

An Oathbound® Novel
Forged

Book 1 of the Queen's Blade Trilogy

THOMAS M.
Reid

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Seattle

Dedication

To the Alliterates; here's to smooth prose, smoother Scotch, and the joys of having writers for friends.

OATHBOUND

Forged

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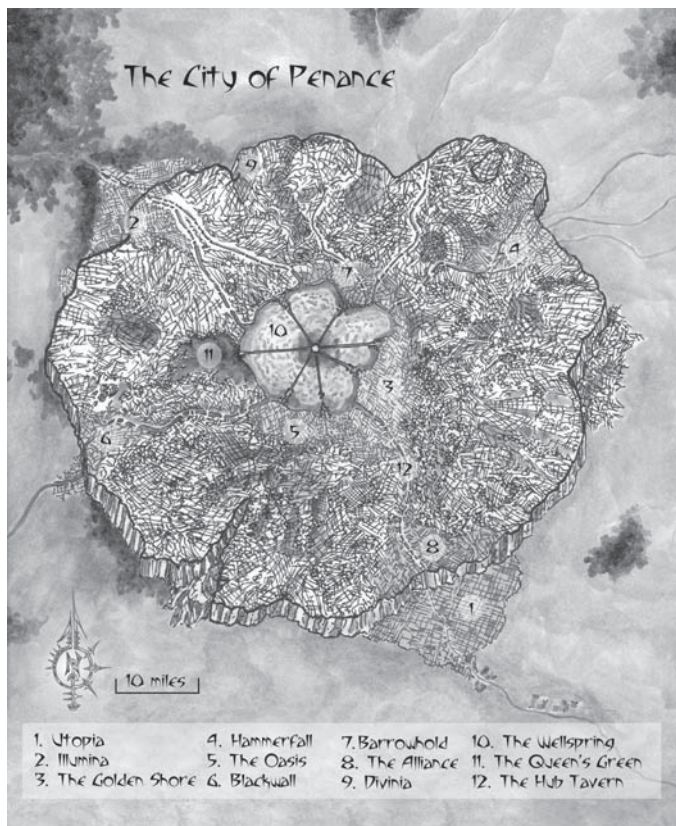
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An overview of the great city of Penance



The thread of your life on this world has run out. Take my hand and I shall give you a new one, and weave it into a beautiful tapestry of dreams and visions such that you have never imagined.

—Israfel, Queen of Penance

Prologue

To Iandra, Lyrien was little more than a shadow in the near-darkness of the muggy tent, but she didn't need to see his face—nothing more than a silhouette—looming over her own to lose herself in his presence. His breath smelled faintly of spiced cider, and of the morsels of chocolate she had hand-fed him earlier. He leaned in, his short dark hair and the stubble of his unshaven face faintly backlit in the predawn glow, and they shared a kiss. She grabbed at the back of his head, holding him there, wanting that kiss to exist forever.

It was what the queen needed right then, to let herself be consumed in the moment, the *now*, forgetting about the world beyond the inside of her tent. Instead, she concentrated on every tiny part of Lyrien, feeling the individual whiskers nudge against her face as he continued that kiss, knowing that he held it because she so desperately wanted him to. She closed her eyes and sank deeper into the embrace, sighed softly as he entwined his fingers with her own, pressing her hands down into the cushions on either side of her head and raising himself up again.

Iandra half-opened her eyes and stared up at that face she could barely see, the face of the captain of her guardsmen, her champion. She felt safe with him there, con-

vinced that nothing outside those tent walls could get in, not so long as she alone could have his fierce, unwavering resolve to protect her. Merely summoning him to her bed could do that, could make everything right. She believed because *he* believed it.

So while the world outside was made to wait, Iandra tried to pull a hand free to draw Lyrien down to her again, and he wouldn't let her. She broke into a faint smile because she could sense that he was going to start teasing her then. She could feel him holding her hands down and not letting her go, could feel him shift, could feel him stir against her leg, and she knew that he would pause, waiting for her to try to wriggle beneath him to get *closer*, to force the issue. She giggled softly and opened her mouth, only her head rising up, working against his weight on her hands, trying to reach up and kiss him again, tease him right back.

"Wait," Lyrien whispered suddenly, holding perfectly still. "Did you hear that?"

Iandra ignored his words, drinking him in, the spiced cider and the chocolate blending with his own musky scent, which lingered in the still, heavy air. "No," she whispered, shaking her head and trying again to lean upward to kiss him. "Not yet," she said, imploring her captain to keep the world out for just a little while longer.

But Lyrien held himself still, listening, as his warm flesh pressed against her naked body where they were tangled together in the thin, damp sheets. The queen felt him nudging insistently against the inside of her thigh and wanted to pull him down to her, feel his mouth close over hers, run her hands through that short, coarse hair and across the scruffy stubble, but she knew not to disturb him. When her captain of the guard acted that way, she knew to trust his instincts. Iandra tried to still her own breathing, rapid with her need, to listen along with him.

A shout, a startled cry of anger, arose from somewhere outside, in the camp. Then Iandra heard the ring of steel on steel, faint, in the distance. The roar of a musket startled birds sleeping in the cattails on the shore of the swamp near the tent. They departed with a cacophony of honks and splashes. In the still, sultry air inside her pavilion, the sounds seemed to come from all around.

Lyrien was off her in an instant, scrambling on hands and knees toward the opening of the tent across the carpet that served as the floor. Iandra watched as he yanked aside the tent flap and darted outside, letting the glow of the early morning intrude into their sanctuary. Her heart was thumping in her chest, but it was no longer arousal that boiled her blood.

Lord De'Valen, she realized. She shifted to her knees and then stood, kicking away the damp cushions at her feet. How did he find us? Damn him!

Iandra stalked toward the tent opening. She reached the doorway and poked her head out. The air was slightly cooler outside, though it was no less damp. Lyrien had not gone far. He was crouched near the roots of a massive cypress tree, peering into the distance, a flintlock pistol in his hand. The pink light of dawn revealed the scar where a musket ball had skimmed the back of his shoulder, and she caught herself thinking of the countless times she had gently traced it with her fingers as he brooded after their lovemaking, his back to her. The glow also revealed the sad collection of tents belonging to what remained of her army, Ilnamar's army, though they were smothered by the heavy mist that cloaked the edge of the swamp, making them seem insubstantial, like the ghost of some long forgotten battlefield.

A commotion was pouring through the camp, soldiers wearing the black and red of Lord De'Valen's banner sweeping between the tents. A few of Iandra's own men stumbled forth, fumbling for weapons to defend them-

selves, but the surprise was complete. The black-and-red clad mercenaries serving the usurper put down anyone who confronted them, all the while making a line for her tent.

This wasn't just surprise, Iandra realized. It was betrayal. Even then she could see some of her own soldiers, men supposed to be on watch, working with De'Valen's thugs rather than against them.

"It's over," Iandra said softly, feeling bleakness wash over her.

"Not yet," was all Lyrien said, spinning back to her, heedless of his nakedness.

The queen ground her teeth to keep herself from trembling at the thought of Lord De'Valen, still chasing her despite already claiming and overrunning her kingdom. He would not be content until he had claimed her as well, it seemed. Only Lyrien seemed convinced that it was not a foregone conclusion.

"Into the swamp," the captain said, grabbing Iandra by the arm. "We'll hide there."

Iandra resisted for a heartbeat, knowing it was futile and wanting only to show some dignity in defeat. She was afraid, truly afraid, for the first time in a long while.

Lyrien tried to steer his lover around the side of the tent and toward the back, but still Iandra held her ground. "Wait!" she said, half-indignant, half-terrified. She tried to dart inside. "Not like this! My clothes!"

Lyrien yanked her back out and to him and gestured into the cattails with his other hand, the one that held the flintlock pistol. "There's no time!" he hissed. "Run now!" And he pushed her ahead of him. She gave one quick glance back at her captain and stumbled deeper into the swamp, feeling rather than seeing him behind her.

Back in the camp, the shouts and sounds of fighting grew louder. Despite her overwhelming trepidation, Iandra was surprised that there was not more gunfire.

She stumbled into the shallow water on the shore of the swamp, splashing and startling more birds, mostly loons but also a single great black bird. The creature went aloft awkwardly, screeching in irritation at her intrusion, and perched upon the blackened stump of a long-dead cypress not far away. It preened itself as it watched her, its head cocked sideways.

"That way," Lyrien said as he caught up to Iandra, gesturing with the flintlock toward a spit of land ahead and to their left. "Follow the path." Then he nudged her forward.

Cattails and vines slapped and scratched at Iandra's naked skin as she picked her way through the growth, crouching low in an attempt to stay hidden from the pursuit. She found the path Lyrien indicated, really nothing more than a game trail, and turned down it, pushing deeper into the moss-draped cypress trees, putting distance between herself and the shattered remains of her troops.

Iandra couldn't really blame her soldiers for the betrayal, she realized as her bare feet thumped along the muddy path. Deep down, even she had known her resistance had become a lost cause. Only Lyrien had seemed unwilling to admit defeat and had continued to lead her army with some grim, willful determination. The worse things seemed to get, the more driven he had become.

Still trying to prove something to his father, she supposed. But the troops had long since lost hope, the queen lamented. They were simple men, and in the end, none of them truly cared who ruled Ilnamar, when it came right down to it. One leader instead of another was better than death for a cause.

The path ahead of her turned, and as the queen rounded the bend, she saw that it split into two directions. "Which way?" she asked as she slowed a step. Three

black crows went swooping by, cawing at her as they glided past to settle in a patch of thick brambles.

"Either," Lyrien grunted behind her, pushing her ahead again. "Just pick."

Without thinking, Iandra charged ahead and to the left, but her foot struck against a cypress root and she went sprawling, landing with a splash in the shallow water beside the trail. The black birds seemed to laugh at her as they cawed and crackled from the shrubs. Behind her, someone shouted, a sound that was too close. The pursuit was on.

With one arm, Lyrien hoisted Iandra back out of the water and shoved her ahead of him. "Go!" he insisted, still glancing back the way they had come.

Ignoring the mud and leaves that clung to her, the queen scrambled forward again, churning along the path and pushing the cattails out of her face as best as she could. She was stumbling along blindly with no idea where they were going.

Part of Iandra wanted to give up the fight, like her soldiers had done. She had grown so weary of running all the time. Surrender with honor and be finished with it, she had found herself thinking more and more often, but every time she had begun to lose hope, she had remembered her grandfather and his continued resistance to Lord De'Valen's conquests. She needed that image right then, of the defiant gleam in her grandfather's eyes—even when he was lying on his deathbed—to stiffen her resolve against those bleak thoughts. She was Ilnamar's queen and bore her grandfather's legacy. That responsibility had driven her onward when almost nothing else would, that and the icy chill she got each time she remembered the lust that gleamed in De'Valen's eyes whenever he looked upon her. He could take her lands, but he would never touch her. She prayed that Lyrien had a plan.

Around the next bend, the trail played out; on every side except the way the lovers had come, water blocked their path.

"Lyrien!" Iandra cried softly, pulling up once more. "We're trapped!"

The captain drew up beside her, turning one way and another, peering at the unbroken surface of the swamp. "That way," he said at last, pointing into the water and toward another peninsula of land yards away. He spun Iandra to face him, then drew her close. He crushed her into his arms, kissing her on the mouth, reminding her of the chocolate. Then her captain gave her a look with eyes of the darkest black. She could feel those eyes boring into her, to her core, to her very soul, every time he stared at her. She shivered, feeling so exposed to him, and she remembered why she loved him, felt herself falling for him all over again, but he only turned her away. "Go."

Iandra looked at Lyrien helplessly, fearing to leave him, fearing what might lie beneath the surface of the brackish water, but when he nudged her shoulder, she sighed and took the first tentative step. Her toes sank into rich, dark mud that came up to her calf before she found solid purchase. The next step found the water up to her waist. She shivered despite the sultry morning, as much from apprehension as from the chill of the swamp. The queen looked back to see if Lyrien was following her, but he stood peering in the opposite direction, watching for pursuit.

"Come on," Iandra urged her mate as she took another step and found herself up to her armpits in water.

"Don't wait for me," her captain replied, not turning around. "Swim for that spit; it's not far. And stay low, out of sight."

"Lyrien!" the queen pleaded, the fear making her throat feel thick. "Please, come with me!"

"I'm right behind you," Lyrien answered, still keeping watch along their back trail. "I won't leave you."

Iandra nodded, though she knew her lover couldn't see, then she took a calming breath, pushed off into the water, and began to swim across to the land on the far side of the narrow waterway. She took long, powerful strokes, like she had so often when she used to race her brother at the summer palace. Trepidation drove her to pull hard for the other side before something living in the water came at her. Her imagination conjured up snakes, alligators, and who knew what else, but the only living things near the waterway were more black birds, crows and grackles, chattering and cawing, all of them watching her. More of them arrived and settled into the thick moss that clung to the cypress trees as the queen reached the far bank and thrashed up out of the water onto dry land.

Iandra turned back, looking for Lyrien, but he had not begun the swim, yet. She wanted to call to him, urge him to catch up, but she was afraid her voice would give them away. Her captain looked back over his shoulder at her and motioned for her to keep moving, but she could not. She didn't dare continue; she would not let him out of sight, for his presence was the only thing keeping her from breaking down completely right then. She crouched low into the cattails, watching him.

At that moment, Iandra spotted movement in the underbrush just beyond Lyrien's position, further back on the trail they had followed. She swallowed in alarm and hissed at her companion, but it was too late. A shout rose up as men dressed in black and red came crashing through the cattails toward him. It was then that Iandra saw the skiffs on the water, flanking their position and coming toward her. They were filled with more men, armed and peering into the thick undergrowth of the swampland.

Lyrien rose up as the first of Lord De'Valen's mercenaries broke into his view, aiming his pistol. Iandra watched in dread as he pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. The sudden confrontation was enough to startle the foe, though, and Lyrien took advantage of the other man's hesitation to fling the weapon at his head. The pistol glanced off the man's temple, and Lyrien was at him in an instant. The thug swung wildly at Lyrien, but the captain simply bent smoothly out of the way, grasping his opponent's arm and carrying the thug through with his own momentum in the process. As the mercenary stumbled forward, Lyrien yanked the man's tunic up and inside out, over his head, shoving him into the cattails off-balance. Then Lyrien turned and dived into the water.

He was halfway across before the mercenary recovered, shrugging his tunic back down and drawing his own flintlock out of his broad sash. "Hold, Captain Ves'tiral," he called to Lyrien, sighting down the barrel of the pistol, "or I *will* shoot."

In desperation, Iandra snatched up a length of waterlogged wood lying at her feet and stood, flinging it as hard as she could at the mercenary. The wet branch spun in the air and struck the thug in the leg, not hard enough to injure him, but enough to startle him. The flintlock jerked and went off, the roar of its powder like thunder in the still morning. The ball skipped across the water less than a foot from Lyrien.

Surprised, the thug stared at Iandra, who realized that she had revealed her position. "They're here!" the mercenary cried out, waving one arm over his head. "This way!" The call went up all around, and Iandra realized the soldiers had fanned out and were working their way deeper into the swamp in hopes of surrounding the two of them.

Iandra turned and ran again as Lyrien reached the same embankment where she had climbed out of the water. Black birds swirled around both of them then, screaming and flapping in a mad dance as the queen ran past them, as though they were as upset as she. She could hear Lyrien's footsteps treading rapidly on the path behind her, and the shouts of their pursuers. A musket roared from out on the water, and the trunk of a cypress tree exploded into splinters near Iandra's head, making her flinch. She jerked away from the stinging fragments of wood and went sprawling to the spongy ground, at the same time spotting more of Lord De'Valen's troops ahead of her.

Lyrien reached the queen then, standing over her naked, mud- and leaf-covered form and holding a hand out for her to take. Iandra merely shook her head no, exhausted and disconsolate. It was over. She rolled to sit up, watching as more and more of the soldiers pursuing them appeared, some on the land, others paddling skiffs. Somehow, they had known exactly where to find the two of them.

Iandra watched as Lyrien stepped between her and the closest of the mercenaries, defiant until the end. He would hold that position until either he or their enemies were dead, she knew, but she wondered if the captain's unyielding principles, his absolute certainty that hers was the moral cause, would be his final undoing. And her own. A tiny part of her wondered if it might not be better to surrender and live. De'Valen might be everything terrible her imagination could conjure, but maybe, just maybe, it was still better than the death her captain promised her with his unwavering defiance. At that moment, she almost felt as trapped by Lyrien as she did by Lord De'Valen.

Iandra huddled at Lyrien's feet, reaching toward him, ready to tell the man she loved the one thing she knew

would defeat him — that it was time to surrender, that she no longer wanted him to die in her defense. She took hold of his hand, tried to draw his attention down to her, but the damned black birds — ravens, crows, grackles, and even a pair of falcons — were everywhere, thrashing around them both, making him hold up his arms to protect his face. Iandra shrieked and clung to her lover's leg, closing her eyes to the hordes of flapping wings and scraping talons.

The sound of the birds was deafening and grew louder by the second. Iandra's stomach lurched in terror and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, sobbing, as the fowl swarmed over the pair of them. She risked a single glance around, but there was nothing to see but a torrent of black feathers all around her. She quickly turned away, howling as talons and beaks raked at her bare skin and tore at her damp, bedraggled hair.

Out of nowhere, Iandra heard a voice rise up. It was a woman's, loud and clear and echoing through the cacophony of the mass of black birds.

"Your courage and defiance are admirable, Captain Ves'tiral, but your role in this play is at an end," the voice said, reverberating through the swamp. It was unreal, larger than life, and despite her terror, Iandra marveled at the warmth she felt inside when she heard it. "There is more for you to do, yet, but not here. It is time for you to come with me, where your passions will serve both of us."

Then Lyrien screamed, and Iandra did, too, crying out as a thunderclap bounced all around her, through her, jarring her bones and rattling her teeth. Even as the tremor rumbled and went silent, it took a moment for Iandra to realize that Lyrien was no longer there. Her arms were wrapped around emptiness. She crumpled to the ground in horror and despair, clearly hearing the sound of her

own rasping sobs. The black birds were gone, along with her lover.

The queen, weeping softly, curled up in a ball upon the damp, black ground. The birds had taken her Lyrien from her. She could not understand how that was possible. Somehow, the woman behind the powerful voice had stolen her lover and left her alone, to die, or worse. She was going mad, she thought, or soon would be at Lord De'Valen's hands.

The queen opened her eyes to see a dozen or so of Lord De'Valen's men approach her warily, their eyes wide and their jaws hanging slack. Finally, one of them got close enough to landra to level his pistol at her. Miserably, landra sat up in a huddled crouch and stared at the man. One eye milky blind where a scar cut across it on his face, he looked unsettled, but whatever uncertainty he might have felt at the disappearance of half his quarry was pushed aside as he ogled the woman still there, licking his lips. His face broke into a smile as he motioned for her to get up. It was not a pleasant expression.

"Milady, if you please. Lord De'Valen would like a word with you."

Chapter 1

Captain Lyrien Ves'tiral kept his arms wrapped about his head and cowered, eyes clenched tightly shut against the blazing whiteness that engulfed him. His whole body throbbed with pain, and he truly believed that he was about to die. The soldier welcomed death if it meant escaping his madness. Only madness could explain the image that loomed over him of the winged woman, masked and horned, impossibly tall, with her resonating, overwhelming voice. Only madness could be responsible for the sensation of his very soul being wrenched from his body and borne away, into that terrible, searing whiteness. The whiteness must be causing this great pain Lyrien felt, burning through his flesh.

The pain increased but also became more focused, centralized, until at last Lyrien realized he was holding his breath. He let it go in one great, sobbing exhalation and, remaining curled up with his arms covering his head, he trembled. The whiteness still loomed, beyond his eyelids, and it took the man several more moments to understand that it wasn't the same all-pervasive glow from before. It now seemed to be simple sunlight. It seemed fantastically bright, but it was mere sunlight nonetheless. Swallowing the strong, metallic taste of fear that filled his mouth, Lyrien cautiously, fearfully, opened one eye.

The whiteness that glared back at the captain came from white stone, inches from his face. No, not just stone; it was smooth, white tile, warmed from a midday sun, and he was lying on a stretch of it. He peered around and found that he rested in a courtyard, a private garden, crumbling with neglect and age.

Suddenly, as his senses crackled and awoke fully, Lyrien realized he could feel the warmth of the tile beneath his naked skin and could feel rivulets of sweat trickling down his body. He smelled a dozen faint odors on the caressing breeze, and he could hear the cawing of birds. Birds! The black birds in the swamp!

"Iandra!" Lyrien cried out as he sat bolt upright, looking around desperately. As he realized the queen was not there, panic and cruel dismay washed over him like the surge of a river, driving him back down against the white tiles. He gave off another heaving, wracking sob. The sudden rush of sadness and loneliness was too much to bear. He had failed her, and he decided dismally that he would lie there and weep for his loss forever. Despite all his efforts and his absolute conviction that he would see her on the throne that was rightfully hers, somehow, Lyrien had come up short, and the queen would suffer for it. The mere thought made him want to stay right where he was and waste away.

Let me just die, the captain thought. Let the sun dry me to a withered husk, to simple dust, and I'll scatter in the wind. What does it matter? I wasn't strong enough and now I've lost her, forever. 'Forever' reverberated through his head, and Lyrien felt the whole *meaning* of it weighing down on him all at once, crushing the life and strength out of him, pressing him relentlessly into the warm tiles.

No, that is ridiculous, Lyrien told himself, sitting up suddenly. Stop whimpering like a child. You can find her. You *will* find her, the captain insisted silently, brimming

with hope. He knew he would track her down, return to her, and nothing, no force in the heavens, would hold him back. He would not be defeated.

The captain half-rose to his feet, ready to set out at that very moment, but even as he scanned the crumbled and ruined building he found himself in, confusion washed over him. It was all too strange, too alien. He had no idea how he'd gotten to that place, or how he would return to her. Too many questions. Too much to work through, to many challenges to overcome. It couldn't be done.

Lyrien sank back down to the white tile a second time, his head in his hands. What's the matter with me? he wondered. I'm like a child, a weak babe. The tiniest thing upsets me. This isn't right! He screamed silently. Be a man! You're a soldier, fool! Act like one!

"Act like one!" Lyrien screamed aloud, pounding his fist against the stonework beneath him. He started at the clear timbre of the echo of his voice, radiating back to him. Then the pain of his bruised knuckles crashed over him as well, and he gazed down at the welling of blood in wonder. It shone bright and crimson in the fair sunlight, and when he sucked at it, the taste was sharper, more pronounced, than he had ever remembered before.

Suddenly a shape, something that had been camouflaged among the dappled shadows, shifted and moved. Even as the captain focused on the motion, a thing as wide as he was tall began scuttling across the tiles directly at him, impossibly fast for its size. The skittering thing was a giant wolf spider, all mottled browns and grays, with a body at least two feet wide and a leg span that carried it toward the captain in a heartbeat. The spider took a dozen lightning-fast strides and then launched itself through the air right at him.

Horrorified, Lyrien rolled to one side on instinct as the brown arachnid settled lightly to the tiles where he had

been sitting a split-second before. It turned to face him as he tumbled backward, gleaming black eyes and a pair of fangs, damp and shiny with venom, glittering in the dim light. Lyrien never stopped moving away, feeling in perfect balance, in total control of his fluid movements despite the fear clutching at his chest. He deftly shoved a half-rotted crate or something similar between himself and the thing as he retreated on all fours, still facing it. The box slid smoothly across the tiles, but a blink of an eye later, the spider had leaped atop the ruined item, bouncing slightly as it surveyed where its prey had retreated. Lyrien continued to roll himself across the tiles away from the spider, but it lunged forward again.

Desperately, Lyrien kicked out, trying to deflect the spider's body away from him. His bare foot struck solidly against the side of its abdomen, generating a meaty thunk as the kick drove the spider away a few feet. The attack felt good, the strength in his leg powerful. Lyrien grunted with the effort and reverse-somersaulted to his feet as the spider landed a couple of paces away, stunned for the moment. The captain took advantage of its momentary condition to dart farther away, seeking desperately for some sort of weapon. There was nothing of any consequence in the courtyard except for chunks of rubble where part of a wall had collapsed, the spot from which the spider had emerged. Lyrien snatched up two sizable pieces of the debris and spun back to keep his pursuer in view.

The wolf spider had shaken off its confusion and was skittering toward him once more, heedless of any danger its prey might present to it. Lyrien hurled the first chunk of rock underhanded at the thing, knowing his aim would be truer from low, on a line with the floor. The piece of rubble skipped once on the tile and glanced off the spider's abdomen, snapping a leg half-off in the process. The spider emitted a high-pitched hissing sound as it was

wounded and danced away from Lyrien, dragging the useless leg with it. Even with only seven usable limbs, though, the arachnid was as mobile as ever.

The creature came at Lyrien again, though not directly that time. It seemed to be trying to circle around its prey, as though it thought it could outflank the captain. Lyrien spun in place, maintaining his facing directly at the thing, and when it suddenly darted toward him again, he flung the second chunk of rubble at it. The spider seemed to have anticipated the attack, though, for it leaped straight up into the air as it came forward, vaulting over the make-shift missile in the process.

Cursing, Lyrien scrambled backward as the spider hurtled through the air at him. He stumbled across more of the loose fragments of ruined wall and lost his footing, staggering into the rubble pile and finally going down in an undignified heap, sprawled out on his back, with several chunks of stone digging painfully into his back and rump. The spider landed mere feet away from him and sprang forward again, before he even had time to bring his foot up for another well placed kick.

As the arachnid landed atop his chest, its smaller fore-legs flailing eagerly toward him, Lyrien shrieked in panic and punched upward, slamming both fists desperately against the spider's head, trying to keep the dripping fangs from striking. The spider hissed again and raised up, either to avoid the blows or to strike, and in fear-induced madness, Lyrien flailed about for something to use to defend himself with. His hand closed on another fragment of rock. He swung the shard up without thinking just as the spider slammed down toward him again, fangs extended. The force of the captain's blow was enough to halt the spider's attack and crush one side of its head.

Dark ichor spurted from the wound and the spider shivered violently as it tumbled to the side, its legs spasming wildly in the air. Lyrien wasted no time, lung-

ing up to his feet with a shudder to escape being so near to the thing. When he was certain it was no longer coming after him, Lyrien moved forward and loomed over the spider, bringing the hunk of stone down again, driving it with both hands into the soft underside of the spider's head, right where the menacing fangs flexed in and out. The resulting squishing sound and splatter of brown flesh left no doubt in the captain's mind that the thing was finally dead, though its body jerked and its legs wriggled for several more seconds.

Panting, Lyrien staggered away, afraid his heart would burst from beating so hard and so rapidly. The adrenaline coursing through him made his whole body ache severely. He had never felt such fear in his life, despite the number of fights he'd experienced.

You've never seen a spider that big before, though, Lyrien told himself. How is such a beast possible? he wondered, staring down at the half-crushed creature.

Every part of its body, from the coarse brown and black hairs that covered it to the shiny black orbs of its eyes, seemed somehow more real and defined than anything he had ever studied before. It was almost as if he and the spider were connected somehow. As if he had expanded his senses beyond the five he already knew to something deeper, more fundamentally a part of his essence, and the essence of everything — the spider, the stone, the sun shining down and the motes of dust that danced within its beams — was also a part of that connectivity. That sharper level of feeling was unnerving.

Lyrien spent several more moments recovering both his wits and his breath. Finally, when he felt he had calmed down enough, he turned his attention back to his surroundings. Everything was clearer and sharper. It all seemed more real than anything before. Every mote of light, every line, every color, every bit of motion stood out and drew his attention in an urgent and joyous man-

ner. He was overawed by everything. And the words in his head, the mind's voice, were also crisper, more pronounced. Every thought, every raw emotion, reverberated through his whole body, making him ache in misery and shiver in delight in the span of a breath. In contrast, everything that had come before that instant, that time and place, seemed somehow less real. It was a distant memory, faded and diluted. He almost didn't believe it was real, except for the fact that every time he thought of Iandra, his heart wept.

Lyrien took a deep, calming breath. This place is affecting me, he realized. I've got to fight it.

He peered around once more, thoroughly studying the place. It was a courtyard, inside a building of white stone, perhaps limestone. The architecture was impressive and refined, but it was also strange and thoroughly unfamiliar. A fountain basin, dry and silent, rested in the center of the patio, and a sculpture of a creature unlike any he had ever seen in Ilnamar before stood atop a pedestal in the center. The creature had the body of a man, but its head was that of a dog, or maybe a fox. Regardless, the craftsmanship was exquisite, and Lyrien gazed at it for several long moments, drinking in every fine detail, every tiny imperfection in the stone that gave the thing such character.

No! He chastised himself, shaking his head. Don't get distracted! Lyrien steadied himself once more and drew on his military training. You are a soldier; stow those emotions right now.

When he had mastered his vertiginous passions once more, he continued his survey, determined not to become sidetracked. It was difficult.

The rest of the courtyard was enclosed by a building, two levels tall, with porches at each level running around the periphery of the atrium. Just beyond the edge of the roof along one side of the courtyard, a slender tower rose

upward at least five more stories. Near the tower's apex, which flared in a domed shape, a walkway encircled the tower. At various points along the tower's length, windows filled with stained glass images decorated the white surface. Lyrien supposed that he might find the way inside that tower from an interior room.

Fluted columns formed the façade between the open plaza and the porches surrounding it. In addition to the fountain, planter boxes sat at each corner of the patio, and Lyrien could see more of them spaced about the porches at both levels, along with hanging baskets dangling from brass chains. Beyond these, in the shade, doorways led into the interior of the building. It had once been a beautiful place.

The plants now grew wild, creepers and vines tumbling out of the planter boxes, many of which were cracked, their soil spilled out upon the tiles. Several of the baskets were hanging askew, a chain missing or broken, while others had fallen completely, lying shattered upon the flooring below. The columns were stained black from rain and mildew, and a number of them were cracked. The balustrade that enclosed the upper porch was incomplete and toppled over. The stonework of the structure itself was listing, all of its angles imperfect, slumping and grim, as though the building, saddened at its abandonment, could no longer stand proudly. It was desolate and wild in that courtyard.

Lyrien drank it all in with his eyes, feeling a tumultuous collection of varying emotions pass through him as he studied his surroundings, willing himself to suppress the tidal wave of feeling that seemed to come unbidden at every new thought, every new sensation. It was both wonderful and terrible, and if he allowed himself to slip, even the slightest, it would wash away his logic and determination.

Climbing to his feet, Lyrien ignored the tingling of a gentle breeze drying the sweat upon his sun-warmed skin. Even his nakedness felt somehow more severe, and he fought the urge to both examine and cover himself as he planted his feet. The tiles felt good beneath them. He found his balance easily, shifted his weight, and was amazed at how sweet the simple sensation of standing felt. He curled his toes and took a step, then another, and on impulse, he deftly leaped up to land upon the basin wall of the fountain. The act was pure, the sensation phenomenal. He felt like a cat ready to pounce, a bird on the verge of flying.

Lyrien peered up at the sky overhead, squinting against the glow of the sun, and was astonished at how deeply blue it was. There were no clouds, but he somehow thought he could sense rain, a great roiling thunderstorm, seething somewhere out of sight, beyond the edge of the second floor.

A single black bird perched atop the roofline, its head crooked sideways, peering down at the captain with one eye. Lyrien frowned, remembering what had transpired prior to his arrival. The thought of Iandra made his chest ache, especially when he considered that by now, she was most likely Lord De'Valen's prisoner, but he forced that emotion down long enough to consider what might have happened.

Am I dead? he wondered. Is this the afterlife?

Lyrien wasn't a particularly spiritual man, but he had to consider the possibility. He remembered the swamp clearly, though dully, like a pale echo of what the reality must have been. The two of them had fled, stumbling through the cattails. He had sent the queen on ahead while he remained behind. He had tried to fire a shot at one of their pursuers, but the dampness had fouled the powder of his flintlock. Had he been shot in return? Was the rest of it just the ravages of death tricking him? The birds, the

woman with the wings and horns, glorious to behold, standing over him, her voice reverberating through his thoughts. Was all of that merely an illusion, a tool of the mind to comfort itself during its final moments?

Perhaps, Lyrien decided, but he was skeptical. If the place was some sort of heaven, why was it in ruin, and why was he the only one there?

There was another possibility, but one that the captain was reluctant to consider. Heedless of his intense desire to repress it, the possibility crept into his mind unbidden. Known as *The Taking*, it might explain his predicament. *The Taking* was myth, though, pure fable designed to frighten children. Everyone in Ilnamar knew the stories of *The Taking*, tales of men and women, heroes and vagabonds alike, vanishing before the eyes of all those around them. No one really believed in them, except maybe in the dark of night when the shadows were deepest. He certainly had never given the legends any credence. His father would have scoffed at him for doing so right then.

Lyrien thought hard; had any stories of *The Taking* ever mentioned an impossibly tall woman, or scores of black birds? Perhaps. The stories had different forms, all mysterious and terrifying, but like any legend, the tales transformed with each telling, becoming more fantastic and yet more vague. Perhaps that was what had occurred, and there was truth in the old fables.

None of that, however, was going to help him right then, Lyrien realized. He had to find out where he was. If people built the place, then there must be more of them somewhere. He was determined to find them, determined to extract some sort of explanation from them about where he was and how he had arrived there – for he was certain that it was not Ilnamar. That was paramount to getting back home, back to Iandra. But first things first, he thought. I need clothing and a weapon.

Yet he hesitated, feeling completely vulnerable. He was naked, unarmed, and unsure of what threats like the spider might be lurking unseen nearby, and he had no clear notion of how to ascertain his circumstances. It made him quiver in doubt, in fear.

No, none of that, Lyrien insisted, clenching his jaw. You can't stay here. Survival is paramount, he reminded himself, his old sergeant's words echoing in his memory, flat and dull, like every other recollection of *before*. Everything you do must be geared toward survival. Then he remembered his father's words, taunting words: whatever worthless thing you're going to do, at least *do* it. For the first time in a long time, Lyrien actually agreed with the man's harsh comment.

The captain noted that the sun had moved well past its high point by then, and that most of the patio was in shadow. Darkness would follow soon, and he knew it would be much harder to traverse the grounds of the estate after nightfall. Still, he refused to relinquish caution. He peered up to the roofline, hoping he might find a way to scale the wall, reach the tower from there, and thus discover where he was, but there was no good place to try. He would have to venture further into the house and find another route up or out.

Grimacing, the captain moved forward, toward a portal along the same side of the plaza as the tower, a double-wide opening set into the wall. Beyond it, in contrast with the flaring brightness of the sun, was cool, impenetrable darkness. Each step felt heavy, but slowly, he worked his way closer. Once in the shade of the porch, the cooler air made his skin prickle, giving him goose bumps. He shivered at the sharpness of the contrast. He took another few steps, and then he was at the portal, peering inside. It was dim, but somehow, he was able to make out the interior with clarity, noting the tiniest, finest details.

There was a large, open chamber, which at one time had been decorated with frescos and murals on the floor, walls, and ceilings. The images were faded and cracked, though Lyrien could still make out bits of outdoor scenes, most prominently of the ocean. The only egress from the chamber was a darkened hallway at the rear, leading directly to the base of the tower. A faint blue glow emanated from there, seeming to shine down from above. It must be the light from the stained glass windows, Lyrien reasoned, feeling hopeful.

The room itself was filled with the remains of a number of tables and chairs, like some pub or inn, but in the same warm, airy style that reminded Lyrien of the tropical coasts of home. He supposed that it would have been a fine place to host a summer party, and he could almost imagine the mellow light from colored lanterns and the sweet smell of hyacinth and jasmine in bloom, as people sashayed in brightly-hued suits and gowns, mingling and flirting, while soft music wafted through the place as a backdrop to their merrymaking. Their laughing eyes and tinkling voices would be —

Lyrien shook his head, dispelling the enchanting vision. This is no time for fancies, he scolded himself. Get a firm hold, Lyrien Ves'tiral, or this place will swallow you in its . . . in its what? Magic?

No. Magic was just a part of the myths; stories told to make children's eyes grow wide in the light of a fire. He had liked the idea of magic when he was younger, but his father had banished that foolishness from his mind. Still, something was affecting him.

Its eeriness, he decided. Get a firm hold on yourself before this place swallows you in its eeriness. It's nothing more than a trick of the mind.

Setting his jaw, the captain reestablished his mindset and returned to the business at hand. He moved the rest of the way through the covered patio and into the hall-

way beyond. There was definitely a dim, bluish glow shining from overhead at the far end. He wasn't certain, but he thought he could make out the frames of more doorways flanking the passage as it receded before him. In the fading light, though, he could not be sure. He found himself trembling, wishing more than anything for a lantern. He resisted the urge to move back out to the patio and stay in the sunlight, stilling his out-of-control emotions once more.

Forcing himself to pick his way carefully, the captain began to move down the dim hallway toward the azure light. As he moved deeper into the gloom, the illumination from behind him revealed more detail than he had imagined it would, and after several yards and a number of closed doors to either side, Lyrien spotted a circular chamber with a spiral staircase ascending at the far end. It had to be the base of the tower. He quickened his pace, reached the staircase, and peered straight up the shaft of the tower. High overhead, he could make out light streaming through an opening. He prayed the stairs were solid enough to hold him and set out.

As he passed the stained glass windows, he admired their ornate construction, noting how tiny the fragments of glass were that made up the images. Of the images themselves, he was pleased to see that they depicted normal humans rather than horned women or dog-headed creatures. Their garb seemed odd, but he paid them no more mind than that, for the images were extremely stylized and simplistic.

By the time he was halfway up the staircase, Lyrien could feel it swaying with his steps. He passed bracing beams at regular intervals, but it was still unnerving, and vertigo threatened to overwhelm him at one point. He had never been leery of heights in the past. He forced himself to stop, clinging tightly to the railing, and then tried to calm himself with deep breaths before continu-

ing on. The sensation of losing his balance had never been so strong as at that moment, but he fought it off and pushed onward. Finally, breathing hard from the exertion, Lyrien reached the doorway. Carefully testing his footing, the captain stepped out and gasped.

Instead of finding himself at a high point on some great estate, or perhaps peering down upon a common square in some village, as far as he could see in every direction, Lyrien spied a great city. There was no open space, no edge to it at all. Buildings were nestled next to buildings, as though some great giant had swept a set of play blocks into a mass, all jumbled together. Carefully, Lyrien circumnavigated the walkway that surrounded the tower. It was, indeed, one of the highest points, and in every direction, the city sprawled to the horizon's edge.

Staggering away from the balustrade and wedging his back firmly up against the wall of the tower, Lyrien gasped for breath. Filled with awe, despair, and a half-dozen other emotions he couldn't even name at the moment, he was overwhelmed. He knew of no place in existence such as that. He was trapped in an endless sea of urban blight and so finely attuned to it that if he wished, he could close his eyes and still retain the smallest details about it, and he had no idea which way to go to escape.

Out beyond the horizon, the captain could also see storm clouds building, thunderheads drifting toward the city. It was the rain he had somehow sensed before, when he had first found himself in the courtyard.

Senses so finely tuned, I can even feel the rain coming, he thought absently. It's not natural. How is it possible?

Something else caught the captain's eye at that moment, the sight of which made him blanch. In the far distance to his left, a second sun had just crested the horizon.

Lyrien gaped. It could not be. There should be only one sun in the sky.

This isn't real, Lyrien told himself, closing his eyes. I can't be here. I'm going mad.

A crow cawed nearby, and Lyrien opened his eyes, spotting the bird perched atop the railing near him. He wanted to throw something at it, knock it from its perch as it peered at him with only one eye, head cocked askew, but because the vertigo was back, he dared not move away from the comfort of the tower wall. A second bird joined the first, both watching him now.

"Get away!" Lyrien screamed at them, and the pair took off, cawing angrily, to float out over the city below.

Lyrien shook his head. I'm dreaming, he told himself. Or dead. This place is just wrong.

But he knew in his heart that he was both alive and awake. Steeling himself, he again looked over at the rising red sun, squinting against its glow. The strange way it lit the city along with the yellow light of the first sun made the shadows very odd, indeed. As he gazed down, studying the odd effects of the overlapping lighting, Lyrien at last spotted something that gave him hope; he saw smoke.

Where there's smoke, there are people, he thought. I can find them and they can help me get home. I hope.

With a most devout sense of renewed purpose, Lyrien began to descend the tower, hurrying down the steps rapidly, eager to find a way out of the building he was in. In his haste, he lost his caution, and when he reached the bottom of the spiral staircase and started to jog back through the darkened passage and into the chamber connected to the courtyard, he realized too late that the hallway was illuminated by a source of light.

In the instant Lyrien was hit with the realization that he was not alone, he saw a creature that was definitely not human. It walked like a man, and indeed, it was as

tall as Lyrien, but like the creature that decorated the fountain in the courtyard outside, it had the head of a dog, a husky to be more precise. It was clothed like a man, and it held a lantern aloft to see by, carrying a slender sword in its other hand.

The creature seemed to have been sniffing the air, but when Lyrien appeared so suddenly and then nearly collided with it, the canine humanoid jumped and yelped, startled as well, and dropped the lantern with a crash, which promptly went out, engulfing both of them in near darkness. Lyrien was stunned by the effect the sudden darkness had upon his now heightened senses. The captain had little time to reflect on its ramifications, however, for in the next moment, the flooring beneath his feet groaned and gave way. Lyrien heard the canine humanoid cry out in surprise and then he tumbled into yawning blackness below.

Lyrien did not fall far. The hole became a chute or a slide of some sort, and he found himself sliding and tumbling down a steep angle, with dirt, rocks, and his impossible counterpart tumbling right along with him. The captain flailed about helplessly, trying to find some handhold to latch onto, anything he could grab to arrest his fall.

When he finally slid to a stop at the bottom of the incline, he could see nothing. Fighting panic, he cast a glance back up the way he had come and saw a faint bit of light perhaps twenty feet overhead, the dim glow of the sun shining down there through the hole in the floor above, heavily filtered through all the dust. Frantically, Lyrien scrambled to his hands and knees and tried to claw his way back up the steep slope toward that light, but the angle was too severe, and the loose rubble simply crumbled away beneath his churning. Coughing and choking, he gave up.

Beside the captain, something gave a stifled groan, and then he could feel a shifting in the loose debris, and something furry brushed against his leg. Lyrien shuddered and jumped away, his hands protectively out in front of himself. He waved them back and forth urgently, trying desperately to keep whatever the thing was at bay. He was just beginning to make out limited shapes in the dust-smothered light, and he saw the dog-creature then, moving slowly. It rolled over and sat up, coughing and wheezing.

Lyrien held his breath, fighting against what his senses told him was there. It was ridiculous. Dog-headed beings did not exist. He must have hit his head in the swamp, he now realized, must be hallucinating the city, the creature, all of it. He would wake up soon, he thought, since he recognized the delusions for what they were. He crouched quietly and waited, willing himself back to consciousness.

"By the gods," the phantasm across from the captain groaned. "I think I broke my muzzle."

Lyrien said nothing, fighting to stay calm. It's just a dream. Nothing more.

"Are you all right?" the thing asked in the near-darkness, turning toward Lyrien.

The captain still said nothing, though he began to feel around in the rubble now, wanting something in his hand to protect himself with. He closed on a large fragment of rock and hoisted it, ready to smash the creature in front of him, even though another part of his mind told him it was foolish to be afraid of something that wasn't there.

"Hello? Can you understand me?" The canine humanoid called, beginning to shift toward Lyrien now. "Are you conscious?"

"Don't," Lyrien finally said, backing away and holding his rock high overhead. "Get away."

“Easy,” the creature replied, freezing in place at the sound of Lyiren’s voice. “I’m not looking for a fight. Why don’t you —”

Whatever the dog-creature had intended to say, it swallowed its words suddenly. A low growl emanated from the captain’s left, from deeper in the darkness.

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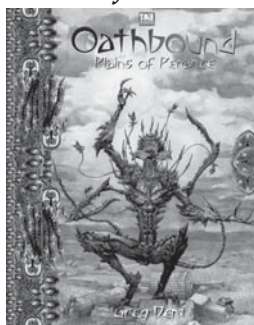


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About the Author

Thomas was born to Norma and Tony Reid in a snowstorm in the mountains of Fort Collins, Colorado, two days before the Christmas of 1966. He spent the first two years of his life living in Colorado and Virginia before the family moved back to their home state of Texas. Eventually, he found his way to Austin, where he met his wife Teresa (while gaming!) and got a B.A. in history from the University of Texas in 1989.

Right after graduating, Thomas made a living in various odd capacities (like selling books and building wooden swing sets in Texas and doing statistical analysis for studies on the elderly in Indiana), just like every other well-paid history major. Then, one fateful day, Thomas answered a TSR advertisement in the back of *Dragon Magazine* seeking professional editors. Being hired by the company that produced his favorite game was akin in his mind to becoming a professional baseball player or an astronaut, so he and Teresa moved to Delavan, Wisconsin in the fall of 1991.

Thomas lived in Wisconsin for nearly six years, working initially as an editor and eventually being promoted to creative director at TSR, Inc. When Wizards of the Coast purchased the company and relocated everyone to Washington, the Reid family packed up their minivan and headed west. But he eventually returned to his Texas roots, and today Thomas lives in the greater Austin area with his beautiful wife and three kids – Aidan, Galen, and Quinton – along with two cats named Mystra and Selûne. He stays home and writes full time now.

Thomas has written three other novels—*Gridrunner* for the **Star*Drive** setting, *Temple of Elemental Evil* for the **Greyhawk** setting, and most recently, *Insurrection*, the second book of the *War of the Spider Queen* series for the **Forgotten Realms**.

To learn more about Thomas's latest projects, visit his website at:

www.thomasmreid.com