

AEIRY

Ciay-j'lae gave the reins a firm tug as they came to land at the tortown's aeiry, swinging the substantial bulk of his steed a touch further from the pens on their left. The Cerchae Penmaster tried not to stare as the mighty steed touched ground and Ciay knew the weight of his L'eysoi vibrated through the rock and beams of the buildings nearby as it landed heavily.

The wind died as the massive beast folded back its wings and the slim rider eased himself from his high saddle, using the shoulders, hips and knees of his mount to descend to where the Penmaster was hesitantly stepping forward to meet him. Ciay's colleagues likewise descended from the saddledeck and made for the towngate with a nod.

"I'll take care of her needs," Ciay-j'lae informed the local handler.

"As you will Dzaa," came the formal reply, though it was warm and friendly in this particular case. The Penmaster couldn't suppress a smile as he left to tend his own somewhat nervous charges and Ciay approved. Looking around the aeiry to get his bearings and locate the things he would need he removed his helm and noted the well-kept pens with the platforms and pads clean, tidy and organised. He liked the fellow already.

Ciay tapped the L'eysoi's chin with his riding stick and got some attention and a huff of impatience in response. He led her to a large drinking trough where spring water fed the stone basin via a series of sluices and channels feeding off of the main run of the stream when required. He turned the wheel lever and the panel lifted to let cold water slice through the gap. The warmount leaned in to drink immediately and he tapped her sharply to wait for the trough to fill higher, garnering some annoyance. But she complied with a shake of her vast head and a deep dissatisfied rumble. He wouldn't let her drink for long anyhow and judged the right moment to close the sluice.

Ciay's colleagues would be a little while down in the town and he took the time to ensure the beast's array of armour had not shifted in flight. He paid extra attention to the high front left flank where arrows had been turned earlier in the day and noted the damage was minor. The L'eysoi loosed a soft rumble of satisfaction through her bulk and lifted her great head, water dripping from her maw.

Turning to the Penmaster, never too distant, Ciay pulled coin from his pouch, "Feed?" he asked.

The Meoqai pointed across the yard. "Oats?"

"Iys?" Ciay indicated the highest quality grade.

"Pardon, Dzaa, but we do have Jayiaq." the keeper apologised genuinely and offered the next best, "We've had trouble with bandits lately. They raided a caravan and we lost a lot."

Ciay knew of the clan's troubles and nodded. He knew the news would reach the town within a couple of days and so decided to be more open with the fellow before him.

"We've just come from Neccunve," he said casually as he gestured to the north. The Meoqai just nodded but looked interested. "You won't have any trouble from them any more."

The Penmaster looked pleased. Traders had been having caravans high-jacked, wildsmen from the local tortowns had been harrassed, or had gone missing. That was just a few of the troubles they'd had since the old Neccunve King had died. His son had claimed his right to the clan which was said to harbour pirates and brigands these days and now they had been dealt with. This was good news indeed.

Ciay mixed water into the feed, some spices from a saddlebag for a touch of flavour and certain herbs to bring the best out of the oats which would give the beast more energy for their continued journey; a little pep and incentive for the creature to take flight again after such a short time.

As the L'eysoi contented herself Ciay wandered back over to the Penmaster. He was short and slim for a Yaretozue Kaestoj but all the same was a good head taller than the Penmaster and he tried to keep his slender frame from looming too greatly as he wanted the Meoqai at his ease. The L'eysoi was his pride and knew the animal handler wanted to talk about it for all his glances and appreciative, measuring stares. It was indeed an impressive creature, standing over two and a half times the height of a Yaretozue at its shoulder, and a tall Yaretozue at that. Its bulk was wide at the front with clawed forelegs and its low head almost the height of a Meoqai in itself. The wings folded tall, swept low to the ground at rest and stretched out to an incredible span in flight. The Huaos-Dzaa had ensured that all local aeirys could accommodate its needs with platforms of stone reaching out and away from the highest cliffs of the tors where it could spread its wings wide and low to take off. Two long legs from a tapering torso at the rear made its compliment of four, made it front heavy and a powerful adversary in battle. The L'eysoi were strong enough to carry cannon about the battlefield and indeed were used for this during deployment.

They had talked for a little while and Ciay could sense that the handler was on the verge of asking for a closer look so he ventured an interest in the aeiry's beasts to avoid disappointing him; the L'eysoi looked calm and docile under his own care but they were highly aggressive with strangers.

Ciay and the handler walked into the pens proper where there were a couple of vastly smaller steeds in spacious, well-kept cubicles; open

gates inclined Ciay to think that the slim Eiha were probably mates. Although not of notable stock, they were finely cared for and healthy: worthy of a common city aeiry. The local Huaos-Dzaa detachment were wise to let this 'Qai look after their mounts.

A cry from outside brought them back out into the grey, overcast daylight. Ciay's colleagues had returned - with them a gagged and bound Meoqai from the town.

"Wurchyv!" the Penmaster muttered, "you came here for him, then?"

Ciay nodded and swept his helm onto his head, his scarf hanging loose around his neck. "My thanks for your hospitality, master," he said as he walked back to where his L'eysoi waited. There were few preparatory measures to attend to before taking flight; out in the field a rider always kept his steed fully ready.

"You were quicker than I thought," Ciay accused his Captain jovially as the L'eysoi sniffed about them, huffing spittle at the presence of the captive. "Ai!" Ciay soothed to let the beast know all was as intended.

The great wings spread as the L'eysoi made for the lip of the stone platform, breathing in heavily and picking up speed quickly.

They looked briefly out over the roofs of the town falling away to the flatlands below and a break in the clouds near the horizon reflected sunlight brightly on the waters of a northern lake.

The beast's wings picked up a wind once more, blowing the Penmaster's hair over his eyes as he watched them leave; fine dust billowed and eddied over the platform.

They rose over the tor, circling above the hill to ride the warm updraft before turning east, the cool wind snapping about their bodies, wings beating a deep and timeless rhythm. Ahead of them, above the horizon, waited the airship that would take them to Uiluann.