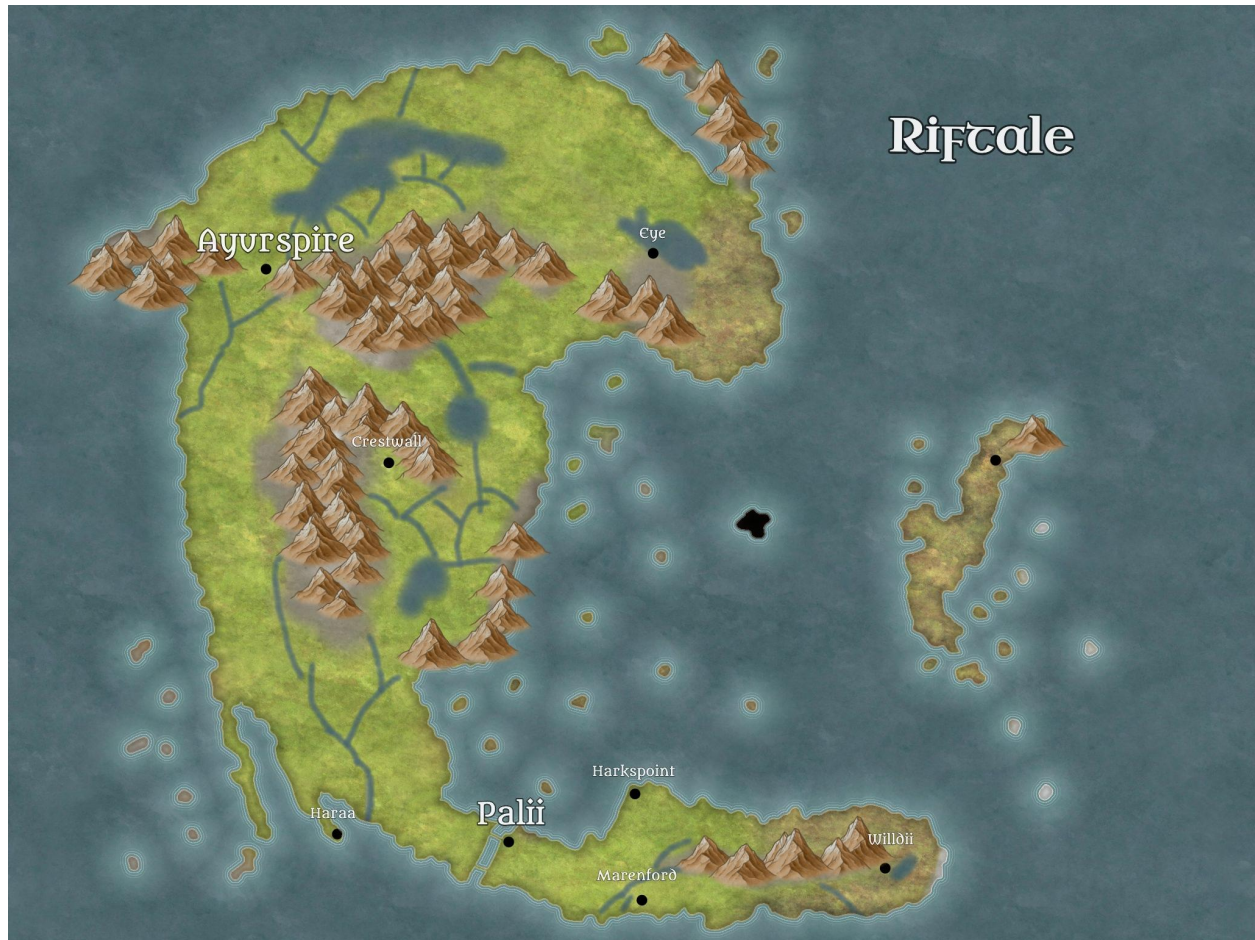


Map of Riftale:



Part 1: Wings

A huntress does not stalk to feed herself. Always, there are others. Kith and kin to defend and feed. A pack to serve. It is a burden not easily shouldered. Thankfully, Sera did not need to bear it alone.

“There it is again,” Ruka murmured, his voice low and weary as he motioned towards the bounty board. Sera followed his gaze, and noted the poster immediately. There wasn’t much to make it stand out, really. Boards like this one were synonymous with civilization, present in every inn, tavern, waystop, and hostel on Riftale. Many were directly sanctioned by the powers that be, marked by the metallic wax of the Pale Crown, notating that able and ambitious citizens of the empire would be paid well by their town’s Silver Brand for taking the initiative and going where their civil watch could not. The Conventicle to the north, as they usually were, took an academic bend to their bounties, posting them in scroll-cubbies rather than on boards. It did, perhaps, help that the northern reaches were still far more wild than the Riftlands or the imperial south. Still, even on the borders of the Pale capital of Palii, there were boards to be found,

bounties to be hunted. Most were mundane, seeking bandits and reminding citizens to watch for signs of rogue Arcane, but wild lycanthroids and other beasts were not unheard of. Even drakes, the smaller cousins of wyrms and dreaded dragons, could find their way here, pushed from island sanctuaries or mountain homes by larger, older foes.

Sera's blue eyes narrowed, glancing over the human script. A fast moving blur in the evening sky, the ruin of a fine carriage, dark, ashen wings. It fit the description of a drake perfectly. Though unusual, the creatures were not rare. She had taken them down before, on numerous occasions, as she learned her new trade just after leaving home to find her brother. Before meeting Ruka, or the Order. But still, there was something wrong about this poster. It set her ears twitching, one hand rising to scratch along the tattoos that swirled over her shaved scalp. She almost reached for her antlers...before remembering that would ruin the purpose of trying to hide them in the first place. Damned stuffy empire.

She and Ruka had enough problems as it was. Sera could feel the eyes on their backs, and reaching out with her mind, she sampled the trailing edges of hostility and suspicion. All without reason, of course...but there didn't need to be one. Even though they were raised outside of the fog-shrouded western isles, elves and half-elves were not exactly beloved. Especially elves like *them*. Who refused to be domestic, tame, docile, and subservient to every human that crossed their path. Who wore their ink proudly. Sera smiled to herself at that thought, shoulders rolling. The maroon tattoos that swirled across her body rolled with the motion, coiling over her lithe musculature. Beside her, Ruka caught the motion and gave a slight chuckle, thick dreadlocks swaying as he shook his head. The older, taller man was a full-blooded elf, marked by the light green tinge to his skin, and the amethyst cast to his eyes. She was only half-blooded, her skin as fair as any human's, but Ruka was still family. He was among the first that she had met in the Order. Alongside a few others, he had guided her, trained her, helped Sera to grow and push the boundaries of her power.

The Order. It had sent them from Harkspoint...to look for something exactly like this. Bounties for a black drake, that left its prey burned to ash behind it. There had been a nearly identical bounty posted in Wildii, of a drake that had swept down on a noble dynasty's yacht, and turned everyone on the foredeck to cinders. And another, at Crestwall...and even farther to the north, in Conventicle land, at Ayvurspire. Thousands upon thousands of miles. No drake could fly that far in the space of a few weeks. This was something else.

"We need to take this to the order," she stated, looking up at Ruka with shining blue eyes. The older man nodded after a moment, pulling the silver stamped bounty down, shooting a glance back over his shoulder as he did. Sera gave him a brilliant smile, turning back around to face the tavern's bar as he rolled the poster up and shoved it down a pocket in his heavy jacket. He wore it over a heavy shirt of spellwrought chain, tucked into a pair of dark, steel-splinted trousers and boots. Flexible armor, more comfortable than full chain and segmented plate, but heavy. Sera preferred her hunting leathers, relying on her own agility to keep her out of trouble. And if that failed...

To the young huntresses's view, multicolored myst flowed over Ruka's shoulder, and wafted down in glimmering bands from her own scalp. Illusion magick, masking the greatblade scabbarded over her friend's back, and the small antlers that jutted from Sera's own scalp, alongside a few other things. To the

bystanders in the bar, mundane farmers, hunters, city workers, the mysted objects were simply invisible, intangible. Even Ruka, according to what he had told her, only had the faintest perception of his blade's weight upon his back, a hint of wispy myst in the corner of his vision. Sera saw the myst everywhere; where there was life, there was myst, a chromatic fog that pulsed with a distant, untamed Arcane power. She drew upon it to sense the emotions of those around her, beyond her, to detect life - or its converse- wherever it was. With a little bit of focus, she could concentrate it, manipulate it to fog an object, or a person, form an image...and accomplish a fair few other tricks. Myst travel was still new to her...as were more physical forms of mysting. Telekinesis, in what form she could accomplish it, was still a work in progress. Right now, focusing solely on the small illusory clouds, Sera could hold her myst for hours. Days.

She was not much one for academic understanding. Books put her to sleep faster than a fist to the jaw, and the Order's ceaseless lectures invariably ended with her staring out a window, longing for her next spar, or toying with the myst. Sera had gotten into no small amount of trouble when she learned that she could myst her teacher's clothing right off of their body...or leave a myst image of herself at her desk while she stepped through the myst, right out of the lecture. What she did understand was that Wild magick, as the myst was called, was fairly limited. The same could be said for Divine magick, pulled through the power invested by Gods and Devils. At least, they were limited when compared to Arcane magick. Sera had been quite disappointed when she learned that she would never throw a fireball, or unleash a blizzard from the palm of her hand.

But, it was the Wild magick of the elves, granted to so very few, that had cracked the world. The Arcane had only helped usher things along in the chaos that followed.

There was a reason that elves were not trusted in the empire, even years after the Rifting. There was also a reason that *any magic*, not practiced under the band of the Central Arcanon and its religious sects was forbidden, hunted. Magic like Ruka's, and Sera's, and so many others in the Order. Which was why her myst was so important. It kept the searching eyes away.

Not like they were doing anything *wrong*. If anything, the Arcanon should have been thanking the order, and every man in the tavern buying Ru and Sera a round. *Especially* after what they had just done for the nobles back in Harkspoint. If she and Ruka hadn't been there, on the Order's...well, orders, half of the men in the tavern might have been dead, or conscripted in a new war. But nooo, they were sworn to utmost secrecy...which meant that they would be buying their own drinks for the foreseeable future. Not that Ruka drank much anyway; she was pretty sure that he'd rather die of thirst than touch a drop of anything but water. Which wasn't even an *elf* thing. She would know, after all.

Her ears twitched at the thought, and Sera gave a low, little sigh. At least the tavern was cozy. A short, squat building on a crossroads outside of Palii, it was packed to the brim with workers and travelers, platinum legionaries on their leave and throngs of road-stained adventurers. They crowded boisterously around their tables, mugs of spiced port and froth-headed goldale flowing, dextrous barmaids flitting through their midst, picking tips and dodging grasping hands with practiced cunning.

“You get your drinks, then; Tali should be by soon, with our full assignment. No way the Three don’t already know that *something* isn’t right with this drake,” Ruka replied, a scowl hiding in his eyes as he looked over the at bar, and the hostile glares levelled their way. “If one of them tries-...”

“I’ll kick his ass,” Sera shot back easily, still smiling wide. “And buy the rest of them a drink. Not *that* hard to make friends, Ru.” At that, she looked to the bar, and gave the glowering men a glowing grin, waving exuberantly. It took a great deal of effort for the half-elf not to bust out laughing feeling the pulse of confusion from the group of men. Docile elves and bitter elves, they could deal with. Friendly elves? Friendly elves that looked like *her*? The only one that didn’t seem utterly baffled was one barmaid sweeping through the crowded tavern floor with a tray brimming with goldale. Sera caught her eye for just a moment, blue-eyed gaze shining...and caught the barest hint of a wink.

Thank all the gods and devils that be for Myst. And tight cut dresses, the huntress thought with a coy smile, ears twitching as she crossed towards the bar.

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A good thief is only ever in business for themselves. Things are easier, that way. Simpler. But, the best thieves know that there are some jobs that are impossible to pull off alone...and it always helps to have something that you’re stealing *for*:

Morgan stepped silently along Palii’s cleftward wall, his gaze towards the west. Beyond the battlements in front of him, a gaping pit yawned, a breath-stealing drop of thousands of feet. The cleft that bisected the city of Palii had been cut by one of the old empires, thousands of years before the elves had rifted the continent. The cleft cut all the way through the southern “tail” of Riftale, from the white beaches to the northeast of Palii all the way west to the rocky cliffs that bordered the western sea. The cleft was the most important maritime artery on the continent, a canal through which millions of ships passed every year, carrying the rich goods of the Riftsea isles to Haraa and Marenford, and from there to the continents of the west. There was a reason why the Pale crown had chosen to make Palii it’s capital, after the old empire fell during the Rifting. The standard, historical assumption was that Palii was strong, defensible, insulated from the chaos sown by legions of rogue and mad mages.

Morgan knew it was simpler than that. The reason was passing through the cleft, as massive trade barges cut through the canal’s dark waters below. It was the bribe that he had paid a Silver Brand lieutenant for a list of patrol times, along the cleftward wall. The gold and platinum that filled the coffers of the Dynasty nobles that could manage to get a cut of the Pale Crown’s taxes, through graft and espionage and cut-throat politicking. It was the same reason that had brought him here, really. Palii was the capital, because Palii was rich. The richest city in the world. And everyone wanted a cut of the coin.

The thief leaned casually against the battlements, scratching at his dark, short-cut beard with one hand while the other patted his wyrmhide jacket down, ensuring that his handbolts were still folded and fixed firmly to the harness beneath. Wyrmhide was expensive, but he had learned that good tools were worth their price. Bending a pick inside of a lock because you’d skimmed a piece of silver was *not* a good feeling, and thieving in your skivvies was harder than it seemed. Dark brown wyrmhide absorbed light

better than any material he knew, staved off heat in the summer and insulated against the cold of winter, and could catch a bolt or a dagger's blade, if one angled their body right. It had saved Morgan's sorry skin on more than one occasion...that, and it looked damn good.

Satisfied with his pat-down, Morgan gave a short glance to his iron timepiece, one ear turned to the northern approach. He heard footsteps just as the short hand ticked over midnight, and caught the outlines of fluttering tabards approaching along the wall, a bobbing torch held aloft in one hand. The thief gave a grin, and reached into one pocket, slowly withdrawing the poster that he'd ripped down from the bounty board in the tavern in which he'd been staying. Of course, he didn't actually *recognize* the two that stepped up to him, one short and one enormously tall, but he hadn't expected to anyway.

"What're ye doin' up here?" the first grunted out with a voice like tarred leather, a gnarled hand reaching to their swordbelt. They wore the garb of a Silver Brand captain, a veteran of the city watch, with the scars and the potbelly to prove it. Lovely. "State yeh business!"

"The password is *'Mirestep'*," Morgan responded in turn, dark eyes rolling. "And I *know* it's you, Lady Vasano. You can disguise your face and hide your voice, but you can't make Strong even a half-fuckin' inch shorter? Real impressive magic you're working with, there."

The figure paused where it was, head cocking. Then, it gave a long, exasperated sigh. As it did, the potbelly, beard, the torch, and the tabard-sheeted mail of the Silver Brand melted away like fog burning under daylight, a similar illusion falling from the taller, silent figure. Arcane illusions; impressive work, as always, but Morgan wasn't going to work overtime humoring the ego of mages.

"I know that fooling you isn't easy, darling, but you can't fault a woman for trying," Lucine Vasano stated in reply, raising one hand. Rather than the torch that she had seemed to be holding before, her palm was filled with glowing, flickering light, like the hearth of a fire held in her hand. It illuminated the face of perhaps the most beautiful woman that Morgan had ever seen. High, sculpted cheekbones were crowned by a pair of emerald eyes and framed by flowing, crimson hair. He believed that the Lady Vasano must have had some amount of elven blood...or, she was simply practiced at keeping up her illusions. "You *are* sure that you aren't pulling at the Arcane?"

"Don't need it. My line of work, you learn to pay attention to the details," Morgan replied, a smirk sliding over his face.

"Well, whatever you say. Those eyes of yours have served the 10th quite well, mundane or not. But, it *is* curious for your daughter to have her talents..."

"Not about her," Morgan cut in gruffly, eyes narrowing a tad. He wasn't comfortable with the fact that his employers knew about his daughter, and her Arcane blood...or that they knew her mother was a High Captain in the Brand. That sort of secret was valuable...and as much as Lucine's discretion was legendary, he knew she had a price. It was just part of the business.

“You’ve found more reports? A trail?” questioned the hulking presence at her side, Strong’s voice rumbling low, with an unquestionably aristocratic tilt. Morgan nodded in response, holding out the poster.

A black drake. A Silver Brand claimed to have seen it fly past the western wall, several days before, as night was falling. When morning came, one of their patrols found the remains of a horseman outside the wall, mostly turned to ash.

“Same as the others, thousands of miles apart,” he stated flatly, eyes narrowing. “But, you knew that already. What’s more interesting are the people it’s been burning. Rich merchants in their yacht, off of Haraa. A caravan from Marenford to Crestwall. And that nasty shit that went down in Harkspoint...this thing isn’t a normal drake, taking farmers and village cattle. It’s *hunting* people. Hunting nobles. Dynasty nobles.”

Morgan noted the nearly imperceptible shift in Lucine’s expression, and surmised that she was thinking just the same. There were nine Noble Dynasties under the Pale Crown, just as there were nine Holy Sects within the Arcanon. Nine massive, sparling families and their coteries of supporters. They worked alongside each other, private armies laboring in conjunction with the Crown’s Platinum legions to bring peace to the continent, with varying degrees of success. But, more than that, they vied against each other in their great games of intrigue, striving for power, wealth, position. It was a cutthroat dance, often pulling independent kingdoms and isles from the Riftlands into the mix. War was brewing on the horizon because of the empire’s dynastic struggles, burning hot enough to rouse the ire of the Conventical to the north.

Of course, there was also the 10th Dynasty. Whispered of in dark alleys, dank piers, and crowded barracks. Morgan’s employers, with Lucine at their head. A vast network of spies, thieves, and mercenaries that supported and vied alongside the nobles in their sport. The Crown’s worst kept secret.

And now someone was hunting their clientele. The Crown’s nobility... certainly the most dangerous game on Riftale. Whatever could do that was no mundane drake.

“Walk with me, darling,” Lucine murmured after a few moments of silence. “There is...much to discuss.”

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“Identical to the last four,” Tali noted clinically, golden eyes scanning the wax-sealed poster.

“Yep!” Sera replied brightly, signalling the barmaid for another mug of ale with a toothy smile.

“And, it matches the description of the thing you sighted in Harkspoint. The one that stirred that flock of-”

“Yes,” Ruka cut in abruptly, his expression souring. “Just...don’t talk about Harkspoint.”

That earned him a raised brow from Sera’s former master, violet lips twitching quizzically. Sera couldn’t help but laugh, shaking her head.

“Y’know, you *think* he’d be happier about it, considering that both of the Harken dynasty’s twins were practically *drooling* over him, but no. All he can think about are *all* the birds-”

“Sera, no,” the older elf choked out, his voice strangled. Ruka was terribly brave, often past the point of personal peril. She’d seen him ready to die, to save the life of even one single stranger. But, throw something with *feathers* his way, and...well.

Sera gave him a mischievous look, patting the back of his head before turning back to Tali and nodding. “Everything matches. The pattern of movement, the targets that the thing is choosing. *Not a drake.*”

“No. Not a drake,” Tali agreed, one hand rising to scratch at her own horns. Unlike Sera, Tali needed to hide nothing. Not her violet skin, or her golden, pupilless eyes, nor the soft horns that hung from her temples. She was of draconic blood; an old, long diluted line, but their features bred true centuries after the vast majority of the old draconids were gone. “I don’t know. This is nothing that the Order has seen before...and something that we must stop. Soon. The nobles that it is removing are carefully chosen. We might only be seeing a few of those that it is taking. A very small number, perhaps. It is sowing chaos. Trying to...”

“Make them fight? Pull the dynasties into civil war?” Sera questioned, brow furrowing. In a moment, her mood seemed to sour. “That’s what it seemed like in Harkspoint. The Harkens are supposed to be...well, actually *noble*, right? Good, honorable. But even their soldiers. They thought that the flock of-....uh, the *trouble* was all because of the Marens. They nearly murdered the Maren prince when he responded to their summons.”

“Chaos,” Ruka murmured, his expression darkening. Tali grimaced at the word, and Sera’s smile dimmed. Chaos was antithesis to what bound them together. The Order. It had been founded to protect Riftale from the worst of chaos, to insulate the continent from the threats that lay without. Sera knew well that the existence of Gods and Devils was not to be denied...and though they were worshipped, their wills could be capricious, destructive. Even more dangerous were the things separate from devilish and divine. Demons, what the elves called *Askan*, and things that lay beyond them. Unknowable, unimaginable things...that the Order had been fighting for centuries.

“Chaos. Whatever is doing this benefits from it,” Tali stated in agreement. “It is powerful Intelligent...and fast enough to cross the continent in impressive time. But what?” she questioned, looking up. Sera met her former master’s gaze, searching. Tali and Ruka were some of the wisest people that she knew, and fantastic warriors aside. They had taught her. Guided her. Nurtured her understanding of her magick...and encouraged her own, natural instincts.

Those instincts thought they knew the answer.

“A dragon,” Sera stated after a moment, nodding confidently to herself. “A full-blooded one...and an old one.”

Tali shook her head, full lips pursing in thought. “No. The Order tracks almost every chromatic dragon on Riftale. If one was being this aggressive, we would know of it.”

“And where would it hide? We’ve seen reports of something the size of a drake, far, far smaller than a dragon. It doesn’t fit, Sera,” Ruka added as well, running a hand through his dreads. Sera resisted the urge to roll her eyes, pointing once again at the poster.

“Crestwall is what, like *fifteen hundred* miles from Haraa? Which is *eight hundred* miles from Harkspoint, and then another *four hundred* miles to reach here? What else can move that fast, that far? What else could hunt the prey it’s hunting?” Sera questioned, rapping her knuckles against the table. “Dragons are shapeshifters. They can change their size, pretend to be a human, an elf, whatever suits their pride. That’s how it stalks its prey, chooses its moment. The only thing we need to find out is who it targets next.”

Tali blinked in response, cocking her head to the side. Then, slowly, she nodded. “You might be right, Sera. A rogue dragon...I’ll need to consult our archives, report to the Three. In the meantime...it’s in the vicinity of Palii. That means that the best place to find it...”

“...will be where it’s prey is,” Sera finished, nodding slowly.

“I don’t like where you to are going with this,” Ruka cut in, brow furrowing. “We just spent *weeks* working with the Harkens. That’s more open exposure to the nobility than the Order has had for a century.”

“Which means you already have their favor,” Tali stated sweetly, brushing one hand down her violet horns. “Where the nobles are, this beast will hunt...and we are drawing close to the Riftide masque.”

“A party?” Sera questioned, one brow rising.

“The party,” Tali responded, smiling wide. “And, if what you said is true...Ruka might have already earned you your invitations in. All you need to do is meet with the twins. I’m sure they’d be honored to break protocol, get their friends and helpers a taste of the high life.”

“...and where are you gonna be during all this?” Ruka groaned, folding his face in his hands.

“Why, contacting the Three!” Tali responded with a grin. “And getting Sera a dress. Unfortunately, the hunting leathers won’t quite cut it...”