

Ælfon BOOK 1

# LOOK TO THE HEAVENS

CARTER NORMAN  
PHILLIPS

*Look to the Heavens* by Carter Norman Phillips

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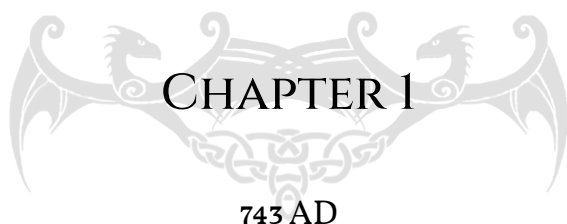
Map by Carter Norman Phillips

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# CHAPTER 1

743 AD

Wyth's sharp eyes scanned the room, taking in the flickering candlelight that cast dancing shadows on the weathered walls. The tavern echoed with a mix of laughter and hushed conversations, and the air was thick with the scent of ale and the smoky aroma of roasted mutton. Worn wooden tables piled high with empty tankards and half-eaten meals surrounded them, and Wyth waited to see a red tunic amidst the sailors and blue garbed soldiers that took their fill. Was he the only one?

The tavern owner served them with stern indifference, and Wyth couldn't help but notice the disdain in the surrounding faces. Efrog voraciously dug into his meal, not seeming to catch the atmosphere of the room, but Wyth felt like there were a thousand men breathing down his neck. The smell in the room was becoming unbearable, as was the only half intelligible speech of the Saxones that filled the space. He realized he was clenching the table with his hands and knew they shouldn't have come in here. Hungry or not he should've known to keep away.

"Come on, it ain't that bad!" Efrog said between bites. "They hardly even notice us."

"You're not the one wearing red," Wyth said, brushing his untamed brown locks away from his face.

"I'm not responsible for your choice of a tunic. They don't like us here, anyway. A little color doesn't change that."

"You see anyone else in red?"

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Efrog glanced around, wearing a grin. “Nope.”

“That’s because ever since the war, the Eadburgans don’t wear it. Especially not here.”

“Well, shouldn’t matter since we’ll be gone before sunset.”

“If you ever finish eating.”

“I havn’t had five minutes and you wanna be going!”

At Efrog’s exclamation, several men turned around, and a couple of soldiers in a corner exchanged words with the tavern master. Wyth watched them, pointing.

“They’re gonna kick us out,” Wyth said, as the owner headed their way.

“For what?”

“For being Eifionon, you fiend! Let’s just go get our cargo unloaded. I don’t want to be late getting back.”

“Just blame it on your left-handedness,” Efrog responded. “With a name like Wyth, you ought to be able to get away with some tardiness.”

“It’s not my real name. How would you feel if yours meant something of no worth?”

“It doesn’t mean no worth, it means you’re lefthanded.”

“It’s pretty much the same thing. You know how people think. They would say I am cursed from birth.”

“Well, if you are, I’m a three-toed leprechaun.”

The owner interrupted them and Wyth saw several soldiers standing behind him.

“You’re interrupting our customers,” he said in Saxone.

“What’s he saying?” Efrog asked.

“I said to get out,” the tavern master said, this time in Cumbric.

Wyth stood, glaring up at the man. “Whatever you say, Saxone swine.”

The tavern owner must not’ve caught the last words, but his face betrayed he knew it was an insult. He grabbed Wyth by the tunic and Efrog jumped to his side, towering over the man but probably half his weight. The soldiers grabbed

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him and Wyth lost sight of him as the whole place turned into a rabble. Men were yelling in his ear, and rough hands lifted him off his feet. He felt himself being carried across the room, laughter filling the air as cups of ale were splashed in his face. The beverage stung his nostrils, and he lashed out, trying to hit the surrounding men. He saw light ahead of him and felt himself being thrown through the doorway of the establishment. He felt the icy rain coming down on his face. Saw the dim grey sky above. And then he landed. One grand mud splatter. He picked himself up and had to dodge a flying Efrog as his friend came out afterward.

The men laughed at them and slammed the beastly oak door in their faces as Wyth tried wiping the grime and clay from his pants. The drink in his hair made every curl stick to his neck and forehead. At least the rain would wash it off.

“I suppose you were right, least we got a soft landing,” Efrog said, looking down with a grin.

Wyth shook his head. “Go back to the ship and start unloading. I have to go to the merchants’ guild and let them know we brought it.”

“Can’t sail in this weather.”

“Well I’m not staying here.”

Wyth started out towards the fort, which stood at the edge of the village. Dark timber palisades on stone foundations separated it from the thatched cottages and fishing huts that made up the town of Farfest. Beyond its walls stood the tangled and overgrown forest walls that only gave way to a narrow road. The gates were open and unguarded.

Wyth walked inside and saw the walls formed a ring around a center tower that was built of stone, and stood like a shadow against the rainy sky. Wyth shivered and rubbed his icy fingers together as he approached it. A banner hung limply on the thatched roof, displaying a white boar’s head stitched into a blue that was almost black in its rain-soaked state. The windows of the tower were mere slits and if the stories were true, great evil had taken place here.

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Wyth pounded on the large door of the tower, aware of how Eifionon the stonework was. Or at least used to be.

A fair-haired guard opened the door and frowned at him.

“What do you want, boy?”

“I have business with the guild.”

The guard let him in, and Wyth quickly found his way to a blazing hearth, where he wrung out the water from his clothes. The warmth of the fire eased his nervousness. He still felt charged after the incident at the tavern. The guard left him and he found himself alone in a round hall. Long lantern-lit tables filled the space and woven tapestries hung on every wall. He smelled fresh bread and, remembering his soiled meal at the tavern, made his way to the farthest table. It was piled with baked goods. Breads, and cheeses, walnuts and pears. Everything he could imagine! Seeing no one in the room, he took a chunk of cheese. It was tangy and sweet in his mouth. Soft and chewable. Unlike anything he’d ever had.

He heard a noise and dropped the cheese. Glancing toward the sound, he bent to pick it up and saw a large parchment on the floor. It was a map of the western Isles with Svegför marked on the right side. Little arrows pointed towards the island, coming from Sanvard and Farfest. Wyth frowned and turned it over. It had numbers and letters scrawled across it with a large seal at the top. What did it mean? He heard footsteps above him and shoved the parchment into his tunic without thinking. He was back at the hearth when a man entered. Tall and lean, he had a long beard that hung halfway down his chest. He wore a silky blue tunic and boots of leather.

“Cadifor, is it not?” He said, approaching Wyth. The words came out condescending yet musical.

“Nay, my lord, I am but his agent, Arlen ap Colwen.”

“It’s all the same to me. Thirty bushels of barley for twenty-five schillings.”

“I was told it would be more.”

“Your master told you wrong.”

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Wyth took the pouch of coins from the man, noticing he didn't come closer than he had to. The man seemed to study Wyth. He wondered if the parchment bulged beneath his tunic. He realized he was fidgeting with the pouch and stopped, his fingers sweaty.

"Do you have any further business here?"

"No. Thank you for your kindness, my lord." Wyth walked away. He felt like the man's eyes were burning through the back of his head. His stomach went rock hard as he heard a chair move, and he glanced back to see the man searching the tables. The parchment! The man's eyes met his and Wyth bolted for the door, his heart racing. The man shouted something in Saxone, and he heard footsteps behind him. He flew across the courtyard, each step bringing him closer to the open gate.

A guard appeared out of nowhere beside the gate and shouted for him to stop. Wyth ignored him and reached the gateposts just before him. He sprang out into the village and ran towards the sea. Something cold slid along the side of his neck and he screamed as a spear shaft flew past his head. A stinging pain shot through his neck and he felt blood. They were trying to kill him! He glanced back and saw soldiers in blue filling the streets. The weight of the parchment pressed against his chest, as the village blurred around him, and the pain in his neck intensified. Fear gripped him, causing his breath to come in ragged gasps.

The masts in the harbor appeared ahead of him and he tried to make his legs go faster. His only chance was to get to Efrog and loose the ship before his attackers caught up with them. He could smell the salt in the air and forced himself to keep going. Why was he always the one getting into trouble?

He saw Efrog ahead of him, sitting on the side of the ship, munching on a piece of bread.

"Loose the ship and push off!" Wyth yelled.

Efrog's eyes widened in terror, and he began cutting the ropes. Wyth looked behind him and understood Efrog's fright. It appeared the entire village was behind them. Sailors, soldiers, the tavern master, they were all in pursuit.

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Wyth reached the ship just as Efrog cut the last rope. He pushed with all his might against the fir planks and then leapt into the ship just as the mob stormed onto the dock. Wyth grabbed a long pole from the deck and pushed against the wharf with it. The ship glided into the water and he dropped the pole. He slid behind the plank rail as the soldiers hurled spears at them. Several sailors dove into the water to swim after them and Wyth yelled at Efrog to bring him the harpoons. He took one and went back to the stern. The men were less than fifteen feet away. His hand shook as he pulled back for a throw. He aimed for one of the men but his hand clenched around the shaft and he couldn't make himself throw. What would his father say? The distance increased between him and the sailors in the water. They were trying to kill him after all.

"Help me get the sail up!" Efrog's words interrupted him.

He dropped the harpoon, legs trembling, as he went to Efrog's side and took hold of the windlass. His muscles burned as they raised the spar, yet each turn of the windlass increased the ship's speed. Looking behind him, he saw the men on shore preparing another boat. The stormy wind caught the wool sail, lurching the ship to the side. Wyth tied the rope down and went back to the steerboard. The sailors must have given up and were swimming back to shore, but the soldiers had the sail up in their boat and were putting oars into the water.

"Do they hate red that much?" Efrog yelled in his ear.

"It's not the red idiot! I stole something from them."

"Why would you do that? Even I'm not that dumb."

"I didn't mean to. It just happened."

"So whatever you took magically appeared in your hands?"

"No, of course not, you fiend!"

Wyth pulled the rough hewn steerboard in, turning the ship to the east. The sky was growing dark, and the clouds hid the sunset from view. The ship behind them didn't get any closer, but stayed right behind them as the tangled tree-filled shore disappeared from sight. Wyth looked back, the stone tower calling to him. Its dark windows seemed to watch his every move, peering through his soul,

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accusing him. Efrog was right. Why had he taken the parchment? Why had he taken the cheese? Were they not to differ from the Eadburgans? His father always said the Eifionons had the true light, the light of righteousness and truth. They didn't bow to idols of stone and wood, as the Saxones. *At least they can see their gods.* Efrog came up and sat down beside him.

"I take back what I said earlier."

Wyth gave him a questioning look.

"I mean, maybe ya are cursed." Wyth noticed the grin on Efrog's face and glanced back at the ship behind them. The Saxones seemed to be changing course.

"I bet your father will like the new scar." Wyth felt the scabbed line on his neck. He supposed he should be thankful he was alive.

"Hold the steerboard," He said to Efrog and let the younger lad take the helm. He took out the parchment and laid it on the deck. It was smaller than he remembered.

"They chased us for that?"

"Aye," Wyth replied, turning it over and looking at the map.

All the arrows converged on Llagorn. *Eddwen!*

"You risked your life for a map?"

"Can you not be quiet?" Wyth examined the ledgers on the back of the map. Twenty bushels of barley to be delivered to the army at Beorgford. Ship's ready to depart a week before Pasg. *Pasg!* That was an Eifionon feast. Why would the Eadburgans need to schedule their fleet departure off of the Eifionon's calendar? Wyth looked at the numbers again. Five ships to depart, Aelfear of Aramoor to lead the expedition. These were war plans! Wyth's hands trembled as he tightly clutched the parchment. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and the weight of the realization pressed down on him, causing his stomach to churn and twist into knots. The ship seemed to spin, and a wave of nausea washed over him. Every breath felt labored, as if the air had suddenly turned thick and suffocating.

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His mind raced, trying to piece together the implications of what he had stumbled upon. His eyes darted back and forth across the words on the parchment, each line further confirming his fears. Llagorn, Eddwen lived in Llagorn and Pasg was only a fortnight away.

“Well, what does it mean?” Efrog’s voice, happy as always, seemed to mock him.

Wyth’s voice caught in his throat as he tried to speak, his tongue feeling heavy and uncooperative. Fear mingled with anger, created a whirlpool of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. How dare the Saxones break the treaty! Thirty years of hard fought peace, and it meant nothing.

“It mean’s war, Efrog.”

“I thought you said the betrayal at Farfest ended it?”

“Are you not listening to a word I’m saying? The Eadburgans aren’t content with the western Isles. They never have been.”

Efrog shrugged. “Shouldn’t affect us too much. Suppose it just means the Chieftains will be donning their armor again.”

“If they get the chance.” Wyth looked up at the stormy heavens above them. The dark clouds seemed to reflect his mind; the turmoil, the longing. Fog rolled in from the west and hid the shore from view. They were alone, no sun, no stars. Nothing to guide them. It was going to be a long trip back to Alryne.



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