondered what the sound was that they had heard originally. Perhaps one of their pursuers had dropped a safety link. It would be unusual for the supervisor to send two crews anywhere near each other without a good reason. He knew Rindar would know that, which would account for some of his suspicion, but the near panic of Rindar's actions seemed unwarranted. Rindar did not have his hazarine, another reason for his fear. Minxa's bigger concern was that this was somehow tied to something that Rindar had not yet told him about the affair with the old man. Perhaps it was the map. If it was as incredible and as old as it seemed to be, how would Rindar have gotten it, and why didn't he know what it was if he had bothered to take it?

A faint scraping interrupted his thoughts, and Rindar's grip tightened on his arm.

"They must have come this way." It was a faint whisper, but the crack channeled it up to them.

"But where now?" whispered the second voice.

"Shhhhh."

Minxa and Rindar echoed their silence and for a long time there was

no sound; perhaps it was a minute, perhaps two, until a deep sigh broke the silence. "I don't hear them, do you?"

"No. Not a sound."

"We were told they are two of the best. If they don't want to be found, it probably won't be us that finds them." Their pursuer spoke in a normal voice, as if the need for silence had been lost, and a sudden beam of light burst forth from the chamber. It really wasn't much, but in the darkness, it was profoundly bright. "And the other searchers won't help."

"Are you sure?"

"Not completely, but there is a certain code with these guys."

"Could we bribe them?"

"Doubt it."

Minxa felt Rindar squeeze his arm.

"And exactly why did we have to come after them in here? Couldn't we just pick them up later?"

"The Protag wanted him apprehended immediately."

"Why?"

"I actually don't know all the details, but the hazarine that was found belongs to this Rindar character, though it seems to have nothing to do with the crime."

"Do they know what really happened?"

"It's not very clear. The shopkeeper discovered it this morning, but it is very strange, and we don't even know if anyone even died."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there was no body, but there was so much blood that if it was all from one being, he never could have survived."

"Maybe there was more than one."

"There *were* two bloods—probably enough of both of them for two deaths. They are being checked to see if there is a match to this Rindar character. The Protag said that there are no records for the tenant in the apartment."

"No records?"

"The shop owner didn't know him very well. She said he was a vid-dik who came into town a couple weeks ago and needed a place to stay. She was letting him stay in her third floor room as a favor to a friend."

"Where was the shop owner when all this happened?"

"She was out, but would not say where. The Protag suspects that she is Sessashian, so he is trying to find out. If she is, she was probably out at some secret meeting, and that would make it unlikely that she was involved in a murder. She said the door to the kitchen was locked and so were the windows when she came home. In addition, we don't think anyone could have removed a body that was bleeding that badly with-

out other traces of blood on the stairs."

"Yevil Sessashians!" the second voice muttered. "And the hazarine?"

"Right on top of the desk—and a small knife on the floor with the dagger. We suspect the dagger was the weapon for the killing. They also found an old coin."

"What do you mean, 'old'?"

"A Tessamandrian twenty dragith in perfect condition. Pure silver from what I hear, right in the middle of the floor and covered with blood."

"Dragiths? They haven't been around since—very weird."

"Two others, exactly like it showed up the day before yesterday at a pawn shop on the waterfront in a raid that the Protag ordered."

Rindar's grip was cutting off the circulation in Minxa's arm. Minxa reached up his hand and pried his fingers open.

"You?" he pressed into Rindar's palm.

"Yes. Later," came the reply.

"No."

"Yes."

Minxa's head swam. The voices from the chamber droned into the mundane conversation of two men who no longer had anything specific to talk about, and they faded from his awareness. He sat in a strange stupor, hoping that what he had heard was not what he thought he had heard.



Distance and time twist every memory.

Hispattea

The Essences of Corritanean Wisdom

"I don't know how I lost my hazarine," Rindar explained, "but I know it wasn't on the table when I left." He was as frustrated as Minxa for an explanation. "And neither was the knife. I looked for it. The only thing on the table was the box with the map."

"What about the dagger?"

"There wasn't any dagger!"

"You think you're being framed?"

"By who?"

"How would I know?" Minxa shrugged. "Perhaps the old man was in on it."

"I don't know how he could have been."

"Maybe the big man you met on the street. What was his name?"

"Vashtor. I thought about that, but I got the map and he never came

to find me. And why would he frame me? I'm just a viddik—there's nothing for anyone to get from me." As he said the words, he remembered the three remaining silver coins. He reached into his pocket, pulled one of them out and held it close to Minxa's lantern. "Look at this," he said.

Minxa bent in close to see the coin. "It's very old."

"I've never seen anything like it," Rindar mused. "It's thick too—a lot of silver here. I'm sure we can use it if we get out of here." He stuffed the coin back into his pocket.

Minxa shook his head.

"Like I said," Rindar continued, "it was strange from the first moment." He and Minxa were standing in the small room, having waited on the shelf for probably three hours after their pursuers had left. "Only one thing is sure right now."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I can't go back—" He could see Minxa staring at him. "And neither can you."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm sure not going back, and if you do, they will be all over you. You're just a viddik like me, and you know they'll clean you. You won't stand a chance."

"If you're not going back, what will you do? They'll have this place guarded like a prison, so how're we gonna get outta here?"

"They can't guard all the holes in this hill. Besides—" Rindar smiled as he spread his hand out over the map, "we have a map to everywhere."

"That's true—and we've found vent holes before," Minxa said, "and there must be others. You got any food?"

"Just some crackers I snagged from the cupboard this morning. You?"

"None." Minxa frowned. He was always hungry and he loved to eat.

"Well then, we better make it quick," Rindar said as he leaned over the map. "I don't think we should go back that way."

They stared at the map together. With a little more time to study it, Rindar noticed some of the other details. There were probably a hundred of the little circles with symbols in them around the perimeter of the map, varying in size from one another. The boldness of each symbol was different. Rindar guessed that they all meant something, but had no clue where to start, and the prospect of just pushing each one made him uneasy.

"If this is really a map of everywhere," said Minxa, "then there must be a way to move it around, wouldn't you guess?"

"Yes, but it's a bit scary, though I don't see much of a choice. I don't recognize any of this." He laid his finger on one of the circles that had

a small black square inside it. Nothing happened.

"How about this one," said Minxa, pointing to a circle containing an arrow spiraling into the center.

Rindar touched it. The image on the map receded, leaving them in the center, but covering a much larger area. He touched it again and it receded further. "Incredible!" he muttered. The map now covered an area fifty times larger than before. They could see the larger drilled tunnels radiating outward from "Main Street" as they called the large vaulted cavern that formed the core of the system.

"How about this one?" Minxa had his finger on a circle with another small circle in it off to one side.

"Okay, you push it."

"I did, it doesn't seem to work for me."

Rindar moved over and touched the spot where Minxa's finger had been. The map shifted again so that the spot where they were on the map was off to one side. "That works," he said absently as he placed his index finger on the small circle representing the room they were in and dragged it across the map. The map obeyed and shifted to follow his finger. "Now we are getting somewhere." He smiled, then added, "That's enough for now. Let's find a way out." He dragged the room across the map so that the direction they had come from was almost off the edge, and the map showed all the cracks and crevices where they could go. He looked up at Minxa. "Pick a path."

Minxa ran his finger along one of the wider cracks carrying them away from Main Street. "That one!" he said.

Rindar folded the map into its case and slipped it into his pack. "Then that one it is," he said as he pulled the pack up onto his shoulder and plunged into the fissure before him. He was not at all sure where it would lead, but right then, that didn't matter.



*The seed of discord is so small that it
often cannot be seen until it has taken
root.*

Old Tessamandrian Saying

Minxa sat on the cold stone floor of a small chamber and watched Rindar examine the map. It was envy, he had decided, with a twist of jealousy. He was envious of Rindar because of the map and jealous of his longtime friend as well. It was not so much that Rindar had the map and seemed to be the only one who could make it work, but that the map drew some kind of line in their relationship. Yet perhaps it was not

the map at all, but just Minxa's own suspicion. Either way, he did not like the feelings that swept through him as he drained the last drop of water from his flask.

"We haven't been able to stand up for an hour," he said. "Haven't seen any water either."

"Hmmm." Rindar had both elbows on the map, and his chin rested heavily into his palms. "We have been going up—which is good, and I'm thinking there has to be an opening somewhere."

"Why?" Even as he said it, Minxa hated the cynicism it conveyed.

Rindar looked up at him. "You know we can't go back," he said, "so the only hope we have is to find an opening. Problem is, we are not yet outside the rim of the city."

"How do you know *that*?"

"I think I figured out how to see different depths on the map, and right now, I think we are directly under East Wegan, and not far from the rim." Minxa watched him drag his index finger across the map as the features of the map transformed under the motion. Rindar went back to studying the map.

Minxa rubbed his knees. "My knees are killing me," he said, "even with these pads."

"Mine too."

Minxa could tell Rindar was only half there, absorbed by the map. Minxa sat silently, studying his friend. They had been through so much together. They were like twins in a hostile, hopeless world that gave them no quarter. He knew he could not go back. Even if he evaded the authorities, or if for some reason they did not care about him, living in Vindarill without Rindar would be lonely.

"Hmmm," Rindar intoned. "What do you make of this?"

Minxa rolled over onto his elbow to see where Rindar was pointing.

"We're right here," Rindar said, his left index finger placed on the map where they were sitting. "But look over here." His right index finger sat next to a place in the map that was completely black, almost like a hole.

"That is curious."

"I think we should go there."

Minxa wasn't so sure. They really did not know that much about the map. Rindar had figured a few things out, but the black spot just looked like a hole. "Holes have to go somewhere, I guess," Minxa said.

"My guess is that it does, but we don't know how to find out."

"Any clue from the map?"

"No."

"Makes me nervous," Minxa confessed.

"Me too, but we don't have a lot to lose, do we?"

Minxa had no answer to this, but that made him more nervous.

"Let's go," said Rindar. "It's not far and we can find out what it's about. When we get there, we can decide what to do."

"My knees are killing me," Minxa groaned again.

"So are mine, but they'll kill us no matter which direction we go, right?" Rindar said as he folded the map into its strange box. "You have any idea how long our lights will last?"

"Long time. I changed the power pack in mine before we left—whenever it was—my guess is it'll last a month. What we need is water."

"I have a little left, and there's got to be some here somewhere."

"If we don't die, or kill ourselves first," Minxa muttered. Rindar was already on his back, inching under a huge stone into the passage leading toward the blackness. As much as Minxa did not like it, he had no rational alternative. At least the first step didn't require him to be on his knees.



Sometimes the only way out is through.

*Oratanga
Passages*

The route to the black spot on the map had been treacherous. In several places, they had had to take risks that, under ordinary circumstances, they would avoid, but these were not ordinary circumstances. As they had approached the location on the map, Rindar could sense a freshening of the still air of the cave, a sure sign that there was an opening to the outside somewhere.

"What do you think?" Rindar did not know himself, and he guessed that Minxa would not either, but it opened the conversation. For the first time in two hours, they were able to stand. Their backs were against a wall.

The room was small and flooded with fresh air. The high ceiling was out of their reach, and only the half of the room in which they stood was visible. Ten feet in front of them, the room disappeared into a blackness that defied description. Minxa had dropped his light into a crevice on their way to this room, so Rindar pointed his beam toward the nothingness.

"No clue," said Minxa as he bent down and scraped some dust off the smooth floor, "but I don't like it." He tossed the dust into the beam of Rindar's lamp where it met the darkness. The beam shone through the dust, but where it hit the darkness, it looked like someone had chopped it off with a knife.

"The fresh air seems to be coming out of it," said Rindar. "There must be an opening on the other side."

"Must be?"

"Well, where else could it be coming from?" Rindar could tell that Minxa was nervous, and he did not really expect an answer. He bent down and picked up a stone. When he tossed it into the blackness, it vanished at about the same point that the light stopped. There was no sound whatsoever.

"Try this one." Minxa bent down and grabbed a stone that filled both hands.

"Go ahead—"

Minxa lifted the stone to his chest and pushed it into the black wall. The darkness swallowed it in utter silence. He stood with his mouth open, staring at the spectacle in front of him.

"Here, hold the light," said Rindar. He bent down, took the rope from the back of his pack and uncoiled several arm lengths, then coiled the free end loosely before tossing it into the darkness. The coil disappeared. The point where the rope entered the blackness remained the same, as if the end of the rope had become weightless. He slowly pulled it. It came back toward him, hovering in the nothingness until the end came out. It fell slack at his feet.

"Can't the map tell us anything?" Minxa asked.

"I don't think so, but maybe now that we are closer—" He unfolded the map. The black spot on the map was almost in the center, and he could see both his and Minxa's light smudges standing before it. It gave no clue what was beyond it. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Maybe one of the buttons—"

"Maybe, but which one?" Rindar tried touching several of the circles around the perimeter of the map. None of them changed the appearance of the map or altered the black spot in any way that they could see. "Maybe one of us should try it."

"One of us?" asked Minxa.

Rindar stared at Minxa, who was staring back at him. "Have you ever noticed how often you answer statements with a question?"

Minxa smiled. "Well, one of us is sure not going to be me! Have you ever noticed how many times you make statements about something you think, assuming I also think it?"

Rindar reached down and grabbed the end of the rope and started wrapping it around his waist. "Maybe I should try it."

"Try what?"

Rindar stopped tying his knot and looked up, smiling. Minxa stared back. "You hold on to the rope. I am going to try something."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe. Do you have a better idea?"

"None, except—"

"Forget it. We can't go back."

"We?"

"I'm not going back." Rindar was testing the knot on the sling he had tied around his waist. He looked up. "You can go back if you want, but belay me through this thing before you leave, hmmm?"

"You *are* crazy."

Rindar had turned and stepped up to the blackness. When he put his hand up against it, there was no sensation at all, and his heart pounded as he slowly pushed his hand into the infinite dark wall. He felt nothing except his own hand and a slight cooling of the air around it. Fear suddenly overtook him, and he pulled it back suddenly. Nothing had changed.

"What does it feel like?"

"Nothing...nothing at all." Rindar got down on one knee, sliding his hand along the floor into the blackness. The floor seemed solid. "I think I can walk into it."

"What about the light? We only have the one."

"Give it to me for a moment—there is something else I need to try."

Minxa handed him the light. Rindar turned it in his hand so it was shining back toward him. When he plunged it into the black wall, the light vanished. Rindar panicked, yanking his hand back toward him. The light seemed to turn on as it emerged into the chamber. "Somehow I don't think the light will be of any use in there," said Rindar slowly. "You keep it. If I find I need it, I'll come back and get it."

"You're not really going in there, are you?" Minxa was incredulous.

"You've got my rope, and you've never failed me before," Rindar said. "If I give three tugs, pull me out. Two tugs, tie the end around yourself and follow me in."

"Not a chance."

"Listen. If I am safe enough to give you two tugs, it will be safe enough for you to follow, right?" Rindar could see the doubt in Minxa's eyes. "I'm taking the map."

"Wouldn't do me any good anyway," Minxa said, his face suddenly overcome with sullen resignation.

Rindar turned to face the darkness. He stepped forward, pushed both hands into it and slid his left foot forward, feeling the floor as it disappeared from his vision. Glancing back over his shoulder he smiled into Minxa's terror. "See you on the other side," he said as he stepped forward into the unknown.

The blackness of the portal is like none other, wrapping the vorn with a nothingness that defies words or thoughts.

*Tristarón Harrista
The Kirrinath*

Minxa was shaking. Rindar had completely disappeared from his view, and the rope, wrapped around his own waist, was slowly inching into the inky black wall in front of him. "Rindar!" he shouted. "Rindar!" His voice sounded shrill and tight in the stone chamber.

The rope crept forward, stopping now and then for brief pauses. The lamp lay on the floor beside him because he needed both hands for a safe belay. He knew that he could not resist a full fall of Rindar's weight, and there was nothing in the chamber to tie in to, so he braced himself with one foot on a protrusion of stone in front of him. He knew he had to be ready, but even so, it happened so quickly he could not control it.

The rope jerked tight. Minxa tried to play it out, but the force of it pulled him off balance, and he stepped forward into a loop of the rope. It pulled through his hands, and the loop pulled tight up between his legs, wrapping tightly around his left thigh; and in the next instant, he was catapulted forward into his greatest fear. The "No!" that tried to escape his lips was swallowed into nothingness.

For a brief instant, he felt himself being dragged along the floor of the cave; and then almost as quickly, he was free falling. He tried to yell, but the darkness swallowed his words. Then suddenly everything stopped swirling, and he found himself standing on solid ground. The total blackness surrounding him dulled all his senses, and he was paralyzed with fear, knowing that a move in any direction could be disastrous. His light was gone, probably still shining on the floor of the cave behind him. He stood for a long time, before the rope in his hand started moving again, slowly inching its way through his fingers.

He let it play. Rindar must have been somewhere ahead of him. He let the rope out slowly, a bit at a time until it stopped once again. Minxa waited. The only thing he could feel was the rope, idle and slack in his right hand.

Two tugs. He didn't want to believe it. The second two tugs were more urgent so he tugged back. The rope started moving again. He knew he needed to follow it, so he gripped it tightly and started inching forward. The last thing he wanted to do was to fall again.

It seemed like a long time, but Minxa probably only traveled about five paces. Without any warning, he stepped out into the semidarkness of a warm stone chamber to see Rindar sitting on a rock three feet in

front of him. He was holding the rope and grinning from ear to ear in the weak natural light that filtered down from a crack in the ceiling.

Minxa frowned. "I lost the light," he said.

Rindar jumped up and threw his arms around him, hugging him tightly. "We made it! And look—daylight!"

Minxa was still confused because of what had just happened. "But isn't it close to midnight?" He swung his arm up to look at his watch. It was gone.

"That's what I thought, too, but look." Rindar pointed up into the crack above them. "Blue sky!"

It was true, but very odd. "You still have the map?"

"Yes. It's the only thing I still have. It was strange. I felt like I fell several hundred feet, and then suddenly I was on my feet, but still in the darkness. As I started to move, I felt the map box at my feet, so I scrounged around for my pack. I found it, but it was empty—nothing in it at all."

Minxa felt his pack. It was empty also. "What about the coins?" he asked.

He watched Rindar's hand reach for his pocket. He felt it briefly from the outside, then shoved his hand down into it. He pulled out one coin. "I guess two more are gone," he said.

"Let's get out of here. That darkness makes me nervous." Minxa thought he could feel the cool dark nothingness behind him. "I never, ever, ever, ever want to do that again."

Rindar smiled as he shoved the coin back into his pocket. "It *was* a bit strange, wasn't it?"

"You're strange." Minxa looked up. "And that crack is too small to get out."

"Over here." Rindar was on his knees peering into a low passage. "There's some light at the far end. C'mon."

The room they were in was not a proper cave. It was more of a filled crevasse, where the boulders that formed the ceiling were jammed between the walls, forming a cavity beneath them. Here and there, thin shafts of light found their way through the cracks in the ceiling as Minxa followed Rindar between the two walls of the fissure. There were several tight squeezes along the way, and none of the openings to the surface were big enough to get through.

They took turns going first through each passage, and after passing through several small cavities where they could almost stand up, they came to one tall enough for them to stand. As they stretched, Minxa heard the first rumble. "What was that?"

"Don't know," Rindar said as a worried look swept over his face. They stood still and listened. It happened again: a low, rolling roar that

lasted a few seconds, barely audible, even in the silence of the cave. "We'd better get out of here!" They moved quickly, and with their eyes adjusted to the dim light, they were able to make safe progress. The floor dropped down suddenly, and they had to wade through a pool of water that sloshed over their ankles into their shoes. As they climbed up out of the water on the other side, Rindar pointed. "There it is!"

Ten feet above them was a shelf of rock and a small passage leading directly to the outside. Almost by reflex, Minxa bent and cupped his hands. Rindar stepped up as Minxa's strength lifted him easily to bring the shelf within reach. Minxa watched Rindar disappear through the opening. There was silence for a brief moment and then a burst of incredulous profanity. Rindar's head appeared in the opening. "Get up here, fast!"

"What?"

"You gotta see this!" Rindar disappeared again.

"Right," Minxa muttered to himself as he started searching for hand and footholds to climb the few feet so he could reach the shelf. It was an easy climb, and within a minute he was wriggling his way through the shoulder-width hole up into the freedom of the surface. A pungent, aromatic smell greeted him as he emerged. Wherever they were, it was nowhere he had ever been before.

He pulled himself out of the hole and stood up. He looked back in the direction they had come from and followed the caved-in chasm until it disappeared into the trees.

"Up here!" He turned to see Rindar standing on a large rock, pointing urgently, silhouetted against the clear blue sky. Minxa climbed up beside him. Fifty feet below, the blue-green ocean pounded solemnly against the gray rocks that formed the base of the cliff on which they stood. His eyes moved involuntarily to the horizon. Far away, where the ocean met the sky, there was a thin line of land, punctuated with occasional mountains.

Neither he nor Rindar had ever seen the open ocean. Their experience was confined to the still, brackish water of Vindarill's harbor, awash with debris and film. He leaned forward and looked left around a clump of stubby thick evergreens where two gulls rode the rising air currents that flowed up the cliff from the ocean. The land was farther away in that direction. To the right, the ocean met the sky in a thin line of blue on blue, wrapping as far as he could see until it disappeared behind other rocks on the cliff. The smell of the water was different and filled all the senses. The vast flatness and distance to the eyes of a young man who had never left the confines of Vindarill was dizzying. Minxa stepped back.