1 The Horsemen

Ah, for the good old days, when you were young and carefree adventurers with nary a care in the world! Funny, how they didn’t seem that way then.

You are one of the survivors of the Horsemen, a famous band of adventurers who were active about three decades ago (gods, has it been that long?). The original band were the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (melodramatic, perhaps, but they were youngsters at the time...): Arriz the wizard, Nehemiah Abraam the swordsmaster, Leranearian Ephraim the fighter-priest (though he never liked that title, for reasons that remain unclear) and the irrepressable Cat, whose thieving skills were unsurpassed.

’Course, as the group grew, you dropped the "Four" and the Apocalypse bit. You came to be known as the Horsemen, even if none of you ever did ride. You were joined by the wizard Kalerege, Arriz’s rival for years; Zephaniah Reuben and Zanannim Benjamin, professional soldiers and fighters without equal; and the Raven, a healer with unusual alchemical and magical skills. The last to join, Raven was perhaps the most enigmatic of your crew, an Eastern witch who teamed up with your band in search of the traitor Soeth.

Soeth had tried to hook up with your outfit a few years before the incident at the Eastern border, but he never made the grade. It was rather a coincidence that when Mandrake Sweetwater and his daughter Dreamer Sweetwater were exiled into the Realm, Soeth would be the commander of the troop of soldiers that was closest to the area, but *someone* had to be. Unfortunately, although you six (Benjamin was, at the time, serving as the head of the Ministry for Outland Affairs) were in the area and heard the same rumours of "alien monsters," Soeth got to the family of exiles before you did, and was therefore the first Realm citizen to learn of the existence of the Clanlands.

Of course, you were unaware of that when you arrived at the village, to discover that Mandrake and Dreamer had disappeared. (Raven later explained that Dreamer was her "family name," and her real name was Mint -- you could understand why she didn’t use it.) Shortly thereafter, though, you met Raven, another "alien monster" who had willingly left the boundaries of her land to track down an outsider who had betrayed her family and stolen an artifact of great power. You decided to take her to Benjamin, who was the closest thing the Realm had to an official in charge of foreign affairs at the time, and in short order she was telling her story to the King.

It was about then that Soeth returned to the Capitol City. Looking back on it, it should have been obvious that his entire story of having been attacked by "Eastern devils" who slaughtered his troops was entirely fabricated, probably to keep anyone from realizing that *he* had slaughtered them to remove any witnesses to his attempted betrayal. At the time, though, things were moving too quickly, and King Rashid ordered Raven imprisoned.

The Cat wasn’t having any of that, though. He had fallen for the girl in a big way, and helped her escape, in the process convincing all of you that Soeth was lying. Kalerege suggested it might be time to vanish for a while, and as it happens, there was a quest he had been itching to go on, searching for an artifact called the Orb of Kryssonyx...

Mistake. Serious mistake. The seven of you spent a year searching through the Crystal Mountains in search of that Orb, finally discovering it protected by a great Worm, which you dispatched. That was the last any of you saw of Kalerege, and the last you heard of him until a few weeks ago. When the Worm was defeated, he siezed the Orb and vanished. The rest of you returned to the civilized parts of the Realm, to discover chaos -- in your absence, Soeth had somehow managed to trigger an international war over Raven’s disappearance and the death of his troops. In the meantime, Benjamin had been branded a traitor to the Realm, having disappeared altogether and last seen consorting with a band of Eastern soldiers. Gods, leave them alone for a year and they're out of control!!!

You managed to set things aright by bringing Raven to the King, and having her truth-read. By comparing stories you pieced together what Soeth had been up to, King Rashid declared the war over, and the Horsemen set out to find Soeth and Benjamin.

Well, you found Soeth in short order. While you were bringing him back, however, something went crazy -- Arriz sensed some kind of disturbance in the balance of white and black magic, and Ephraim went absolutely nuts, and in the confusion a demon of some kind appeared to take Soeth. Even weakened as he was, Ephraim managed to dispel the creature, but Soeth took the opportunity to escape. You haven't heard from him since.

Shortly after that incident, Ephraim took a leave of absence from adventuring, as did Arriz, to research some obscure metaphysical phenomena that they never really explained. Rueben and Abraam decided to follow suit to raise families, and the rest of you sort of disbanded.

Since then, you've kept in some touch. The Cat and Raven remained an item, but vanished mysteriously some eleven years ago and haven't been heard from since. The rest of you settled into rather ordinary lives as soldiers, mages, or merchants -- and Benjamin and Kalerege remained unfindable until very recently, under very odd circumstances.

When the Eastern War began, you were all quite upset -- but there wasn't much you could do about it. Unlike the first war, this one was started by the madness of the people in charge, and they have the right to do that ... Nevertheless, you were thrilled when COERCE announced that the leaders of the two nations had agreed to meet for a peace summit. You, along with the rest of the world, were stunned when they announced that the summit would be held on the mythical Castle in the Sky, a magical locale unseen by mortal eyes in centuries. You were even more flabbergasted when you discovered the identity of the Castle's keeper: somehow, Kalerege had taken up residence there when he disappeared with the Orb. The worst shock of all, however, was receiving invitations to a reunion of the Horsemen on "Castle Kalerege." The invitations were signed not by the mage, but by his manservant Benjamin.

There was no way you could refuse an invitation with that kind of mystery attached, so here you all are. Perhaps this week you'll be able to resolve some unfinished loose ends -- Soeth's fate, Kalerege's ascension, the "treason" of Zannanim Benjamin, the disappearance of Raven and the Cat, and what exactly *happened* the night that Soeth escaped. In any case, however, it will be worth it just to see each other -- who knows? Perhaps, with the chaos that has erupted on the Castle these last two days, the Horsemen will have the chance to ride again!

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