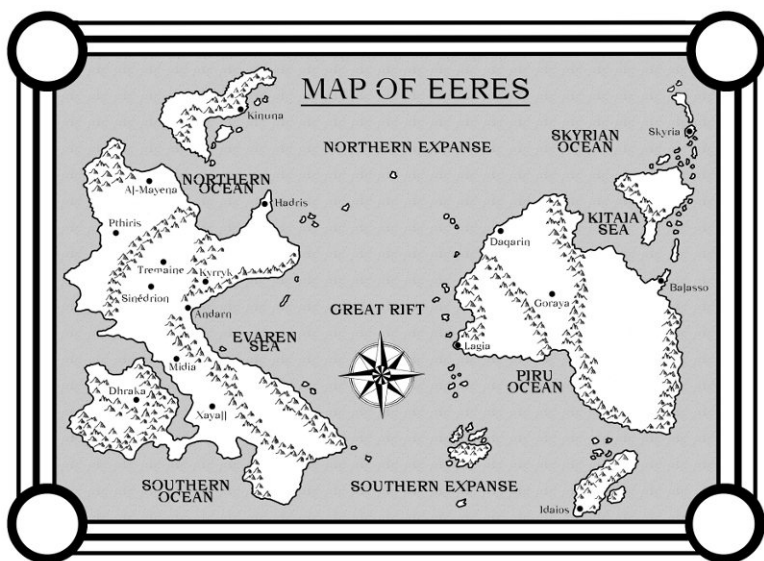


LEGACY

Part 1 of the Resonance Tetralogy

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Centuries had passed. The ancient tales were forgotten, lost in the winds of time. Many who knew them died without uttering a single breath of their secrets, the memory of them too harrowing to endure.

Two and a half thousand years ago, a great cataclysm struck. It reshaped the world, purging its surface of millions of lives. The only evidence that civilisation ever existed before this point were tiny clues in buried ruins and the vague remembrance of stories whispered through the generations. One word consistently appeared time and again, a single clue of the world that existed before – Nazreal.

That this was once a city was the only certainty. Where it lay, why it disappeared and the fate of its inhabitants remained as myth and speculation. The world had barely escaped from its spiralling plunge into chaos and virtual extinction. Those who survived fought over ancient artefacts unearthed by chance; the promise of old technologies fuel for their battle to remain alive. They were desperate to find out what had happened to prevent it from happening again.

While the world was currently stable, its foothold was tentative at best. Tense diplomacy and uneasy peace had reigned for many years now, but fresh arguments and border disputes erupted on a near-daily basis.

But then, something stirred deep at the heart of the world. A new discovery had just been made.

Chapter One

“Impossible! Nazreal does *not* exist! If it did it wasn’t anything more than the cities which stand today. How could it be anything else?”

Sinédrion, grand central city of the Cadon continent, was alight with debate.

“Show some intelligence, Pthiris! We can’t draw conclusions until we’ve examined the evidence.”

There was nothing unusual about the Senate holding audience. It happened every seventy days. But those who knew the meeting’s agenda were waiting impatiently outside the illustrious pantheon structure of the Senate building while the representatives conducted their speeches within its lavish halls. The massive amphitheatre was under higher security than it had ever been before. The stern guards standing by each massive oak door would brandish their spears at anyone who tried listening in, the metal weapons almost as sharp as their harsh, forbidding glares. The anticipation had everyone on edge.

“And how long will that take? Months, years, decades? Our time is better spent on the problems that plague our land *now*, not thousands of years in the past!”

This was unlike the Senate gatherings people were used to. Normally they were rigid, sparse affairs. The city-state nations of the Senate, known as ‘sovereigns’, usually ignored their calling due to disinterest and unwary preoccupation with their own matters. This time the hall was full to bursting. This meeting had brought news that the entire world had been waiting to hear: a breath of evidence that could help explain Eeres’ greatest myth, the disappearance of Nazreal, and so bring hope of new solutions to their ongoing struggles. Dhraka, a sovereign to the Southwest, had unearthed a new artefact.

“Representatives, silence!” came a gruff, rumbling growl. “You disgrace yourselves!”

News of the discovery had spread quickly as Dhraka sent out its messengers to pique the interest of other nations. The word sunk into people’s minds, creating widespread controversy. Some sovereigns even tried to keep their people uninformed to prevent unnecessary excitement; nothing could be decided until the claims were proven true. People were sceptical of a hoax attempting to channel resources and money, or an immature exaggeration of easily identifiable debris, as had happened before. But every new find sent ripples of anxiety through the world: underground ruins crushed by seismic activity, scraps of metal from unknown sources. These told very little, but spoke volumes in their implications. The largest sovereigns had been continually researching Nazreal since its likely existence first came to light, but nothing conclusive had ever been proven.

A tense quiet descended upon the members of the Senate as the Dhrakan Representative, current ruler and military commander Fulkore Crown, stood at the central plinth, awaiting his chance to continue. He was tall and muscular, with amaranth scales and a dark grey suit of armour. On the chest plate was the Dhrakan emblem: a dark red dragon with blazing yellow eyes, spitting fire, set against a black pyramid. That he had been allowed free entry to the Senate Hall was contentious enough given the dragon race’s

violent history. Thought extinct and virtually unknown, they re-emerged some decades ago with great vehemence. The fact that Dhraka had persisted so urgently in taking their discovery to the Senate in the first place had surprised many, as few believed they possessed interest in anything other than themselves.

Deep red claws clicked on the stone surface with disdainful calculation as Fulkore stood before his audience, barely even attempting to conceal the satisfaction at the furore his claims caused. His sharp, angular wings, boasting a span of at least twelve feet, were folded behind his back. Despite their imposing wingspan, most military Dhraka were unable to fly due to their competitive and gruelling strength training and desire for armour. Nevertheless, it was still forbidden for any creature to open their wings inside the Senate chamber. Even with knowledge of the rule, and probably especially so, they still twitched and swung with Fulkore's movements, in constant threat of breaching the code.

With his piercing yellow eyes he glanced around at the rows of anxious dignitaries, taking in every detail of their extravagant ceremonial clothes and their ornate gilded chairs. He looked to the transcribers on the next level up, quills in hand, fervently awaiting his next word. Everyone was watching him, a glorious moment he savoured while brandishing his presence before them. He craned his neck back to the stained glass ceiling and gave an arrogant scowl. It was overcast.

"Such a pity," he thought, *"that the sun cannot see my glory today."*

"Representative Dhraka," the crisp, old voice barked from behind him. He turned round to meet the gaze of Chief Senator Tyrone, a hulking badger in the elaborate green and gold uniform of the Senate House. He governed the Senate meetings and had done so for the last twenty-five years. His distinguished features and imposing figure were shaded with an air of tiredness; one of his eyes was half-closed and his fur was greying quite considerably. The once perfectly-fitting tailored dress uniform sagged in places about him and his head was noticed to drift slowly closer to his

chest as meetings progressed. His voice, however, still contained enough authority to make younger delegates jump in their seats and for the entire room to straighten themselves out of respect. The dragon looked at him expectantly, the ridge of spines down his back flexing at the gall of his interruption.

“Yes, my Lord?” he replied, with as little respect as he could get away with.

Tyrone was nonplussed at the dragon’s indulgent antagonism. “You were saying?” the badger growled, glaring at him with increasing boredom.

Fulkore turned swiftly back to face the rest of the Senate, fast enough that his armour gave an indignant rattle.

“Yes...” he spoke very deliberately, just enough to not appear patronising, “the piece our workers found was of substantial size and of a material so far undocumented in our scientific endeavours. The material and the area it was discovered in have led us to believe it is from the city of Nazreal. In the interests of the—”

“Where did you find it?” a voice called from the higher seats. The noble figure of a red fox rose stood at the rail; suddenly all eyes had turned to him. Aidan Phiraco, the Emperor of Xayall, stood before him. Although of more youthful appearance than most of his fellow Representatives he was an experienced dignitary, taking an active role in the politics of the continent, and often sought as a mediator to reconcile disputes between sovereigns. While this gained him respect it also made him a number of enemies who saw his efforts as overbearing and manipulative, or a conceited effort to take over the Senate for himself.

The Dhraikan rustled his wings, his grin ebbing. “A rather forward outburst, Xayall,” he growled, unimpressed at being interrupted a second time. “That’s unlike you.” He gave the slender fox a steely glare before continuing. “It doesn’t matter where it was found. The point is—”

“But you said that ‘the area’ led you to believe it was from Nazreal,” the middle-aged fox pressed, his voice rising but

remaining calm. Under his stiff imperial robes he held a sense of veteran experience, somewhat belying his outward years. His eyes were cerulean, faded slightly through chronic illness, but still alight with sagacity. “How are we supposed to quantify that if we don’t know where it was from?”

The dragon clenched his fist. “I’ll forgive your inappropriate interruption, *Xayall*,” his voice so full of acidity it seemed corrosive even to listen to, “as this is a matter of the world’s importance... But I admit that I have made an error. I apologise,” he said, “I meant that given the location of *previous* pieces thought to be from Nazreal, this ties together those smaller proofs to create a larger, more detailed picture of our history.”

Aidan studied the dragon with a narrow stare, guarded by suspicion.

The lizard’s grin re-appeared as he fixed his gaze directly on his Xayall counterpart. “Ironically, you are quite apt to stand, as I have a proposition for your sovereignty. Given the previous discoveries, we of Dhraka are in agreement that it is in the world’s interest to access these artefacts in order to study the possibilities more closely. Specifically, we need to see the extensive library collected within the Xayall vaults, and hence express an interest in a joint venture to excavate areas within your borders for further research.”

Aidan stood unmoved. “That’s impossible. We cannot grant you permission to tear up our land on the basis of an object that has not even been described to us.” Whispered murmurs began coursing through the other seats. “As the Senate is aware, we have already opened our reports to Sinédrión’s library in accordance with the requirements of the law regarding ancient histories. You are free to look at those for your examinations, if you so wish.”

Where Xayall’s heritage was one of respect and co-operation, Dhraka’s had done nothing but bicker and oppress since its reintroduction to the world. The dragons would frequently raid the tiny villages and towns that neighboured them, but threats and mass disappearances in the correct application allowed many

trespasses to go unreported until the damage had been discovered and the culprits safely obscured behind their wall of reptilian wings. Violence was not their only machine, however – further subversive operations conducted in dark corners and shady streets negotiated hungry, destructive agreements. They were not to be trusted, but difficult to pin to their crimes, and harder yet to strike an alliance against, due to their intimidating diplomatic nature and secret agreements.

Crawn, being the head of the civilisation since its reappearance, had been throwing his might around in search of Nazreal since whispers of its existence caught the air, and although information was scarce, under his rule Dhraka had engaged many troops in legal and illegal artefact hunts.

Everyone looked back at Fulkore, who, although keeping his body absolutely still behind the plinth, had a vicious fire in his eyes. His claws closed around the edges of the wooden lectern, gouging bits of it free. “You are being unreasonable, Xayall,” he seethed. “Don’t you understand the importance of these finds? How are we to understand the ancient disaster that confined our race to the darkness if you forbid us from investigating it? How can we rebuild what was lost to history without sharing its knowledge?”

“We don’t even know that Nazreal was involved in the disaster,” Aidan said calmly. “But there is still nothing of ours that you have not already seen. The interest in our libraries aside, with Dhraka’s border relations being as they are, we cannot let you inside our sovereign. I’m sure you don’t need reminding that your continued encroachment on numerous territories, including our own, has still not been rectified to the Senate’s satisfaction. And you have not yet fulfilled your obligation to the Senate under the Ancient Histories Decree to reveal what this new artefact is. Until these matters are resolved, we have to respectfully deny your request.”

A new murmur swept around the hall.

Aidan didn't allow himself to look around, focusing solely on the dragon at the pulpit. The smile had completely drifted from Fulkore's face, replaced with a stark, jagged snarl.

"*You still persist in your vile impertinence. You'll suffer for this,*" the dragon thought, bile rising in his throat. "The matters of our country are none of your business, Xayall." A flicker of hatred flashed across his eyes as he addressed the fox. "Petty accusations aside, is our request unreasonable? This is in the interests of the entire world; do not forget your responsibilities."

"*You mean your interests...*" Aidan growled internally. His knowledge of the Dhraka and Nazreal ran deeper than anyone else in the Senate. He was not prepared to back down.

Fulkore took on a more obnoxious, patronising tone, his conceit grating like claws on glass. "Perhaps Xayall has another reason to forbid us access," he tested harshly, pacing around the plinth again. "Perhaps these artefacts hold more than the reports dictate: that there are more waiting in your vaults, their benefits being secretly reaped by the nation for your own gain."

"What are you suggesting?" Aidan growled.

"I am not 'suggesting' anything," the creature fawned, feigning a mock calm. "I'm merely... *speculating* as to why a sovereign that has always had such an interest in Nazreal and proposed the Ancient Histories Decree in the first place would be so protective over its release of information. After all, without having an outside nation to verify your reports, there is no way of knowing they are genuine. I'm sure you don't believe us any more than we do you, but this piteous mistrust must be resolved or we may never discover the truth of our world."

Aidan could hear whispers creeping across the room. He withdrew from the parapet and straightened himself, content not to continue the debate any further. He was aware that Nazreal was a contentious issue for the entire Senate, and he didn't trust Dhraka not to have coerced other smaller sovereigns into supporting their cause, or to act independently to gain the knowledge they sought.

“I understand your concerns, Dhraka. But we cannot approve your request at this time,” he said firmly, before sitting back down.

Fulkore flicked his tail dismissively. “Then there is little point in continuing.” He bowed to Chief Senator Tyrone. “I am finished in my address, My Lord.” With a final glare aimed at Aidan, he stalked across the stage and made his way to the Dhrakan seats, where more dragons gloated and sneered to each other in uncivil tones. An unsettled quiet sunk into the Senate as the hope for detailed news dissolved into the air, unfulfilled.

The badger rapped his gavel on the desk before him, displeased by the rising tension in the seats. “Perhaps Xayall would be more willing to accede to your request if a third party oversaw the operation, Representative Dhraka. Shall we put it to discussion at the next meeting?”

Fulkore craned his fearsome head round to give the old boor a look of absolute disgust. “It shall be considered, My Lord,” he oozed.

Tyrone nodded sagely, satisfied in his resolution. “To further matters, then. I trust we shall hear no more than necessary of this pointless, cyclic argument? What an anticlimax,” he sighed. “Skyria, your Representative?”

A female pine marten stood up, clutching a note in her claws. “My Lord, and fellow Representatives, we have still not received any word about the Skyrian abductors who disappeared to the Cadon mainland over two months ago...”



Once the meeting had finished, the delegates filed out of the amphitheatre, flanked by guards.

Aidan was shadowed by his bodyguard Kier, a younger fox with three white crystal earrings in each ear and bold, silver eyes. He had been standing behind his master for the whole meeting, and now he matched his pace to Aidan’s urgent stride as they

marched to the outer wings of the building. Once they were out of sight, Aidan slowed dramatically. He let out a heavy, rattling sigh, massaging a pain in his ribs. The blue imperial robes were heavy, and tired him as much as the debate had, the long sleeves and tight, high collar constricting his already weakening circulation. He ripped the headdress off and bundled it towards Kier's chest. Hurriedly, he pulled open the collar of his jacket, allowing the oxygen to flow back into his lungs. His mind pulsed with the weight of the meeting.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?" Kier said, taking his arm in support.

Aidan brushed him away, breathing through his teeth. "Yes, I'm fine, Kier. It was just... troublesome."

"I did offer to go in your stead, Majesty," the younger fox said quietly.

Aidan let out a slight laugh, his pain slowly subsiding to a dull ache. "This isn't... something you'd be able to debate. You'd never be allowed to speak if you weren't a Representative anyway. It had to be me..."

Compounding his worries from the Senate was the journey back to Xayall, at least two days by carriage if the journey was smooth. As soon as he returned he'd have to make plans to leave again, and Faria would not make it easy for him.

They rounded a corner and descended a set of large, sweeping stairs; this was one of the main entrances to the building. Aidan could hear the bustling of the citizens in the streets outside.

When they reached the large iron door at the base, two bulky guards hauled it open, revealing the eminent city of Sinédrión laid out before them, colours ablaze in the late evening's low vermilion sun. A large river curved majestically around the Senate chamber, wearing luxurious bridges like a uniform of office.

Their carriage awaited them: an elegant design in dark wood with green and gold trim. Tall, horse-like dinosaur creatures with long tails, Theriasaurs, stood proudly at its head awaiting their

command to move. The Xayall emblem, a white fox on a shield of blue flame, had been carved into the vehicle's doors. A troop of mounted soldiers stood to attention behind it; a silent, respectful welcome to their Emperor.

A footman held the door for them as they climbed inside, and seconds later the carriage began to move. For a while Aidan watched the shifting cityscape with a distant, grave expression.

"The world ended once already..."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty?"

Aidan pulled a piece of parchment from a chest under the seat, along with a quill and a bottle of ink.

"Nothing. Kier, I need you to deliver a letter to a friend of mine in Andarn," the older fox explained, his serious tone sounding all the darker in the half-light of the carriage. "We'll stop near the city for you. I'm sorry, but it may take a while to find him."

Kier nodded. "I will, Majesty."

"I take it you still have my staff?"

The younger fox instinctively moved a hand to his back to check, even though he knew the Emperor's charge was still safe in its cloth shroud. "Yes. Do you want it now?"

"No. But I'll take it with me. Make sure you leave it when you go."

"Yes, Majesty."

The carriage fell into silence. As they passed through Sinédrión's gates and the voices of the crowd subsided, Aidan let himself relax a little. The meeting had not filled him with optimism. He only hoped that his concerns regarding the Dhvakans would not be proved right. Xayall did not have the military strength to repel the dragons if anything were to happen.

The Emperor's procession passed the city's gates and broke into the forest. Some seconds after the last armoured creatures thundered away, a black carriage ground into motion, following in their tracks.