

From Stacia to Hyperion

A Hero's Tale

By Mike Amundsen

Chapter 7: The Maps

You press forward, your boots scuffing against the narrowing path. The Eldraevan Wilds seem to fold in around you, the air thickening with the scent of moss and wet earth. The further you walk, the more the brambles claw at your clothing, their thorns snatching at your sleeves and tearing at your resolve.

The path is no longer clear. Roots rise like knuckled fingers from the soil, grasping at your ankles. Branches creak and whisper above, their leaves casting trembling shadows that dance and twist. Your eyes strain to find the thread of the path, but it is fraying, dissolving into wildness.

You pause, catching your breath. You had hoped to navigate the Wilds by instinct alone, trusting that if you kept moving forward, you would find your way. But the tangle of growth and shadow refuses to yield.

Reluctantly, you unfasten the pack from your shoulders and drop it to the ground. Kneeling, you rummage through its contents until your fingers close around the peddler's maps. You hesitate, feeling the weight of Old Kern's words as you unfold the brittle parchment.

The maps are not what you expected. They are yellowed, brittle things filled not with tidy drawings of hills and rivers, but with words. Lines of cramped, hurried writing scrawl across the pages, each phrase a terse instruction rather than a pictorial guide.

“Walk 100 paces forward. Turn 30 degrees left. Walk another 250 paces.”

The instructions continue in this fashion, precise and relentless. There are few landmarks to compare against, even fewer visual cues to match the world around you. Instead, it is all distances and angles, a disjointed litany of movements that feel both deliberate and maddeningly vague.

But as you leaf through the brittle collection of maps, something else becomes clear. These are not the work of a single mind. There are different handwritings, various inks, and countless scratches and corrections made over time. Some instructions are crossed out, others amended with careful notes. What began as a coherent attempt to chart the Wilds has turned into a chaotic palimpsest of desperate revisions.

Whoever the original mapmakers were, their efforts have been overwritten, patched, and adjusted by many hands. Each addition a futile attempt to fix what could never be made accurate. The Wilds were never meant to be contained by ink and parchment.

It is as if you are holding not a guide, but a history. A testament to the impossible effort of imposing order upon something that thrives on change.

Kern’s voice echoes in your mind, dry and bitter. “You can’t pin down the Wilds. Or the world, for that matter. The minute you think you’ve got it, it wriggles from your grasp.”

Another of his rants, you once thought. Just another shard of madness from a broken mind. But now the words seem to cling to you like brambles.

And the peddler’s voice, half-forgotten, seems to rise from the pages themselves. “The Eldraeven Wilds are not kind to those who wander without guidance.”

These maps, so meticulous in their instructions, are nothing but snapshots of the past. Each layer of ink a record of someone's attempt to force precision upon the Wilds, and each attempt rendered obsolete by the passage of time.

The realization tightens your chest. If the forest itself is fluid, then the maps are doomed to fail from the start. They pretend at precision in a place where precision cannot exist. And you have been trying to follow them like gospel.

And yet, even as you fold the maps away, something occurs to you. The act of creating these maps must have been satisfying for those who tried. A labor of effort and hope, a way to pin down the unruly, ever-shifting forest into something graspable. But that satisfaction was for the mapmakers alone. What you hold in your hands is a relic, a frozen moment in time, nothing more.

They are not a guide for the future, only a record of the past.

Your thoughts drift to Stacia. The village, with its stubborn rituals and reverence for predictability. Its founders must have understood the power of imposing order. Not just for themselves, but for everyone who would follow. Maybe they believed that by embracing rigid customs, they could hold back the forces of change. Protect themselves from the chaos that always threatens from beyond the safety of their fields and walls.

Maybe that was their real purpose. To make Stacia a sanctuary from the Wilds, a place where the world could be made simple and the unpredictable kept at bay. A place where maps might actually work. But if they succeeded in building such a place, they also trapped themselves. Locked in a constant struggle against the very thing they feared.

You feel the heaviness of exhaustion settling into your bones. The weight of the pack, the ache in your legs, the sting of scratches along your arms. And more than that, the dull fatigue of

frustration.

Staggering forward, you find yourself leaning against a fallen log. The rough bark presses into your shoulders as you slide to the ground. For once, you don't pull out the maps. Instead, you watch the shadows lengthen as the sun slips lower in the sky. The light is gentler now, slanting through the canopy in fractured beams.

You take a slow breath. Water, food, rest. That's what you need right now. Everything else can wait.

Wearily, you reach for your pack again, but this time it's not to search for guidance. It's simply to survive the day.

As you sip from your water skin and chew on a bit of bread, your mind drifts. The forest feels strangely calm in these moments of stillness. The frustration of the day's struggle ebbs away, leaving only quiet. You notice how the shadows stretch with the setting sun, the way the leaves shimmer as the wind brushes past.

Old Kern's words echo in the sun's shadows. "Some places, they don't want to be tamed. You can't wrestle a river and expect it to run straight. You've got to learn its moods, follow its currents."

You close your eyes, feeling the coolness of the air against your skin. Maybe Kern's madness held something you hadn't been willing to consider. Maybe the Wilds weren't meant to be conquered or charted. Maybe they were meant to be experienced.

You rest there, eyes half-open, letting the quiet settle around you like a blanket. For once, you aren't fighting the Wilds. You're simply part of them.

And that's when you hear it.

A faint, burbling sound carried on the breeze. The unmistakable music of running water.

Your eyes snap open, a sudden jolt of energy rushing through you. Water. A stream nearby. Maybe fresh water and, if you're lucky, berries or nuts along the bank.

You scramble to your feet, pack already in hand. Whatever wisdom or peace you were trying to absorb is forgotten in the moment. Driven by thirst, hunger, and hope, you plunge through the thicket, pushing toward the sound of the stream.

You break through the thicket, the underbrush grabbing at your ankles, but your determination drives you forward. The sound of rushing water grows clearer, a cool promise in the stifling heat of the late day sun.

Then you break through into a small clearing and freeze.

There, sunning itself on a smooth, flat rock beside the stream, is a great green gecko. Its scales glisten in the sunlight, dappled with hues of jade and emerald. Its red eyes gleam like coals, and its long tail curls lazily over the edge of the rock, swaying slightly in the warm breeze.

You stare, unable to comprehend the sight. But before you can make sense of what you're seeing, the creature speaks.

"Hi there, stranger. Welcome to my rock."