

THRISTAS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Before I wrote *Lisen of Solsta*, I wrote an earlier version where most everything that happens in *Fractured* and *Tainted* occurred but in a different order and under different circumstances. In that telling of the story, Lisen (who was called Ann then) didn't go to Thristas until *after* she'd become Empir. Instead, out of curiosity, she sent Korin to Thristas to observe and return with a report.

I never wrote the report down back then. I had a vague understanding of what it contained but never required it in the story telling. However, when confronted with the desire to make Thristas real, I decided to compose that report for my own use in preparation for writing what is now *Tainted*. Thus, what follows is that report as it might have been had Korin accepted the assignment to study Thristas on his Empir's behalf.

**AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THRISTAN LIFE
PRESENTED TO EMPIR ARIANNAS ILAZER
IN THE FIFTH YEAR OF HER REIGN
by Captain Korin Rosarel**

Located within only a few horizontal miles east of Garla, divided from its parent state by the Rim, a long, mostly impassable range of mountains, Thristas cannot be further from Garla in its atmosphere, its people, and the manner in which those people persist despite what Garlans perceive as ferocious elements. Thristans have, of necessity, adopted a lifestyle which makes it possible for them to live together within the close environment of a mesa, to avoid the heat of the day as much as possible and to survive on the meager supply of sustenance available.

How they got here, how they survive here, what they do here day to day—all of these questions have rarely been asked by anyone in Garla and never by an Empir. Garla's residents are aware of Thristas, but they close their eyes to the reality of an entire other world in existence just over the mountains. The people of Thristas know they barely exist in the minds of Garlans, and they grow weary of the ignorance of their westward neighbors. Few Garlans know how people ended up in Thristas; even fewer care. Thristas is a little itch on the arm that is the "greatness" of Garla.

It is foolish for Garlans to be so cavalier about a larger-than-they-think population of strong and willful people. One day a charismatic leader will rise up and guide the Thristans to a violent fight for their independence, either by pulling away from Garla entirely or by overcoming an unprepared Garlan Emperi Guard and wresting control of Garla from its Empir. We need to understand our neighbors to the east, to communicate with them and to recognize that differences between us exist but that those differences do not define better or worse. To accomplish the first of these tasks, I spent an extended length of time living in Mesa Terses, one of the six mesas, and now present my findings to my Empir, Ariannas Ilazer.

Your captain and defender,
Korin Rosarel

The Story:

The Thristan Story is entirely verbal. The people use writing sparingly, not all can read, and the written word barely exists in Thristas. If writing is necessary, Garlan is used more often than not. Therefore, as with all oral-only tales, there is some basis in fact, but I question portions of the account. I will, however, note my doubts when applicable.

“The People,” as they call themselves, speak of arriving in the desert an age ago. By my estimation, they most likely made their way over the mountains from Garla. They speak of it as “coming home” although I doubt those first settlers saw it that way. (See Geography, topography, weather below.) They did not come willingly, of that I am certain. “The Destroyer sent us away as punishment for our willfulness and our pride. We left behind our homes, our families, all that had once meant life to us and followed the Maker to a new life,” the oral tale informs us. I believe this refers to a marginally documented moment in the Garlan Story when Empir Osificant exiled a large group of citizens after they had questioned her right to force their young people into service to her, either in the Emperi Guard or as servants to her and/or other nobles. This occurred approximately 750 years ago and correlates well with the refinement, complexity and signs of age in the excavated tunnels within Mesa Terses.

Many of The People died in the first years. They found shelter in the caves on the east side of the Rim, but water and food were scarce. Some ventured out and discovered that the mesas could also provide shelter in caves with connecting tunnels, with the added advantage that many small desert creatures had long ago taken up residency in those caverns, far more than they’d found in the Rim’s caves. They also found water, funneled in from above, preserved in enclosed lakes for “longer than forever.” They made the trek to Mesa Terses, the closest mesa to their original arrival point, and settled there. They learned they could grow some meager crops on the mesa’s crown, and as the population regenerated, they moved on to the other mesas one by one so that today they occupy all six within sight of the Rim.

Geography, topography, weather:

Thristas is a desert. The rain that showers Garla rarely makes it over the Rim, leaving Thristas hot in the daytime, cooler than anyone in Garla would imagine at night, and dry as a bowl of water left out in the sun too long. One would expect that, in such an atmosphere, no plant life could survive at all, but that is anything but the case. One glance from the top of the Rim reveals an expanse of tawny brown with sprinklings of green. What are these hardy plants that survive without water for months on end? They are vegetation that can store deep within what little water is provided to them, protecting the precious resource within a usually tough exterior. Some of these plants also serve as nourishment to the Thristan people; one in particular has become the most important source of income for The People. (See Economy below.)

The mesas, six in all (the above-mentioned Terses, along with Orul, Tebu, Ves, Diri and Eres), are the most outstanding topographical feature of Thristas. Without them, The People would not have survived their exile. They are, in most cases, named after their original leaders, those who guided their small bands of people, soon to be known as tribes, as they broke away from the original Tribe of Terses, which was itself named after the woman who lead The People over the Rim.

Each mesa is riddled with a multitude of labyrinthine tunnels which Thristan children run through when allowed to play, and thus The People learn how to navigate the mesa without getting lost. The children

are taught early not to wander the tunnels alone so that if one gets lost, there are always others who can report them missing and guide the searchers to the last place the child was seen.

It might seem to those raised in the bright sun and fresh air of Garla that life in such an enclosed space could prove daunting, but surprisingly, it is not as uncomfortable nor as claustrophobia inducing as one would think. Larger chambers, some natural, some hewn out by The People over time, serve as meeting rooms, dining areas and, in the case of every mesa, a large “Elders” chamber near the very top of the mesa. In Terses, this chamber, as well as the Pit where emerging children are welcomed, already existed, and the tradition carried forward to the others where such a chamber had to be dug out of solid rock. (For more on the Elders, see Government below.)

Government:

The People are led by the Elders’ Council of each mesa. As the name would imply, these are older individuals who must reach the age of fifty before being invited to join the council. Not an easy task given the rigors and dangers of the desert. And age is not the only criterion for membership. Once the council determines that they will invite a new member, that individual must survive the Elder’s Trial in which she or he must spend a night alone on top of the mesa under the influence of a plant called yafra which heightens awareness. Nearly half of the candidates fail, dying before they can return.

Although the Elders’ Council would appear to be egalitarian, usually a leader emerges, never acknowledged as such but recognized by each and every member of the Tribe. This leader serves as touchstone in all arguments amongst the Council members. Considered the wisest in the Tribe, the leader guides and encourages movement towards compromise in any dispute in or outside Council without thrusting an opinion into the fray.

Economy:

The People do not possess their own coinage. They use Garlan marks when necessary in commerce with their western neighbors, but they barter amongst themselves—trading work for food, necessities for services, skills for training—and rely as little as possible on Garlan trade. The item of greatest value, however, is water. It is revered, preserved and stored in caverns deep inside the mesas (see above in The Story). When it rains in the desert, all the mesas generally benefit, their funnels channeling the gift from Mantar into the pools. Occasionally, though, one mesa may not lie in the path of the storm while another benefits from the slow movement of the clouds laden with the much-needed liquid. At these times, water is transported in wagons hauled from one mesa to the next, and a record is kept by the Elders of the transaction. Water is too valuable to just give away.

However, The People do cultivate one commodity for which Garlans are willing to pay and pay well—malla. Malla only grows on the mesas’ crowns. It survives there somehow, exposed constantly to sun and wind, no water to speak of. It is, in fact, the only vegetation native to the crown. It has thick, heavy stalks (one could hardly call them leaves), and the liquid preserved within these stalks can be dried into a grey paste which is then rubbed on the gums. It produces a euphoric effect, slightly dream like. It can also heighten awareness of sight and sound as well as open up the user’s inner sight. It is for this reason that few Thristans partake of this drug. As a group, they believe that anything that even approaches the sort of powers that the Garlan hermits possess cannot be trusted (see Spirituality below). In addition, malla possesses addictive qualities, and The People abhor the lack of discipline addiction fosters.

“The People” and their culture:

There are Garlans, and then there are The People. The People understand the Garlans only a bit better than the Garlans understand the Thristans, but the truth is that neither knows much about the other. They’ve lived separate from one another for so long that fear of each other seems to be the only commonality they share. The People follow an unwritten creed of honor and commitment. When a Thristan makes a promise, it is an absolute obligation.

The mesas are divided into levels, and each level defines a group of individuals and families of anywhere between 25 and 50 people. They share meals and friendship, and although they identify themselves as members of their mesa, they remain fiercely loyal to the people in their level. Oftentimes, people from different levels have little contact, so little, in fact, that they wouldn’t recognize each other outside the context of the mesa. The citizens of each mesa are considered to be the mesa’s Tribe. The population of each mesa can number into the tens of thousands. The mesas, when originally occupied, contained many small caves suitable for living quarters, and hundreds more in each mesa were hollowed out by the early excavators.

The People are nocturnal due to the difficulty of performing tasks in the heat of the desert day. They rise just before sunset, eat their first meal of *chardhoosh* (a sweet grain product eaten dry and washed down with the bitter *alk*), then go about their tasks. Even those who have duties inside the mesa follow this schedule which they have followed for centuries. Each level gathers again just after sunrise to share dinner, which is usually a stew made with the *kerl* bean which comes from a hardy vine than can survive and produce with little water.

The People see life as a never-ending ribbon of many colors, twisting and turning, filled with many knots. Sometimes the knots can be released; other times there can be no untying, and one must find a way past without falling off the ribbon. They weave ribbons through the long braids they wear. These ribbons are made of the silk produced by the everfly caterpillar, the glow moths that fill the summer nights each year, and then they are dyed a multitude of colors. Each house, or family, has adopted a color as its own, and each color has meaning. When a child’s hair has grown long enough for braiding, one ribbon bearing the color of the house of its pouching is introduced into the braid. If, for some reason, the child chooses not to acknowledge a house of origin, a black ribbon of one-without-family is worn. When the child becomes an adult at 16, they can choose to add a ribbon of their non-pouching parent’s house.

As well as signifying a house, colors also represent strengths and attributes, and new ribbons are constantly being added to a young person’s braid as they mature and reveal their truths. These usually become a permanent part of the braid. Then there are colors as symbols of a current situation. Joined or unjoined, pregnancy, pouching, parent of an emerged child, loss. I will not list every color here, but it should be noted that a house’s color is usually tied to its perception of its attributes. For example, orange, which can mean heat and fire, might be applied to a house whose members are thought to be temperamental.

Spirituality:

The People revere an entity know as Mantar. Mantar is a two-faced deity, both the Maker and the Destroyer. They recognize that their lives are filled with duality, and, therefore, their guiding spiritual force brings both life and death, peace and war, joy and grief, love and hate. Neither aspect is

considered better or greater than the other. Mantar represents the equal forces pressing in upon The People every day. They scoff at the one thing all Thristans seem to know about their Garlan neighbors—their belief in multiple Creators and but one Destroyer. The People wonder at the power of the Garlans' many over the One, at the inherent optimism and apparent naivety of that inequality.

As a group, The People believe that anything that even approaches the sort of powers that the Garlan hermits possess cannot be trusted. They fear the hermits and once attempted to find a way of limiting their powers, but their plan backfired on them.

The people celebrate four high rituals each year. These correspond on the calendar to the four Garlan holy days. What the Garlans call Evennight in the spring, the Thristans celebrate as the *Farii*. It is the night of fertility when several young couples (newly joined or about to be joined) ascend to the mesa's crown, and there they wait for the manta (a snake which symbolizes Mantar) to choose one of them for the consummation of the ritual. It is hoped that the couple will conceive and thus guarantee the fertility of the entire Tribe for the next year.

Garla's Greatday is called *Arii* in Thristas. The Thristans rise to greet the setting of the sun late in the evening and then spend the night dancing and singing to praise Mantar the Maker in the form of the rising and setting sun and welcome the night back as the days begin to shorten. This, of course, is in opposition to the Garlan farewell to the sun as it leaves them in darkness.

In the fall, when a child conceived in the *Farii* is likely to emerge, the Thristans gather in a chamber called the Pit. All infants emerge here surrounded by family, but on the day of the *Holii*, the Garlan autumn Evennight, the best outcome is a *Farii* child emerging with the entire Tribe in attendance.

Finally, and perhaps most significant, is *Kolii*, in which the Thristans grieve and remember those they've lost that year. Unlike the Garlans, they mourn rather than celebrate the return of the sun.

CONCLUSION:

Life in Thristas is difficult and complicated, and the Thristan people do not trust strangers easily. They do, however, know that life must be lived today, not tomorrow or yesterday. They face too many potentially destructive challenges not to appreciate the value of the moment. They wish for independence but have not yet organized themselves to seek it out. I would recommend extreme caution with these people. They are fierce and could very likely best us in battle.

Respectfully submitted,

Korin Rosarel, Captain, Emperi Guard