

THE FIRST SKYRIDER

Callenas Chronicles

Book 2

H. R. Hess



Reformation
Lightning




PROLOGUE

To the good people of Callenlas, all her cities, reifas and farmlands, her ports and her islands:



For almost two hundred years, the people of Callenlas have embraced the law and love of King Elior. Our once warring tribes have been united, and our divisions have been woven into collaboration. Peace has been established in the mountains and the marshes, the forests and the plains, for one hundred and fifty years.

Fortresses once built for the defence of our different tribes are now to be put to a new purpose. The King desires that all those who rule in his name be taught well, to nurture and defend his people, and to love the laws he has established for our good. Therefore, henceforth, many of these fortresses will be devoted to the education of the future riders, reifs, masters and governors of Callenlas. Those who expect to take the care of a reifa or city in



adulthood, and any who wishes to serve the King as a rider or master, may make application to train in one of these houses. The sponsorship of a reif or governor is required for the first two years of training, after which the student will be granted a place, at the King's pleasure, in one of these houses of education.


In the name of the star Elior, King of Callenlas, overseer of the Councils of Light, ordained by the Council of Orr and the five Guardians, and signed herewith by Lord Orlan, Guardian of Orr, on the first day of the third month of the one hundredth and eighty first year of the stars.






CHAPTER 1

As Cairn guided the elderly mare over the hump of the hill, his stomach clenched with nerves, and he drew sharply on the reins. The bay pony stopped with a whicker of complaint, and Cairn reached down to rub her bony neck in apology. Behind them lay the rounded foothills of the mountains, their gentle slopes blanketed in waving yellow grass, and the odd coppice of friendly trees. Beyond that the great plain swept south, divided by the Great Road which had carried Cairn almost in a straight line from the lush farmlands, north and north still to the barren sweeps of moorland, where the grass was tough, and nothing grew higher than Cairn's thigh. As familiarity slipped from the landscape, Cairn had increasingly doubted his decision to travel north. But now, faced with the sheer height and rigid points of Merethlourdia, Cairn almost turned his horse back and headed for home. He did not belong here.




The gentle slopes of the foothills abruptly gave way to steeply rising mountainsides, their jagged peaks sharp against the thin blue sky. Many were mantled with trees which mirrored the angular shape of the mountains, their leaves mean and sharply pointed. The air was thinner, colder, and there was not enough sky.

“Cairn!” Ahead on the path far below, halfway to the foot of the formidable Falnarth Peak, his brother Jarrod waved and beckoned. “Hurry up, we want to make Ilith by dark.”




Reluctantly, Cairn urged Lotti down into the barren valley. It was all very well for sixteen-year-old Jarrod, three years older than Cairn, who was already used to working hard on the farm and handling horses daily. The way was difficult for a horse accustomed to flat, smooth roads, and she stumbled more than once. A weathered sign directed them off the road and onto a narrow track made of broken grey stones. The grass on either side of the path was wiry and pale, tougher than straw. The track turned an abrupt corner and began to lead up the steep side of one of the mountains.



“We’ll have to dismount,” Jarrod said, discouraged, after his horse almost lost its footing.

The trees began to close in about them until they were travelling along a dark avenue, stiff branches scraping the saddlebags, tall trunks soaring above to create the



sensation of a great chasm – but a whispering, living one. Cairn remembered stories told around the fire at home, of trees that had more life than usual, and could bend their branches to embrace a traveller, drawing him into a dark cavity of the trunk ...

Stories, Cairn told himself firmly, and anyway, they were in the wrong forest. Meretharnae, the great forest in the east, was where such tales originated. These curious trees with their needle-leaves would not be able to embrace anyone unnoticed.


“Are you sure we took the right way?” Cairn called forward after an hour of climbing, when the trees were now so thick about the path that they had to force the horses through, and Jarrod had twice drawn his hunting knife to hack vegetation out of the way.

“You saw the sign,” Jarrod grunted, slipping on the loose shingle and almost falling off the path.

Progress was slow, and darkness fell early with the trees close about. Soon the path became a pale shadow against the darker trees and the gloom.

“Do you think we should make camp?” Cairn suggested to Jarrod’s hunched and tense shoulders. Soon it would be too dark to gather wood for a fire.

Jarrod halted and his shoulders slumped. The journey had taken them three weeks, and in a few days, Jarrod would face the trip in reverse, alone. He had been longing




for a comfortable chair, and a warm bed under a solid roof.

A distant sound sent shivers down their spines. A wolf's lonely howl.


The nag's ears flicked back, and Cairn caught sight of a sliver of white as she rolled her eyes in fear.

After a pause, another howl sounded, nearer than the last one, and then suddenly the mountain around them seemed full of unearthly cries.

Jarrood's horse, a nervous gelding, reared and would have bolted had Jarrod not kept a tight grasp on the reins.




Without speaking the two boys plunged ahead on the path, fear driving them fast over the uneven stones. Cairn kept his hand on his horse's shoulders, whispering gentling words, but the whites of her eyes kept showing, and her ears were pressed flat back against her head.





The howling eased after a while, but still, at intervals, the wolves sounded from the forest around them. Cairn felt sure that the animals were getting closer, but in the growing darkness every sound was magnified, including the crunch of their feet on the path and their ragged breathing.

Without warning, the trees fell away, and they found themselves on the far side of the mountain. The path had followed a curve around its flank, and now dropped steeply down the side into a broad valley.



“Ilith!” Jarrod breathed with relief, pointing down to the cluster of buildings shielded by a grey stone wall, clinging to the side of the mountain about a third of the way down to the valley.

They picked their way down the steep path, and if it had not been for the sound of the wolves still baying among the trees, Cairn would have enjoyed the view. The low moon and the lingering glow of the Day-Star in the west cast a gloomy light over the valley. A river ran like a silver ribbon down the side of Falnarth Peak, disappearing for a time behind the thick walls of the town which stood solemn under the moonlight. The town of Ilith was mostly a cluster of low buildings, but at its highest point stood an imposing structure, a fort built of the same grey stone as the walls, looming high over the roofs of the town.



Emerging from the far side of the town, the river wound on down the slope into the valley, where the ground ran flat for some distance. Cairn thought he could make out fields and barns, though the shapes were hard to distinguish from the land around them. Beyond the fields, another steep mountainside rose, higher than the peak they had just circled. In fact, all around the valley Cairn could see the peaks of Merethlourdia, all purple and grey with distance and moonlight.

At last, their path joined a smooth, well-laid road,

and the boys felt free to mount once more. The horses needed no bidding and cantered towards the safety of the town's walls, even Cairn's tired old mare.

They were hailed by the watchmen, and once Cairn waved his admittance papers one of the great doors swung inwards and the boys rode into Ilith at last.

"You're playing a dangerous game," one of the watchmen said, slamming the door shut and dropping the beam across.

"Southerners." The other, still in his lofty position in the tower, dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

"You're lucky the wolves didn't give chase," the first one said.

"We thought to reach the town before dark," Jarrod defended himself. Cairn was too exhausted and relieved to bother arguing.


"What possessed you to take the pass?" the watchman asked. "We saw you coming down. Did you get lost?"

"We followed a signpost," Jarrod shrugged.

"I thought Timms was ordered to take that down," the one in the tower exclaimed. "Useless!"

"Never mind now." The other was taking a closer look at Cairn's papers. "I take it you've not been here before. Take this road here, it winds a bit, but it'll take you straight to the fortress."


"Thank you."



Cairn felt drained, too weary even to pull himself back onto his horse. But Jarrod was already up and making his way through the houses, so Cairn somehow managed to clamber up, and urged the weary Lotti after his brother.


The houses and shops were all closed against the night, but the glow of lamp and firelight spilled out between cracks in the shutters and under doors, and often the boys caught the sound of laughter or music from within doors. Though the surroundings were bleak and hostile, the town had a friendly air; the dogs that came up to sniff them neither barked nor snapped, and the streets were clean and swept of debris and straw.

The road led to a large square, edged by houses and one wall of the fort.



Cairn's nerves, which had fled with the first wolf's cry, returned like a fist clenching around his stomach. He barely noticed as Jarrod gained entrance from the watchman through the large doors, under a stone archway, and into a spacious courtyard beyond. It was too large for a courtyard, Cairn realised – the walls of the fortress's grounds, fronted by a paved pathway, ran along either side of a grassy space that must have been four hundred paces wide. Cairn followed Jarrod silently along the path to their left, guiding his horse as he stared at his new home.

The imposing building stood opposite the gate house



at a distance of six hundred paces. The stone walls rose three storeys high, with a fortified tower at each end rising a further two storeys. It had been built fifty years before, when the northern tribes were still warring and disputing King Elior's rule. Now that the north was peaceful, riders in training, like Cairn, were sent here for their middle years of preparation.

Cairn was too young to remember the King's original decree, that any who loved Callenlas might train and serve as rider or reif – no longer just the nobility – but since he had been old enough to understand he had wanted to become a rider. He had watched King Elior's riders passing through their town, sometimes even riding through their farm on their quests and journeys. He had cheered and waved the King home from campaigns in the South and diplomatic visits around Callenlas. Ilfrig, their local reif, had regularly spent time in his home, and entertained Cairn and his siblings with stories of the exploits of King Elior and his riders.

Life on the farm had seemed small and dull in comparison with the thrill of riding throughout Callenlas in a rider's cloak, defending the land from raiders and uprisings, supporting the reifs and governors in upholding Elior's law. But Cairn had not dared to say as much to his father, when he finally worked up the courage to express his longing, one late summer evening after the hay had

been brought in. Cairn was nursing blisters and weary limbs, and the idea of being a rider instead of a farmer was bright like a new coin in his mind.

“It’s not that simple, lad,” Father had sighed, after a long pause, after Cairn had expressed his heart’s desire with the glowing eyes of a nine-year-old.

“Why not?” Cairn’s heart had melted like ore in the furnace. “The King said ...”

“Aye, the King said any may come, but not all have the wherewithal to furnish a rider’s person.”

“The King provides board,” Cairn had replied. “All I’d need is – ”

“ – *All* you’d need, lad, is clothes, and good shoes, and a horse, and armour, and a sword, and no doubt books and pen and ink. How are we going to afford all that, dear boy?”

“I could work.” Cairn’s voice was weak with disappointment.

“You *have* to work. I can’t pay you like a hired labourer; what’s the point of having a son if you have to pay him?” Cairn’s father had laughed and ruffled his son’s hair. “Come, now; this is a good life you have – a safe home, a family that loves you. Someday, a wife and children, and land of your own. You don’t need to go riding off to war and glory.”

The stone and wood walls of the little farm house