GUY
STANTON III
A WARRIOR'S
REDEMPTION
BOOK ONE OF THE
THE WARRIOR KIND

A WARRIOR'S REDEMPTION

Book One
of
The Warrior Kind

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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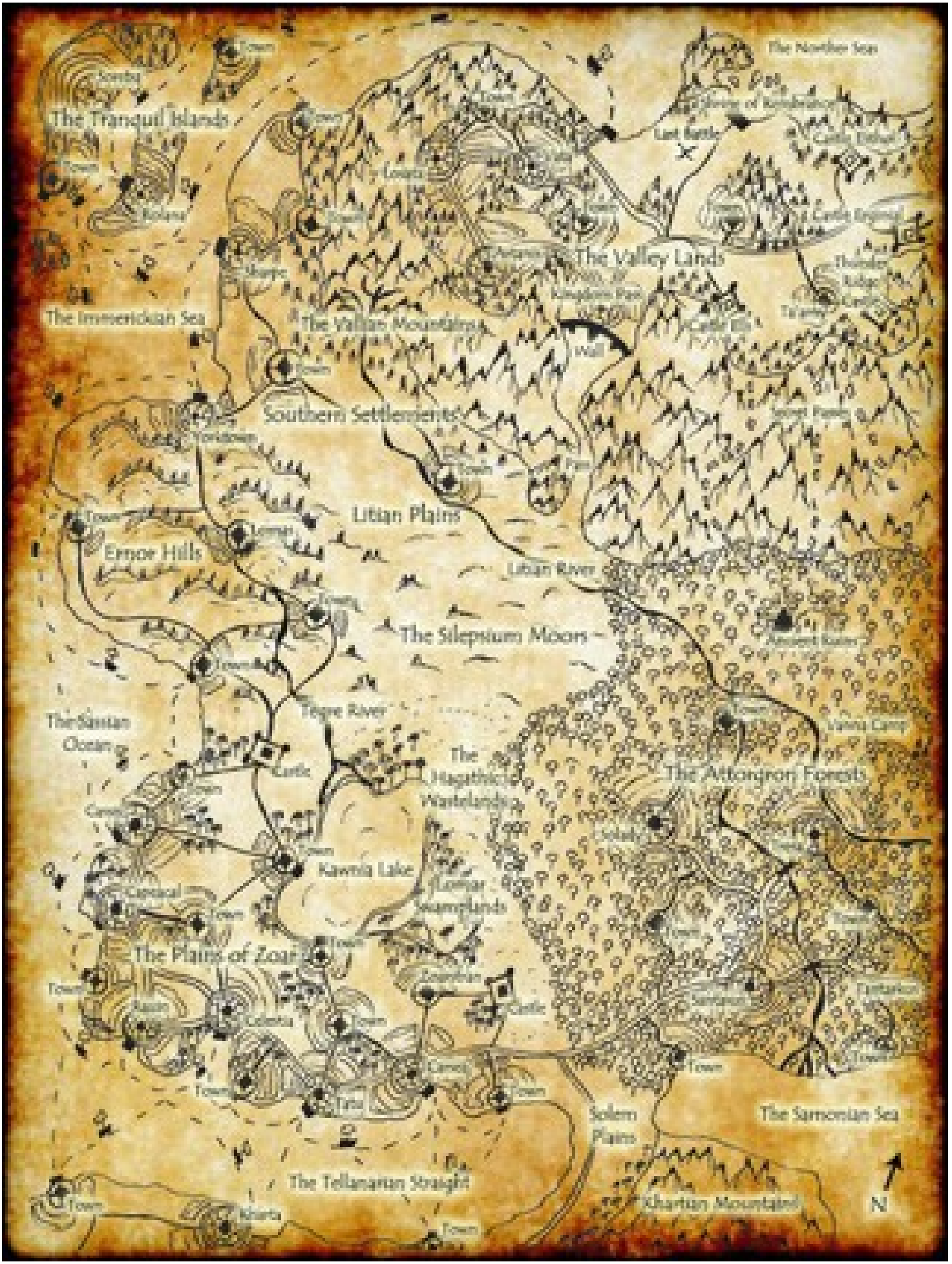
Dedicated to my wonderful wife. You're the best! You've always been there believing in me and inspiring me to do more. I couldn't have made it without you Honey. 143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A long time ago…..

The Prelude

In the distant past there was a tribe of people on Earth called the Vallian. They were warriors, a people of the sword, and they lived by honor and the integrity of their belief in the Creator of all life.

The world was changing all around them as it drifted more and more from the old ways of the beginning of time.

Their enemies hated them for their stubborn determination not to change and go along with the wicked tide of man's fall from grace with their Creator.

The Vallians prepared in secret to do the only thing left for them to do; leave Earth, the first world. Sensing that a judgment was coming, they prepared a way to escape the catastrophe that they felt had become inevitable, given the conditions of the fallen peoples of Earth. With their preparations complete, they left the place of their creation two hundred years before the global flood sent by the Creator. A flood that would destroy the earth save for one man's family, who was found to yet be righteous and of pure blood lineage.

The Vallians traveled far and long through the galaxies of the Creator's handiwork until they came to a planetary system where they decided to make a new home. However, they were not the only ones there. Other peoples from

Earth, in the more distant past, had found the series of worlds in this distant galaxy first and had settled there.

The Vallians claimed their spot in this new realm of space and had peace among their generations for over three thousand years in which they grew and prospered into a powerful nation above any other.

However, they made a mistake and replicated the evils and fallen natures that they had once escaped from on Earth and an enemy, with a grudge three thousand years in the making, had no pity upon them. War broke out and millions upon millions of the Vallian kindred died. They could not win a war they had not been prepared for and so a surviving remnant of their once proud people fled the galaxy.

They knew nowhere else to go other than the galaxy where man was first created. They found the Earth, and its resurgent peoples after the great flood, a vastly different place than they had left. They had left in 2150 BC. Now they were back and the year was 1350 AD. So much had changed that they felt they could not stay, but they took the words of the Creator, which had been spoken in their absence and recorded, with them in their journey to find a new home where they could both hide from their past and forge a new future.

They found a solitary, uninhabited world not far from Earth and this is where they settled. They abandoned their technology for fear of replicating the mistakes of the past, but inevitably civil war broke out and the Vallian people

fractured apart. The new world became a place of factions, warring against each other in bitter envy and hatred of belief, where once had been brotherhood and unity.

Over seven hundred years passed as life continued on, bitterly contested among the descendants of the Vallian. They, as a people, had now split apart into many and were without any clear knowledge of the grandness of their ancient past. They had no real hope for what lay ahead, their views of what life had to offer having become embittered. They only fought to survive as brother warred against brother. However, there comes a chance in every people's existence to make a change for righteousness and to adopt the justice of the Creator's path.

One of the factions of people broken off from the tribe of the Vallians still adhered to the ancient beliefs and fought on among their kindred to see this change accomplished. They dreamed of a day when a unified belief in the Creator of all life would be restored to their kind, but they needed a leader to help accomplish this quest. One day they found him.

Chapter One

Hell is Hot

Roric

The sun was hot and I felt a drop of sweat make its way down through the grime; days of built up dust that I hadn't so much as had a chance to wash off yet. I was doing well to still be alive, but I hated that I reeked of the smell of stale sweat.

Still, it was better to be alive than a rotting corpse left out for the vultures to

dine on in a lonely gully somewhere. I didn't have any spare water to wash with anyway, now that I did have some time to think about how bad I smelled.

Water, at the moment, was the most pressing problem with which I was faced. The Hagathic Wastelands were just that, a wasteland without drinkable water. It was a good place to either lose a posse of enemy riders or die of thirst. Take your pick, but I didn't want any part of either option.

To the east, about fifty miles away, was the edge of the Attorgron forests. I could get good water there, and it was closer than the other source of water I was heading for, but it came with its own problems. For one, my pursuers would be expecting me to head for water there, not to mention the cover that the

forest could offer us as we made our way north, but running into the Attorgron people would be unavoidable at some point along the way.

To them, I was a wanted man with a bounty on my head. That made me more than worth the trouble it was to them to hunt me down and stick one of those poison darts they were so fond of into me. No thanks; I'd take my chances out in the open as opposed to dying from some poison burning out my insides.

Decidedly, all my options were somewhat grim. When had it ever been any different? Not for a long time.

I glanced through the shimmering heat waves back over the way we had come. I didn't see anything amiss, so I decided to stay where we were for a while longer. Both I and the boy needed the

rest.

It would have been nice to get some sleep, but the thought of a Zoarinian lance point being rammed through my middle while I slept kept my eyes open. I hadn't seen any signs of visible pursuit in two days, but I could feel them out there all the same. It was like an itch that wouldn't go away.

Rats! I smelled and now I could add itching to the list of maladies of neglect under which I was suffering. The chase was definitely starting to get to me in a bad way. Going without sleep for days and being responsible for a kid would do that to you.

How had I been suckered into doing this fool's errand anyway? It was one thing to be a man alone and be chased, but carrying along a kid laid down a

whole new array of problems to contend with. I didn't know anything about kids! Taking this kid along hadn't been a part of the plan, but he was here and that was that. A chase was tough on man and horse alike, but on a kid it had to be especially tough and I was grateful that this kid exhibited a lot of toughness.

The kid's toughness reminded me of my own tough childhood back in the lowlands of the Hills of Ernor, near the Zoarinian city of Cassis.

My family was not of Zoarinian lineage or of the Ernorian people either. My father had brought us to the hill country to get away from some difficulty of the past. No one knew us there and that seemed to be what my parents liked most about the place. Only I could tell that my father hadn't been happy to be

there. He would often look wistfully off towards the land of his birth in the north, and that was where his heart seemed to have stayed. The Ernor Hills were the closest he could come to the mountains of the Valley Lands, which could be seen in the distance on a clear day.

My brother and I had grown up largely alone and had few friends, as our parents had, for the most part, kept us from mingling with the local people. The most we had seen of the outside world was when harvest time came. We would float our harvest on rafts down the Tegre River to the hungry markets of the Zoarinians farther down the river.

*****

Though my brother and I were kept from much interaction with others, we still had the love of our parents and the

security of the home they had provided us.

Those had been golden days, but I hadn't known it then. Those kind of days weren't likely to be seen again by either myself or the poor lad, who lay curled up in a ball over by the small fire, fast asleep.

The journey from Kharta had been rough. We had been chased from the onset and it had been a near thing for a while, before I was able to buy us some time and distance by losing our pursuers temporarily in a swampy stretch of territory with which I was familiar. The boy had stood up to the task remarkably well and my respect for him had grown daily. I hadn't directly told the boy yet that his father was dead, but I think he had probably already guessed. I'd seen

him crying quietly at times, mostly at night when he had thought that I wasn't looking. I had respected his wishes and had not let on that I had noticed him crying.

I decided to let the boy sleep a little longer. It would be better to travel after dark now anyway. Settling into a somewhat more comfortable position against the bank of a long dead stream, I continued to rest. I let my mind wander back to the past again, when I had lost my family and the innocence of my youth.

All I had left of my past was my name, Roric Fortigar, the son of Lorn and Ni'isha Fortigar. My brother's name had been Faron. While we had lived peacefully enough in the Hills of Ernor, the world around us was not so settled.

The world outside was cruel and merciless and grew more so with every day that passed.

I had been naïve to the ways of the world, until one day when it made its harsh intrusion in a way that changed my life forever.

*****

My parents raised my brother and I differently than the hill people around us, who had in large part adopted the Zoarinian way of life. Unlike our neighbors' kids, we were taught the old ways. We learned of the Great Creator, who had made all that we saw around us. We learned how man had fallen and how he had been redeemed and much more.

As boys we didn’t really understand the concept of a fallen sinful world, and

what it meant that all things would be made right some day. At the time I hadn't been convinced that there was all that much wrong with the outside world. From what I had seen in the fall of each year, when we had taken our goods to market, the greater outside world had looked rather exciting, especially when compared to our humble little home in the hills. Our parents' adherence to the old ways caused us to be looked down upon by those around us.

The central culture of the world as we knew it was the Zoarinian Empire to the south, with its many great cities by the sea. They went about their lives far differently than my parents did. Surely so many people couldn't have gotten it so wrong in life to be worthy of the scorn directed at them by my parents?

Maybe the Zoarinians had a good reason for abandoning the old ways to which my parents still adhered.

At the time I had begun to wonder if my parents weren't the ones that needed to change. How naïve I had been then, I thought now, as I looked back on that period of my life.

The Zoarinian culture was presented as a free society, where one could do as one so pleased, as long as it had the approval of the ruling elite, who rarely denied self expression to take place in whatever form it took, just so long as it didn't obstruct them from making a profit. Excesses were encouraged and the old ways of honor and self control were discarded as useless, outdated virtues that shouldn't apply to life anymore. Dissenting voices were very

few to this new, self styled destiny of life, as it had something for everyone to like about it. In fact the only dissenters I knew of were my parents and it had brought unwelcome attention to both them and my brother and I. I hated it most when, because of my parents' beliefs, I was pressed by others of my own age to defend those same beliefs. I wasn't sure that I believed in those beliefs, but out of loyalty to my parents I had to defend them.

The real trouble seemed to start when my father refused to visit a temple priestess, who requested his presence in her private chambers at the city temple after she had seen him while out walking in the marketplace during the harvest festival. Such a refusal was unheard of, as few would turn down a sensual

evening with a beautiful temple priestess behind closed doors. Priestesses rarely made advances to commoners and to refuse such an offer was regarded as an insult. I had always respected the relationship my father had with my mother, even though it was old fashioned to be committed to only one person. Turning down the priestess's offer had been the right decision for father to make and yet the cost of it had been high.

*****

One warm summer morning they came for us. I had almost finished with my morning chores when I had seen my father, walking towards me across the barn lot, stumble and gasp hard as four brightly colored arrow shafts slammed hard into his chest with dull sounding thuds of finality. Horrified by what I had

just seen, I dropped the bucket of water I had been carrying from the well and started running towards father, but he had waived me off with a violent gesture of one arm.

Several mounted Zoarinian lancers started to converge on my father from opposite ends of the barnyard. My father, still upright on his feet, had yelled to me.

“Save your mother and brother, Roric!”

My eyes had locked with his for a moment and, in dazed realization, I had sensed the weight of the responsibility he had just conveyed to me, as if it was a crushing burden I was unfit yet to manage. I had not been overly close with my father, but in that moment I felt like I knew my father in a deeper, more

powerful way than I had ever known him before.

Frozen in place, I had watched him turn to meet the onrushing lancers boldly. I had come unfrozen with a jerk of consciousness then, as I remembered the responsibility he had conveyed to me to protect the family. I'd run for the house with all I'd had in me. As I ran, I watched what became of my father; I had no choice, as I had to run past him to reach the house.

He had stood there, tall and proud, and I had watched as somehow he was able to grab hold of a lowered lance and rip it from the hands of its mounted rider. Balancing the lance overhand he had thrown it like a spear at the next rider and I'd saw it impale the rider through his middle, causing him to fall

backward off his horse. A third lancer, who had come up from behind my father's blind side, impaled him through the back with his lance. Tears streaming from my eyes, I had looked away from father and run even faster for the house, determined to save my mother and brother.

My mother had already fled the house and was at the stable pushing my brother up onto one of the two horses there. She then swung up behind him, and spurred the horse forward. My mother had been a strong woman, but her face had been awash with tears, as she fought to save her youngest son. She had to have known that father was dead, because she would never have left otherwise.

"Mount up quickly, Roric!"

She had screamed at me, gesturing

towards the second horse before she was gone in a cloud of dust. I had jumped the rail fence of the corral and leapt onto the back of the second horse. Wheeling the horse around, I had kneed it forward brutally in order to catch up with her. After several minutes of fast riding I had narrowed the gap between us, when I saw a group of riders coming out of a low creek bed ahead and off to our left.

Their sudden appearance ahead of us threatened to cut us off from our only chance at escape. I remembered what I had seen in my father's eyes just before his death. He had passed the responsibility of protecting the family to me and I wasn't going to let him down! I clenched my jaw hard; not at all sure I was doing the smart thing, as I veered

my horse away from my mother's and towards the group of riders, who were gaining on us rapidly in an effort to cut us off. I heard my mother scream, "No!" in an anguished voice, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop; she had to keep my brother safe and, deep in her heart, she knew this was what must be done in order for there to be any chance of saving my brother's life. Briefly I wondered if I would ever see them again, and then moments later all thought was gone as my horse had slammed full tilt into the mass of riders. Pandemonium had ensued and dimly I had felt myself fly free of the horse to connect hard with the ground.

I had awoken slowly and straightened up, only to realize that I was tied to a

horse which was being led by one of the Zoarinian soldiers. Seeing me awake, the rider to my left had backhanded me across the face and as my head was flung towards the right, the rider to my right backhanded me across the face as well. All of the soldiers had broken out in laughter at the antics of their companions.

My neck had felt broken and, if I hadn't been hurting before, I was then.

*****

The days of riding and mistreatment by my captors had seemed to flow into each other and I had been surprised when we rode into the city of Capeacal. At that time I had never before been so far south.

The city of Capeacal's market place was like nothing I had ever seen. It was

far grander than Cassis's marketplace. Cassis's marketplace had sold assortments of fruits, vegetables, and household wares, but Capeacal's marketplace dealt primarily in a higher priced commodity, slaves.

I was shoved into an ill smelling, dark room beneath the marketplace's floor. At first I had thought I was alone in the room and then, after a moment of silence, I'd heard the sounds of many captive people begin to resume in the packed quarters of the room. I'd made my way to the side of the door and leaned back against the slimy wet wall, seeking shelter from both whomever was in the cell and those who had put me here, but there was little security to be found in such places.

A dreary vision of the future had

begun to take place within my mind and I had been unable to shut it out, as it had overwhelmed me with its depressed vision of the road ahead of me. Caught up in my own misery as I was, I had been ignoring the hushed conversations taking place all around me.

It was a foreign sounding dialect that wasn't familiar to me at all. I listened to it for a while and then it dawned on me that I had heard it before. It was a dialect of speech that the Imerickian Traders of the Tranquil Islands used. I had heard them speak a couple of times when I had been with my father trading in the city of Sharpe, which we had done but rarely. Sharpe was a seaport town on the western side of the Southern Settlements. Sharpe was the farthest south that the Tranquil Islanders liked to

venture to trade, because they, like the Valley Landers to the northeast, were not on good terms with the Zoarinians.

Out of the sea of foreign voices I'd overheard a conversation that I'd understood since it was in my own language.

"Krista, listen carefully to me. You will be separated from me tomorrow."

"No, Momma!"

"Yes, Krista! It will happen and you must promise to do as I say! You are young, but it's apparent even now that you will be beautiful one day. Tomorrow you have to take advantage of how pretty you already are and carry yourself with pride! Keep yourself as clean as you can tomorrow and they will put you in a special class."

"Special class, Momma?"

“You will serve your new master as I served Master Nivaron, but that is not important. What is important is that you’ll have good food and at least something of a life of ease, which you won’t get as a field hand.”

“No, Momma! You can’t tell me to do this!”

“Krista, I know what I ask is terrible, but in this way you will at least be given good food, shelter, and protection from too much abuse, as long as you please your new master. You will not last long in the firan cane fields as a manual laborer!”

“I would rather die in a firan cane field and keep my self-respect than be a soulless whore like you’ve become, to ask such a thing of me!”

Slap!

“Krista you will not speak to me like that again! I’ve done what I’ve had to do! I’ve survived to care for you and your brother, after your father died!”

“You mean murdered! Besides, what good has surviving done you? Look where we are mother! And he’s not my brother!”

“Yes he is, and as for what I’ve done, it’s been to keep food in your belly and of all the choices left to us this is the safest route for you to take! You will do as I say tomorrow Krista and that is final!”

Leaning back against the damp wall behind me, I had shaken my head slowly in empathy for the girl. My world had been completely overturned and I was without comfort to turn to, in any form. I

had never experienced anything in life to prepare me for the harshness of either what I was hearing a mother tell her daughter or the personal loss I had already experienced with the loss of my family.

Who knew what was yet to come? The knowledge of that yet unknown fate ate away at me like a preying animal in the darkness. Silent tears had coursed down my cheeks and I had been grateful for the darkness around me that hid my tears from the others.

I hadn't wanted to appear weak to anyone. I had sympathized for the girl, as much as I had for myself at the time. My mother would never have asked me to do what her mother was asking of her. How blessed I had been and not even known it! And now that I knew what I had lost,

it was gone from me forever.

A crow cawed loudly, breaking my remembrance of the past momentarily. I glanced back the way we had come, but it was still clear of any visible threat.

I glanced at the sleeping boy and studied him for a moment. Yes, he was an unwanted hassle, but in some ways I was glad to be of help in saving his life. I didn't want him to experience what I had as a young slave, that was for sure.

I would get him to his kin in the Valley Lands, along with the information that his father had given me before he had died. It was a long way to safety though and a lot could happen. There was no guarantee that the boy's fate would turn out any differently than had mine.

I glanced at the setting sun. I still had an hour or so to kill, so I let my thoughts drift back to the past again as I rested.

I had helped the girl change her fate. At least, I'd made it possible for her to die in a more preferable way anyway.

I looked out at the horizon, over the edge of which the sun was fading, but the sunset wasn't what I saw. In my mind's eye I was seeing back to the day when I had been sold as a slave to the arena fighting school of Carsea.

After we had been pulled from our underground holding cell at the slave market, I'd had to repeatedly blink my eyes to adjust to the harsh daylight of the marketplace. I had stumbled several times over the uneven cobblestones of the market floor, and several times

heavily armored guards had lashed out at me with their sharp stinging whips that drew blood.

The marketplace was filled with tradesmen hawking their goods. Prospective buyers filled out the rest of the market's space.

The noise of the mob of jabbering faces, which poked and prodded at me as I walked by, caused a renewed sense of anxiety to rise up inside of me as to what my fate would soon be. The guards had begun to divide us into groups; old, young, male, and female.

My attention throughout the walk from the cell had been drawn to a woman ahead of me. She would have been quite attractive, if it hadn't been for the hard lines etched deeply into the skin around her mouth and eyes. She had a mean look

about her, too. She held a baby in her left arm almost carelessly, while her right hand gripped the forearm of a young girl that walked beside her.

The girl's bright cinnamon red hair hung all the way to her waist. She was sure to be noticed, even though she had yet to show the maturity of a grown woman. Something told me that these two must have been the two I had overheard the night before.

A sudden disturbance off to our left caused them and the guards to all turn and glance over in that direction. I kept walking forward though. I'm not sure what possessed me to do what I did, but it felt like the right thing to do and I didn't question my actions any further than that. My manacled hands separated apart and, as her face was turned to the

side, I raised a fist and swung hard at the girl's head.

I intentionally sideswiped her left cheek with the chunky metal protrusion of the manacles binding my hands, instead of with my whole fist. Blood spurted from where the edge of my rough manacles caught her high on the cheekbone and lower down on the cheek, ripping the flesh badly. The force of the blow, even though I had pulled the majority of the strength behind the punch off to the side, knocked her forwards breaking her mother's hold on her arm. She fell heavily into a muddy puddle of water, which splashed all over her, dowsing her in the dirty water of the marketplace gutters. Complete shock at the unjustified hit had widened her eyes in a questioning gaze, as she looked up

at me from where she lay in the muddy water. Blood trickled down her face in abandon and I mouthed two words.

"I'm sorry!"

I had barely gotten the words out when I was slammed to the ground from behind by the guards. I was only pulled back up to my feet after I had been kicked and whipped several times savagely.

My aggressive actions got me placed in a group of other surly individuals, who were unified in their dislike of me. Hitting a woman was bad, a girl worse and a fellow slave even worse than that. No matter, I didn't regret what I had done. They just didn't understand.

I watched as the girl and her mother were led up to the examiners. They pulled the mother to the side and shoved

her towards a group of older women, who also had small children. The chief examiner grabbed the girl's chin and held it up, examining her. He paused for a moment and then muttered something and shoved the girl towards an attendant who led her away. The attendant dragged her towards a pen that was filled with other attractive girls and young boys.

As they drew near the pen, the girl's head had fallen forward, her dirty hair shielding her face from view. The attendant dragged her past that pen though and on down the line of slave pens towards the pen at the very end of the line.

Looking around with a dazed expression she found me in the sea of faces. She lifted a hand and slightly

waved it at me, before she was jerked onwards by the attendant towards what was the field slave pen. Everyone deserves the chance to meet their end in the best way possible and I was sure she would prefer the fate of an overworked field hand, than a longer life of being used in a brothel, as a cheap vessel in the gratification of other people's desires.

The moment of connection with the girl helped to assure me that I had done the right thing after all. I glanced around and was surprised by what I saw. The hostile stares of the men around me were gone, and in its place was respect. All of them seemed to comprehend what I had done for the girl. The hostility had been easier to bear than the respectful deference they were now showing me. It

made me feel like I had to do something or be something special now, to be worthy of their respect.

I may have only been fourteen at the time, but I'd already had the large bone structure and the beginning great strength of my father budding within me. It was apparent to the buyers that what I would be most useful for was the arena wars.

Gladiatorial entertainment was the favorite pastime of many Zoarinians throughout the empire. The mortal combat of men, against other men and animals, was big business. As such, it was closely monitored by the ruling elite of the day, who got fabulously wealthy by betting on the games fought out by slave warriors.

I was bought by one of Carsea's

prominent fighting school owners. He was a big bellied man that looked at me as if I were but a piece of meat or a chew bone fit only to be thrown to the dogs. After the sale was over, I was hustled to a wagon by armed guards and tied to a shackle bolt on the floor of the wagon along with several other men.

The wagon started to move out of the marketplace at a slow pace as my life as a slave had begun. Other slave wagons had passed by ours headed towards their respective destinations within the empire. In the last wagon that passed us, I saw the girl from the marketplace at almost the same time as she saw me. We stared after each other until we lost sight of each other; my wagon going towards the southern cities and hers headed out toward the open plain.

Chapter Two

Branded

The fighting school of Ramnotan was located on the outskirts of Carsea. Roughly, we were yanked out of the wagon by the guards.

I'd hit the ground face first, after having been shoved by a guard off the wagon. I'd tried to get up, spitting the dust from my mouth as I did so, but I was knocked down flat again by another guard. I'd tried to get up again, but several hard kicks had slammed into my side and I'd curled up into a ball in the

dust. It had been hard to breathe and I'd had to repeatedly gasp to get back my breath. I'd looked up into the face of my tormenter then before trying to get up again. He'd stood with his feet shoulder width apart and appeared to have no weapon upon him. He smiled down at me. His face had looked like worn cracked leather and the smile that was splayed across it did not reach his eyes.

"I'll show you the meaning of what it is to be a slave, boy! I think I'll start your education with your pretty face!"

He had reached down with one hand and grabbed my hair, jerking my head up. He extended his right leg behind him and I knew that he intended to smash his knee into my nose. As he drew his knee back, I stopped resisting the grip on my hair and instead I flung myself forward

at his support leg. Unbalanced, he gave a surprised grunt and fell over backwards away from me.

He had released my hair in an effort to catch himself as he fell. He hit the ground hard and I had gotten shakily to my feet, knowing I had probably just made things a lot worse for myself. Surprisingly, he had lain there in the dust for a moment and then he'd started laughing as he got to his feet. I'd regarded him warily, waiting for him to strike out at me like a viper.

"This one has spirit left in him! Cato, take him to the keep and see that he gets branded as a fighter, but not cut. He'll fight better that way."

I was seized by strong hands from behind and shoved inside the fighting school. It was cooler inside than the

outside was, but that was as far as the comfort went.

I was shoved against the wall of a room that received some light from a skylight in the ceiling above us. I, and the others that had arrived with me, were handcuffed to iron rings that projected out from the wall above our heads. I had watched as two powerfully muscled guards held the slave who was the farthest from me away out from the wall. A third guard rose up from a fire kindled in the middle of the room. In one hand he held a hot poker and in the other a hot knife.

I could still see the way the slave's eyes had rolled back into his head as he screamed, when the branding rod was pressed into the back of his left shoulder. The sizzle and smell of

burning flesh had made me want to throw up. It wasn't over though.

The two guards shoved the whimpering slave back against the wall and spread his legs, as the man with the knife set the brand poker back down into the fire. He then turned toward the slave, knife in hand, ripped the slave's pants down and proceeded to slice off his seed sac, throwing it to the side, as he then held the hot knife to the wound, cauterizing the flesh.

The slave almost jerked out of the grasp of the two big men as the realization of what had just been done to him hit him, along with the pain. I had thrown up all over myself then and I had tried to somehow block out the man's hysterical cries of pain and loss, but failed miserably.

One by one the process was repeated down the line, until they had reached me. I had been crying my eyes out and sobs of fear and expected pain racked through my body, as the other slaves' anguished screams still lingered around me in the room.

Nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of the hot poker being ground into the back of my shoulder. I had screamed and sobbed, hoping against hope for freedom from this hellish place, but none came. I had felt my pants ripped down and I had bitten my lip, as I felt the grip on my sac as the edge of the hot knife pressed against it. A moment had passed in which I had sobbed hard from the expected burning pain and the loss of my identity as a man.

The knife had stayed where it was as

the grip on my sack was released. I had opened my eyes, blurry from the tears pouring out of them, and looked around as I heard a strange sound. The guards and even the men holding me were laughing! As if this was all a big joke!

The man with the knife withdrew it and joined in on the laughter. I had heard the guards leave the room, still laughing, as I pressed my eyes closed, feeling shamed by them.

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That had been the worst night of my life, being forced to stand there naked and listen to the cries and whimpers of the others in such a dark dungeon of a place.

The other slave's pathetic cries, the burning pain in my shoulder, and my own abject humiliation over what had

happened to me, threatened to drive me mad. And in some ways, I suppose it had.

My one burning life's desire from that moment onward had been to exact revenge and have control over my own fate once more.

Time had passed into months and months became years. I wondered why the Great Creator that my mother had prayed to kept me alive, for there could be no other reason, other than a Divine one, that could explain how I had been delivered from death so many times. There were just too many coincidences that just seemed to happen at the right time, which always led to my survival and another day in the arena before my adoring crowds. They called me Zeventhal, which in the Zoarinian

language means ‘Storm Maker’.

The average life expectancy in the arena world was marked by being violently brief. I was an exception to that, as I had already lived and fought for almost nine years in the arena. That’s how long it took for the opportunity of escape to occur.

I had done the most with the time and resources provided to me over the years. I had learned and mastered dozens of fighting styles and weapon proficiencies. But most valuable of all, I befriended the men around me.

We all knew that we could die from each other’s hand, as easy as that of a rival school’s fighter, because of the whims of our masters. So why not be friends and help each other as we could to make the short brutal days of our lives

better. When I was forced to fight against my friends we fought with dignity, not holding ourselves accountable for the death of either one of us, if it was required by the crowd or our masters.

Perhaps no one would understand how one could fight with a friend to the death, but my answer to them was that they hadn't been there so what did they know about it. In addition to fighting skills, I had learned all that I could about the tactics of war. I even discussed the merits and lessons to be gleaned from the literary works of wisdom of our time, of which I had previously known nothing, but of which many thrown into the arena dungeons did.

We thought of, dreamed of, and planned every day for a chance at

acquiring freedom for ourselves once again and wrecking vengeance against our captors, but freedom eluded us. Then one day we got a lucky break.

It was the festival of the moon goddess, which was the patron god of the city of Carsea. Games of extravagant proportions had been planned for the festival. All six of the Zoarinian governors of the Rings of Hath were going to be in attendance.

This was a rare occasion within the empire and it would require only the finest in amusement offerings. Our handlers taunted us in glee over the special ordeal that we would face in the arena the next day. By all accounts the spectacle was supposed to be well beyond the usual. The fighters from the city of Rauin were to be the first to face

this new height in crowd amusement offerings.

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The night passed as all nights did before a fight, it either went by too quickly or passed by too slowly. It had been raining softly as I had looked through the bars of the door that opened out into the great arena.

The fighters from Rauin, numbering a little over forty, stood expectantly in the middle of the arena as rain dripped off their helmets making moisture trails down their armor clad bodies. The rain would have normally put a damper on the crowd's mood, but not today. They had been promised something special today and they were eager for it to begin.

The noise of the crowd was suddenly drowned out by the enraged, crazed

screams of an animal I had only heard of, but never before seen. The big doors at the other end of the arena had been shoved open suddenly and three large bull elephants, from the southern lands of Kharta, rushed into the arena. Angered and driven mad with rage by their handlers, who had poked at them with spears, they looked around feverishly in search of something to take out their raging aggression upon. Unfortunately, the only prey available was the men of Rauin.

Grimly, I had watched as each man was chased down by the enraged beasts, one after the other. The elephants were inconsolable with rage and wanted to kill anything that walked on two legs, because of their mistreatment by their handlers. I had continued to watch the

spectacle even as the other fighters with me had turned away from the horror of it, knowing that soon enough it would be them out there.

Some fighters were crushed under the heavy feet of the beasts, while others were caught by the swinging tusks and thrown across the arena to crash with deadening force into the high walls. The men of Rauin were soon trodden down to a bloody pulp. Not sated in their bloodlust, the crowd had cried out for even more of this new level of violent entertainment, which I would make them regret. Because in their thirst to see our blood spilled, I had seen the greatest opportunity for a mass escape that had ever presented itself before, not to mention the perfect diversion needed to successfully escape.

The walls of the arena were not of a sufficient strength at all places to hold the raging animals it contained. Our captors had probably been counting on the elephants giving their full attention to exterminating the human ants running around in the arena screaming for their lives and not attempt their own escape. They had probably intended on killing the elephants near the end of the act anyway. Briefly I had relayed my plan to the other fighters, who had listened intently, scarcely daring to hope for even a chance at attaining their freedom and escaping the grisly death awaiting all of us within the arena.

There weren't as many of us as there had been of the men from Rauin, but that didn't matter as we weren't going to be fighting the beasts. When our dungeon

doors had been raised with a resisting creak of the rusty iron draw chains, we had boldly stepped out and gotten the attention of the three elephants. Instead of running aimlessly around the arena away from our superior foe, we charged right at them.

Several of us had fallen in the initial contact with the three crazed lumbering beasts, but those of us who survived quickly started slashing away at the undersides and legs of the great beasts towering above us as we ran past them. This only incited the elephants to an even more insane rage, which is what I had hoped would happen. As one man, we had broken off from our harassing of the beasts and ran as hard as we could for the far wall of the arena that featured wooden bleachers and pavilions, instead

of those made of stone on the fancier end of the arena.

How I made it in one solid piece to the wood boarded wall, I don't know. I had felt the hot breath of one of the elephants pulsing against my back and the swish of its sharpened tusks just behind my legs for what seemed like an eternity before I reached the far arena wall.

Everything had seemed to be moving in slow motion and then abruptly it had returned to fast paced reality. At the last possible second before we ran headlong into the arena wall, we dove off to the sides of it and hit the dirt as each of us prayed that the heavy foot of one of our pursuers didn't set down on top of us and squash us into the sand.

The three beasts stampeding behind us

had no time to veer off after us, but instead they slid onward across the slick, wet, sandy clay of the arena floor. The shear momentum of their charge and their own bulk sent them plowing through the arena wall with the snapping of breaking boards and beams.

The crowd's outspoken glee at the spectacle before them turned to screams of fright and pain, as the three bull elephants rampaged out of the arena and up into the bleachers, creating complete havoc and pandemonium within the crowd. Those of us left alive picked ourselves out of the dirt and slipped through the smashed remains of the arena wall following in the wake of the elephants' destruction.

People were running everywhere in mass panic and had paid us no attention

as we slipped through them and away from the arena into the city. Looking back, I had seen several of the men from Rauin hobble up to their feet from where they had been playing dead on the arena floor and make their way towards the gap in the arena wall. One of them started to follow us, but then hesitated. I had gestured him onwards and he had broken into a run to catch up to us.

We had made it to a narrow alley between two buildings and I had held back a heavy rug that had been hung out to dry. The stray fighter from Rauin ran hard towards us, even though I could see doing so hurt him greatly. All was still complete pandemonium around us, with people running to and fro as they screamed hysterically in fright over their escaped entertainment. The fighter made

it to the alleyway and stopped, before continuing forward, looking as if he needed to say something, but couldn't frame the words.

"Don't mention it, get going!" I had said, as we both ducked under the rug and ran down the alleyway towards the other fighters gathered at the far end of it, waiting for me. After running through side streets and down alleys for over an hour, we had reached the edge of the city and from there we had headed for the open country beyond the city as fast as our legs could carry us. The chance at gaining freedom gave power to our legs as no other inducement could ever have.

*****

It had been a long run to make it past the crop fields needed to feed such a large population, but finally we had

reached the edge of a forest. I had fallen heavily against a tree and let my burden, the man from Rauin, slide to the cool spongy forest floor.

He hadn't been able to keep up, so I had helped carry him along the last part of the mad dash from the city limits. I slid down the tree with my back to it. My lungs had felt like the bellows of a blacksmith's forge. Sweat had been running into my eyes causing them to burn, but the sting of the sweat couldn't dampen how I had felt inside. Freedom!

I would remember that jubilant moment to the day I died. My fingers had curled into the rich forest dirt and I had sucked in moist forest air like it was fine wine.

The feeling of euphoria at my release from hell had been so sharp I could

fairly taste it, even smell it with every breath I had taken. My companions had been right along with me in what I had been feeling in the moment. We had begun to grin and then laugh, which soon overtaxed our already worn out lungs. Wheezing from laughing, I had shakily gotten to my feet and walked to the forest edge. The laughter had disappeared from me at the sight of the glistening city in the distance. The others had gotten to their feet and come to stand behind me.

"Zeventhal what will we……?"

I had held my hand up, cutting off the speaker's voice.

"Call me by that name no longer! My free name is Roric. Call me only by that name from now on."

Seething anger had coursed through my body as all the injustices done to me

flashed by in my mind, starting with the unjust death of my father and the breakup of my family.

The anger had left me cold and full of resolve as to what I wanted to do.

"What is to be done, Roric?" asked the man from Rauin quietly. I had turned and looked at him and then the rest of the men for a moment and then I had glanced back at the city in the distance, where it sat gleaming like a jewel in the fading afternoon rays of sunlight. My fists had tightened at my sides and my jaw hardened.

"I intend to make the Zoarinians pay for what they have done to me. To all of us! They will rue the day they took me captive, as I will become a scourge to their empire and if they plead for mercy, all they will hear will be my laughter! If

you wish to share in my revenge then its welcome you are, if otherwise then just go!”

A big, rough looking fighter, who came from the northern coasts, gruffly broke the silence.

“Roric?”

Turning, I had faced the man, not sure what to expect from this man, whom I had seen crush the backs of grown men but hold and care for a pet sparrow with only one wing as if it were a beloved child.

“In this plan of yours boss, does it involve eating soon?”

My seriousness had dropped away as we had all broken into laughter. “Yes, Olaf, we’ll eat soon! I promise!”

The three years that had followed our

escape from the arena had been both profitable, yet frustrating as well. We found other escaped men such as ourselves and we united together in a common purpose, which was to cause as much trouble as we could for our former captors and enjoy ourselves doing it. Our number swelled to well over eighty fighters and we became organized, as we took on bigger and bigger targets of interest.

We had informants entrenched throughout the Plains of Zoar, that we paid handsomely to keep us informed of everything going on. They told us where we should turn next for a profitable target, but it was an uneasy alliance.

All alliances founded on a system of monetary payment are by nature susceptible to an underhanded betrayal,

if enough money is thrown into the mix. We were betrayed several times, but we always seemed to slip out of the traps that were set for us, largely because of me.

I followed my instincts and they had yet to lead me astray. In time, the others came to trust my instincts as much as I did and I became the unofficial leader of the group. None of them wanted to challenge me to a fight either, which might have helped make up their minds as to who the leader of the group should be.

Under my leadership we had unbridled success in robbing and pillaging the Zoarinian Empire of its bounty and we succeeded in being a major thorn in their side. We had also become as wealthy as kings. But after

years of successful unmitigated revenge, all I was left with was an empty hollow feeling inside that made me feel as if I hadn't achieved anything of noteworthy value.

I wanted my life to be meaningful again! Fighting for my life in the arena, and not turning into a soulless animal feeding upon my own kind, had been meaningful and I had thought a life spent in reaping revenge on my former captors would be even more fulfilling. I had been wrong. In some ways, it was as if I had become like them instead. Cold, heartless, out for only my own gain and amusement; were all character traits that befitted the people that had paid to watch me fight. I was becoming like the people I hated by following this path of endless revenge. As I had realized the

graveness of my mistake, the desire had been born to find something worth devoting my life to.

Good deeds, at least nobler purposes, other than my current pursuits, had seemed the best place to start in redefining the purpose of my life, hence the boy sleeping over by the fire. I wasn't at all sure that I had chosen the right path in the reformation of my character, but it was too late to go back now. I had accepted the responsibility of both the secret information that I carried in a waterproof satchel on the horse behind me, as well as the boy.

I had no sooner looked for the opportunity to redefine my life, when I had embarked on the journey to accomplish it. My new desire to change had found me in a neat feat of timing;

which supported the notion that there was a greater overall design at play behind the scenes of my life.

I thought of my parents and again I could see the evidence of a higher power involved in the interplay of the daily emotional mixture that is life. They had known something of the Divine nature that lies behind all of creation's excellence and it had defined them as people. They had been people that were worth emulating because of the decisions and strengths by which they had structured their lives. I was so far from being like them! I could only imagine what my mother would think of how I had turned out in life.

"She would love you and forgive you, even as I love you and am willing to forgive you, but you must turn away

from doing what you know displeases Me!"

I had known the origin of the voice, when it had whispered into my consciousness several weeks back. It had been the intense overwhelming feeling of the Author of life itself, which had spoken to me as a boy and had continued to prod my consciousness into action lately, in order to help me find my way.

During my darkest moments in the dungeons and in the arenas above, the voice of the Creator had been a source of encouragement that had filtered into my soul and had sustained me with the hope that one day life would be better and that it was worth it to continue on with the struggle to survive one more day.

That familiar voice in my consciousness finished my decision making for me and I had been ready to accept the first opportunity presented to me to begin my life's journey anew. I just hoped that I had chosen the right opportunity, because this path I was now embarked on promised death at every turn. I had been desperate for change, who knew how many more times mercy would be offered to me, if any at all. Facing life without that glimmer of hope would be completely intolerable and pointless.

I had decided to make a change that night several weeks ago. I had headed my horse back to camp from a natural scenic area where I went when my mind was burdened down in thought or when I was heavy in spirit. When I had gotten

back to camp, it was to find a visitor waiting for me. His horse had been an exceptional beast, which is when I knew that he had to be a man of some importance and influence, as he didn't have the bearing of a horse thief. He was a Valley Lander or close to being one at least, which was an unusual occurrence so far within Zoarinian held territory.

His gaze on me had been steady, as I had dismounted by the fire. I was curious why the others had let him live, let alone bring him to our hidden camp. He spoke.

"Are you the one they call the Zeventhal?"

There was a ready intelligence in his steady gaze, causing me to again wonder why such a man would risk being here.

I replied, "I have been known by that

name, but I am called by that name no longer. Call me Roric."

He smiled and extended his right hand toward me, but I didn't take it. He held his hand out a moment longer, looking uncomfortable as I left it there in space. He let his hand fall back to his side.

"I have come a long, perilous way to find you. I hope it was worth the effort," he said, with a slightly aggravated tone to his voice.

"So you have, and your perilous journey will end tonight, as you won't leave this camp alive unless you convince me to do otherwise," I said.

His face whitened some at the seriousness of my words and I waited for him to speak, drawing him out with my silence.

He began slowly, as if considering his

words carefully, “I, as you have surely guessed, am a Valley Lander, a sworn enemy to the people of this land, the Zoarinians. However, we are not enemies by choice, but rather the state of war between our two peoples has been one of the Zoarinians making, entirely spurred on by their continued and constant aggression towards us, because of disagreements in the ancient past. We have been expecting them to mount an all out assault on us for some time now.”

“What has any of this to do with me?” I asked, feigning a disinterested tone of voice as I drew a knife from my belt and tested its edge for sharpness with my thumb, looking at him suggestively as I did so.

With a desperate tinge to his tone he asked, “Are you aware of who your

father was?"

Now he had gotten my attention, but I kept it from showing on my face, "Why don't you tell me?" I asked, in a measured tone.

"He was the son of one of the most influential Valley Lander families ever, heir to a great estate and even a castle. He was poised to take over control from his father, when attempts were made to assassinate his wife which nearly succeeded. One morning, just after the last attempt to take his wife's life, he disappeared with his wife and newborn son, never to be heard from again. His father searched for years, until he found where he had been living in the Hills of Ernor under the maiden name of his wife, but it was too late. They found the bodies of your father and his wife and

that of a son born later on. It was rumored that the oldest son was taken south and sold as a slave to a fighting school."

The knowledge that my mother and younger brother were dead too, hit me hard. My sacrifice for them had been in vain. They were all dead! Gone was the vague illusive dream of a reunion with the remnants of my family one day.

"You didn't know they all died, did you? I'm sorry for the loss my words have brought you!" he said softly.

"Continue with your story, how did you find me?" I asked, gruffly.

"Your grandfather never gave up searching for you. He heard word of a slave fighter in one of the southern cities that matched the description of the men of your family and he sent some agents to

investigate. They identified that you were indeed the one for whom they were searching. Your grandfather tried to rescue you on several occasions, but the attempts failed. He was preparing another rescue attempt for you when he received word that you had escaped. He has been looking for you ever since. He found out, with a liberal application of money, the identity of one of your contacts. From him and few other sources of information, we were able to piece together a probable location where we might find you. I was sent by the ruling high council of the Valley Lands, with the blessing of your grandfather. We want you to come home and assume your rightful place among us. Will you come home?"

I studied him carefully, my instinct

telling me there was something more to this. “After I do something for your high council first, I imagine,” I said rhetorically.

He chuckled softly, “You have the same way of reading the unspoken as your grandfather does. Yes, the high council does have an item of extreme interest that they would like for you to acquire and bring back with you to the Valley Lands, but it is not a condition for your return. You are free to return anytime you wish, Roric. The decision is entirely up to you.”

There was a silence that stretched out so long that the Valley Lander started to look apprehensive once again, as if fearing that I hadn’t believed him. “What is it that the council wants brought back to them?” I asked.

The man gave a relieved sigh and said, “We have essentially been cut off from the rest of the world. In particular, we have lost contact with a valuable spy of ours, who lives in the city of Kharta. This is all hostile territory to us.” He gestured around him, “I was surprised that I was able to get this far without being stopped. The spy has gathered vital intelligence for us for years, but we have been unable to make contact with him for some time now. We believe him to still be alive and we’re hoping that he has intelligence as to the time and strength of the assault that will be brought against us, as well as any weaknesses the enemy might have. We badly need that intelligence, if we are to protect the Valley Lands and keep them free. I would try to contact the spy

myself, but I know nothing of the lands further south and it has been a miracle, as I have already said, that I have reached this far and been successful in finding you. All we need for you to do is to go to Kharta, locate our spy, and, if possible, gain whatever information you can from him and then come home." He looked uncertainly at me.

I looked at those gathered around and knew that my decision wasn't going to be one well liked by my companions. "So, how do I find and contact this spy of yours in Kharta?"

My statement jarred them all awake, with a collective chorus of surprised grunts and exclamations. They were all looking at me now, as the firelight flickered onto their faces, creating odd shadows. They were undoubtedly a

rough looking crew, but I knew their finer points. They had, in a way, become to me like the family I had lost.

"I know you view me as your leader, but it is a position I have never asked for or pressed upon you. I've grown weary in this endless quest for revenge and so have a lot of you, if you're honest with yourselves."

At that statement there were several downcast faces in my audience.

"I need to find out if there is something better out there than just being an embittered, escaped slave on a revenge kick. If I find what I'm looking for, I promise that I will find you and share it with all of you. You have all become to me as the brother I once lost and it is not easy to leave, but I must!"

"Can we not come with you?" asked

Seth, a fighter that was forever getting himself into trouble and that I had saved more times than I could remember from those troubles.

"No, this is something I must do for myself. If I do not return by this time next month, I advise you to forsake the hope of ever seeing me again. If you would like some parting advice, it would be to disperse and give up this life of revenge as it is doing little good for any of us!"

That had all transpired fourteen days ago and much had happened since then. Awakening from my remembrance of the past I looked over at the boy still asleep by the fire.

The sky had grown dark and soon it would be time to wake the boy and move on. I gazed out over the Hagathic

Wastelands, wondering how I was going to get the information given to me by the spy in Kharta, and the spy's young son, safely to Kingdom Pass in the Valley Lands. I looked over at the lad, even in sleep his face was tight with the stress we both felt.

When I had arrived in Kharta it was to learn that the spy had already been discovered and was awaiting his execution. Kharta, while not occupied by the Zoarinians, was still very much controlled by them and they were only too willing to execute a spy on their behalf.

It had been very early in the morning when the guard on duty outside the jail access door breathed his last ragged breaths. I had eased his lifeless body down to the pavement, wiping my knife

off on his tunic as I did so, careful not to make a sound. I continued on into the stygian darkness of the city jail.

"Over here!" I heard someone cry out weakly.

The voice had come from further down the row of cells. As I drew closer to the voice and could make out more of its owner, I could see that he wasn't going to be able to go anywhere with me. In the condition he was in, it was unlikely he would live long enough to attend his own execution. I did not like the closed confines of the jail, which seemed to press in on me like a cage. I kneeled down beside the spy's cell.

"I knew they would send somebody for me. You're a little late though," he said wheezing, as he coughed up what appeared to be blood.

He had been worked over several times, judging by the different ages of the bruises and cuts I could see on his face and underneath his torn shirt.

"They tried to get me to tell them where I hid the intelligence reports, but I didn't! I didn't!"

The impassioned outburst cost him a lot of his remaining energy and he sagged back weakly against the bars of his cell. He reached through the bars with one hand, caught one of my hands and gripped it tightly, as desperation tinged his voice, "You must do one thing for me, and you must swear to do it or I won't tell you where the reports are!"

His intensity of gaze, and an indefinable desperation of spirit that radiated out from his eyes, forced me to concede and I nodded my head.

“You’re going to take my little boy with you! My boy is going to know what freedom is, especially the freedom to worship the Creator, without the fear or strictures of this place!” he spoke emphatically and painfully at the same time.

“Please! Swear you’ll take my boy with you!”

“I swear it!” I affirmed softly.

He collapsed back against the bars weakly, his grip on me loosening as he slumped down.

“Good! The reports are in the false bottom of a planter pot located where Rassian Street meets Gonda Way in the Sonna District of the city. You’ll find the boy at 56 Rassian Street. Tell the lady keeping him the code words, ‘The meadowlark flew away’, and she will

give you the boy and provisions for the journey. Now go, while it's still dark outside. You will have a better chance of getting out of the city with my boy before the alarm is raised. May the Creator see you on your way safely! Tell my boy I love him and that I wish I could be there for him, but that I have to stay here. He'll understand someday what this was all about."

I got up to leave, but his failing voice caught me before I started down the corridor.

"One more thing, leave me a knife if you would be so kind."

I glanced questioningly at him.

"I assure you, Sir, that I'm not the suicidal type, except for perhaps staying in the game longer than I should have. If I am to die here in this place, there is

someone that I very much want to take along with me," he said, with a raspy chuckle that abruptly caused him to gasp with pain.

Wordlessly, I pulled a small sharp dagger out from my left boot and handed it to him through the bars.

"Thank you again, Sir! Tell me by what name are you called?"

"I'm Roric," I replied simply.

"Ahh, I knew it! There was something about you that reminded me of my old friend. I'm glad to know that your grandfather found you at long last! I am at peace now, as assured as I can possibly be of my son's safety while in your care! Your father was one of the greatest warriors the Vallian people have ever had. All you Ta'lonts are forces of nature! It can only help our

fight for freedom to have another Ta'lont in the field of battle with us!"

Ta'lont? Was that my real last name? I wanted to ask this man so many things. He had known my father in a way I had never known, but there was simply no time to ask what I desired. I moved quietly out into the cool, still grayness of the early morning.

I heard him saying something before I was out of earshot, "Dear Lord, it looks like my time here is nearly up. Protect my boy and keep him safe. I love him so much. His mother and I have……."

The rest of what he said was lost to me as I was now out of earshot.

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I had scouted out the city yesterday and I remembered the street intersection the spy had spoken of. It wasn't far from

here.

The streets were empty of life, other than night critters that dug in the alleyways in search of scraps that had been thrown there from the day before. Reaching the intersection, I saw a row of large planter pots going up Rassian Street just as the spy had said. The report was in a false bottom of one of these pots, the spy had said. I came up alongside the first pot and tapped the porcelain outer shell of the flower pot, near the bottom, with the butt of a knife, but no echo resounded from it. I continued up the row of pots, with no luck at finding the hollow bottomed pot.

My studied calm began to crack as there were at least fifty or more pots to go. It was getting lighter with every passing second and with it the likelihood

of getting caught. Maybe the spy had lost it and there were no reports in a hollow bottomed pot after all. Maybe they only existed in his cracked imagination. Sweat had started to bead on my forehead and it ran into my eyes. A light had come on here and there; it wouldn't be long now before I was noticed!

I started to walk away, when I saw the house number, Rassian Street thirty one. Having an idea, I suddenly skipped ahead to the pot outside the boy's house. Grabbing my knife from my waist band, I tapped the pot with the haft. Dong! Excited, I swung the haft of the knife again like a hammer against the pot's side and the sound of breaking pottery echoed loudly up and down the street, but nobody seemed to have heard it. An oil skin pouch lay in the hollow cavity of

the underside of the pot and in it I found the spy's documents. I stuffed the oil skin pouch inside my shirt and made my way towards the door of the house.

I knocked briskly on the door and it opened almost immediately, surprising me by the suddenness of the action. A middle aged woman stood before me with worry lines creased across her face as she studied me. I repeated the words that the spy had given me. Nodding, she turned and called to someone behind her. A boy stepped past her to stand in front. The woman gave him a tight hug, kissed him on the head and then shut the door quickly, as tears streamed out from the corners of her eyes. The boy turned away from the closed door to face me. The boy was a sturdy looking one and he bore the pack on his back well.

“When do I see my father?” he asked almost immediately, with an earnest eagerness.

I shook my head stiffly and said, “He’s not coming with us.”

“I see,” said the boy softly.

He looked away from me, ducking his head down as he did so. It was growing lighter by the second. We needed to get out of here before the changing of the guard at the jail took place and they closed the cities’ gates.

“We need to go, follow me quickly and as silently as you can. Can you ride a horse?”

“Yes, a little anyway,” he said, lifting his head back up. I pretended not to see the moistness gathered in the corners of his eyes.

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We were miles away from the city when I looked back and saw the first signs of pursuit in the distance. From then on our lives had been one of constant action. We moved northward in an irregular manner as I eluded the pursuit that had gradually grown more distant.

It was dark enough now to move on and I woke the boy, who came awake, startled. We mounted up and I led the way through the darkness that was gently highlighted by the glow of a half moon. I looked back after an hour and saw that the boy was almost asleep in the saddle, as he relied more on his horse's natural instinct to follow mine than consciously directing its path himself. It was working for the boy so I let him be and monitored his horse's progress a little closer to

make sure he continued following me.

The boy hadn't said a word since we had left Kharta. Looking at him now, hunched over in the saddle with a blanket wrapped around him to ward off the night's chill, reminded me of the awesome responsibility I had taken upon myself to get this boy to safety in the Valley Lands. I should have left him behind for both our sakes. Still, I didn't regret my decision completely. If I could get this boy to a better life than I had experienced it would be worth the risk, at least in some ways. Having the boy along had changed my escape route considerably though. He wasn't up to an all out run for the Valley Lands so I had decided on a route that I hoped our pursuers wouldn't expect. Instead of taking the obvious route further up

through the Hagathic Wastelands, I was taking a gamble on another route. I was going to bypass the Zoarinian forces that I felt sure awaited us on the other side of the Hagathic Wastelands by going partially through the Plains of Zoar, the very heartland of the enemy.

I doubted that my pursuers would expect even me to do something crazy like that. I would avoid the Zoarinian outposts stationed along the northern border of the Plain of Zoar, by hiring a Kawnia Lake fisherman to take us across the lake and drop us off on the shores of the Silepsium Moors. From there it would be a straight shot to Kingdom Pass and the Valley Lands beyond.

*****

Two days later we made it into the Lomar Swamplands and if I hadn't lost anyone still on our tail by now, then I wasn't going to.

I had gone back to the camp where I had left my men, hoping to increase the strength of our party northward. But the camp had been deserted with castoff supplies and clothes laying around, like my friends had left in a hurry, without time to pack. I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to cause them to leave one of our most secure camps so hastily. Perhaps it hadn't been so secure given that the Valley Lander had found us. Just how had he been able to do that? Blind luck I guess.

I had been looking out for my friends for so long now that I felt like I was

somehow at fault for the hard times that seemed to have befallen them in my absence. They would have to make do for themselves from now on, because I wasn't going back to the life of a bandit. My responsibility was to get the boy to safety as I had promised his father and then get the reports to the high council of the Valley Lands. After that, other things would occur. What they might be I wasn't sure, I'd just have to discover them along the way. I was anxious to meet this grandfather who had been searching for me for so long. Maybe when I was in the land of my father my purpose in life would be clearer to me. I hoped so.

*****

I parted the heavy knot of reeds in front of me slightly to glance towards the

boats pulled up in the sand across from us. The water was up to my waist and it was surprisingly cold for this time of year.

I watched as the Kawnia Lake fishermen finished hauling in the day's catch from their fishing boats. Having finished their task, they started off towards the sleepy village in the distance. I waited until the sun had almost disappeared over the horizon before I felt it was safe for us to move from the heavy reeds where we were hidden.

We had run straight into a Zoarinian patrol two nights ago. It had been a unexpected surprise for both parties. In the chase that followed, we'd had to practically run our horses into the ground to avoid capture. Last night, I had

released the horses so that they would lay down a false trail for our pursuers to follow and we had set off on foot towards the lake, hoping that the patrol would take the bait and follow our worn out mounts instead of us.

It seemed to have worked out so far in our favor, but there was nothing favorable about our current circumstances. The water we stood in was dark and it stank. Dead fish and lake debris swirled around us in the murky water, but that wasn't the worst of it. Leeches! I could feel them sliding along my flesh and then the sudden pinch of pain when they latched on and started to suck my blood.

All I wanted to do right now was roll in a barrel of salt until every last one of the retched things shriveled up and fell

off. I hate bugs and anything close to it, especially leeches. The arena dungeons had been full of bugs and the poor excuses of what passed for medicinal experts assigned to patching up fighters had employed the heavy use of leaches in all their remedies. I had grown to loath both. It was all I could do to remain calm as I stood there.

The boy looked as miserable as I felt. “Okay, they're gone, let’s go!”

We waded through the reeds over to the beach, where I slid a small, sturdy looking craft with a single small sail out into the waters of the lake. Pushing it further out into the current, I reached for the boy and lifted him into the skiff and then climbed in myself. I rowed away from the shore for awhile to get some distance between us and the beach and

then I unfurled the sail and set the rudder on a course to take us to the northern side of the lake.

After I had tied the rudder off, I turned to the boy, “Now that we’re on our way, let’s get off these stinking, bloodsucking leeches!”

Chapter Three

Hunted

We sailed through the night and most of the next day before we reached the far end of the lake, which bordered the Silepsium Moors. I had never seen a more foreboding stretch of land as was laid out before me now. Not even the Hagathic Wastelands could compare with the somber mood of these moors.

I kept my reservations about the gloomy moors to myself though. No need to infect the boy with my uneasiness. I pulled the boat up onto the shore and

after a brief meal of fish we started out into the moors.

The boy stuck close enough that he could have been my shadow. He was still as silent as he had been since we'd left Kharta. That night we had another fire and ate some more fish along with a few wild vegetables that I had managed to scavenge on the way.

Things were going well for us until the next day. As we were traveling along through the scrub brush of the moors a sense of foreboding came over me. We were being watched! I glanced at the boy behind me and I could see that he sensed something was different as well. Perceptive boy, I thought approvingly to myself. I put my hand on his shoulder reassuringly, and felt him draw slightly closer to me. I had been followed

before, it was in fact almost a daily occurrence in my life, but this feeling of being followed was different in some way. It took me a couple of hours of puzzling over it to realize what was different and by then it was almost too late.

I didn't tell the boy. It would only have stressed him out more and he would find out soon enough what was following us. I quickened our pace through the dense brush, searching the gathering darkness ahead of us for a spot to make a good account of ourselves and perhaps live out the night.

We weren't being followed by humans. Moor wolves were shadowing us! I had heard the stories and the stories had been enough to convince me that I didn't want any part of them.

Unfortunately I did have them, quite a lot of them. Moor wolves traveled in packs. Although I had never seen the wolves of my home country, I had heard they were of a bigger build than these moor wolves and remained solitary for most of their lives.

I could see wolves ghosting along behind us now, through the gathering shadows.

Snap!

Looking off to my right I saw another wolf lurking not twenty yards off to the side. That was a bad sign. The wolves of my home country didn't hunt men as a rule, but I had heard that if moor wolves were hungry they would attack just about anything. The boy had noticed the wolves and his pace after me quickened even more. These wolves were

definitely interested in us as prey. They were moving in on us now, which was a clear indicator that they had gone past the point of being merely curious about our presence here.

We didn't have much time left to us and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw what I had been looking for up ahead of us in the gathering darkness. It was a shallow impression in the land, which was surrounded by boulders on three sides.

"Over there, boy!" I said, directing the boy ahead of me because the wolves were more likely to go for him first.

"Stay back between these boulders, while I hold them off from the front."

"No!"

Surprised, I glanced down at the boy, who had suddenly given proof that he

could still speak and quite vehemently at that. “No?” I asked.

“I want to help you!”

I nearly insisted that he do as I had told him to do, but I glimpsed the desperate need in his eyes and thought better of it. I liked the boy’s spunk.

“Okay then,” I drew my short sword from the holster on my back and handed it to the boy. The blade was just light enough for him to handle, without it being too cumbersome for him to manage. “Stay behind me and protect my back.”

He nodded his head vigorously in response as he gripped the sword hard enough to squeeze impressions on the steel handle. He was still pretty much where I had wanted him from the beginning, but he was there under his

own terms and I respected that as a sign of strength that hinted at the kind of stalwart man he would someday be.

The sudden yipping and snarling taking place around us told me that the time for survival was once again upon us, as we faced off against man's ancient foe, the wolf. I withdrew my sword and turned to face the snarling, yellow-eyed assailants arrayed out before me in a half circle.

There were five of them. A big mangy eared male made the first move as he lunged toward me. I half knelt forward on one knee and ripped my blade through the length of his stomach while he was in mid flight and then quickly stepped aside to avoid his falling carcass. As his trailing death yip sounded, I flung myself to the right, away from the boy, and

decapitated a second wolf in one fluid swing of the blade in my hand. I quickly launched myself towards a third wolf off to my left. I heard an anguished yip sound behind me as I attacked the third wolf. The wolf tried to retreat, but my blade found its heart first.

I wheeled around, sword at the ready as fear gnawed at me, to see what had become of the boy and the other wolves during my time away. What I found was a dead wolf lying at my feet that had been brutally hacked several times. My gaze went from the dead wolf to the blood dripping from the boy's sword. I glanced up the blade to the boy's white knuckled hands and finally my eyes drifted to the boy's frightened but proud face.

"Nice job!" I said, meaning every bit

of it.

I saw a tremulous smile emerge on the boy's face. Without this kid watching my back, I would most likely have had a moor wolf's teeth wrapped around the back of my neck or calf muscle.

I heard the rustling in the brush as the last wolf escaped the scene as fast as it could go. The boy, trying to act calm and collected after his first test of emerging maturity, wiped the blood off the short sword with a rag and made as if to hand it back to me, but I declined it.

Holding up my hands in refusal I said, "No, keep it! You've earned it. It's yours now."

I saw a look of heartfelt gratitude flood into the boy's eyes as if I'd just given him the moon. It felt good to give it to him. I wanted to do more of it,

because I liked feeling as I did right now.

I asked, “What’s your name boy? I can’t keep calling you, boy.”

“Call me, Larc,” the boy said.

“Larc, it is then. Let’s get out of here and bed down somewhere else for the night.”

After several days of walking and living off the land we saw the end of the moors come into view. The Litian River lay beyond the moors, as it snaked through the plains at the base of the majestic mountains that rose up in the distance. I had never been this close to the Vallian Mountains before.

I wanted to see what lay up among those lofty peaks and the green valleys that I'd heard existed on the other side of

the mountains.

The land of my father's was so close! An intense desire to discover my ancestral homeland overwhelmed me and I found myself walking faster, but I pulled myself back to a sane pace for the boy's sake.

It took awhile to get to the edge of the moors, but when we did I saw something that disturbed me. A mounted warrior was stationed just on our side of the turbulent river. He was alone, but even more curious was that the warrior had three saddled horses with him. He was waiting for someone. Was the warrior waiting for us? It was unlikely, but what other explanation could there be for his presence here with extra saddled horses. Why three horses? They must have known about the boy, but hadn't sought

fit to inform me about the additional passenger. That annoyed me.

Larc whispered, “Roric, is he a Valley Lander?”

“Yes, I think so,” I whispered back.

I didn’t like it, but I saw little other choice in the matter. We needed those horses. “Follow close behind me,” I said, as I stood up from hiding and started walking down from the elevated knoll of the moor towards the warrior by the river.

Larc stood and made to follow me but hesitated for a moment, “I don’t like it, Roric. Something doesn’t feel right about this!”

Glancing back at him I replied, “I don’t like it either Larc, but we need those horses.”

The mounted warrior noticed our approach almost immediately, but he stayed where he was with one hand holding the reins of the other three horses. The other hand, I noticed, was not far from the sword on his hip. As we drew closer to him something about our appearance must have given him confidence that we were the party he had been waiting for, because he smiled openly and said, “It’s good to see you, for it is tired I am of sitting out here in the open like a hobbled goat in front of a marsh cat den!”

I liked the man. I replied simply, “Sorry for the delay, but we got here as fast as we could. I wasn’t expecting to find you here waiting for us, but it’s a good thing as we need to get out of here quickly. Pursuit might not be too far

behind us."

The man nodded and then said, "I was told to expect three; an old man, a warrior, and a boy."

"The boy's father didn't make it," I replied.

Shaking his head solemnly, the warrior glanced over to Larc and said, "Sorry lad! Your father was a good man. He will be missed. Here, mount up now and let's get you to your mother."

The sound of whiffs of ruffled air announced the presence of the arrows even before I saw four of them smack into the warrior's chest, causing him to reel back in his saddle from the shock of their impact. Choking on his own blood, the warrior cried out to me even as he tossed the reins of the saddled horses at me, "Get away from here and save the

boy!" I leaped into one of the empty saddles and pulled Larc up behind me. As I swung the horse around to face the moors from the direction the arrows had come from, Zoarinian longbowmen started standing up from their concealment all along the line of the moor dunes. There had to be at least two dozen or more of them, which was most likely how many arrows would be sticking out of Larc and I if we tried to make a break for it.

Two groups of horsemen pulled out of concealment in the moors to either side of us and started toward us, riding along the river. I debated for a brief moment about grabbing Larc and throwing him and myself into the river, but even if we survived the raging current of the river we wouldn't make it far without horses.

I hated the feeling of helplessness that washed over me. If I had been alone I would have made a try at getting away, but I had the boy to consider. I had to do what was best for him. Our best option, it would seem, was to bide our time, be patient, and wait for an opportunity to escape, if the opportunity came. I'd had to wait nine years the first time to get an opportunity to escape. I don't think I could do that again.

*****

They evidently wanted us alive, as they had not fired upon us. That was at least something positive. I sat where I was and watched as the Zoarinian soldiers closed in on us. It was one of the hardest things I had ever done to just sit there and do nothing. I felt Larc's arms get tighter around me as they

closed in on us, “It’s okay, Larc, we’ll get out of this. You wait and see.”

After we had been disarmed they mounted us on separate horses and tied us to the saddles. A cloaked figure rode up and flipped back his hood, chuckling as he did so. I recognized the Valley Lander warrior who had recruited me for this assignment. At my look of surprise on recognizing him he said, “I know. I know. You’re surprised aren’t you. Roric, it’s really very simple. The Valley Landers and their pathetic allies, the Tranquil Islanders, don’t stand a chance of winning against the power of the Zoarinians. It may seem that I am betraying my people in the here and now, I grant you, but once this nasty conflict is over, I’ll be able to help my people rebuild our nation better than it

was before. We'll advance on as a people, no longer hindered by the outdated practices that force our culture to a standstill. I've been promised an administrator position over Artanis itself!" He finished confidently, looking as if he genuinely expected me to agree with him that he was, in fact, loyal to his country and not a traitor, when all his actions amounted to was cowardice wrapped in a cloak of power hungry envy.

"Is honor so cheap a sentiment that you're willing to squander it all for a position of power and influence? You are, by this one act of treason, wiping out the efforts of all your ancestors before you to be free. The noble ideals that they've fought and died for, for countless generations before you, all

gone now because of you! Just so you can have a bigger piece of a pie that in reality doesn't even exist!" I looked him over contemptuously, wishing for a weapon so that I might slit his traitorous throat.

One guard leaned over in the saddle and backhanded me across the face. It hurt, but I smiled back at him in return. He made as if to do it again, but the traitor motioned him to stop. "Roric, if you live much longer, which I doubt, you will find out that honor has very little to do with helping one get through life comfortably and besides what would you, an escaped arena rat, know of honor in the first place?"

The soldiers around us laughed as if it was a good joke, but I gave no response, which seemed to anger Lent a little

because he pulled his mount around abruptly and rode to the head of the column.

*****

They took us to Cassis. It was odd, and yet highly ironic, how the beginning of all the calamity that had befallen me in my life should be where I found myself in the end.

I hated this city. I had come here as a boy, marveling, but as a man I cursed it with my eyes. Gradually the opulence of the city encroached around us as we entered deeper into it. Buildings reached for the sky boldly, trying to make up for the flatness of the plain on which they were built, even as garishly colored silks flapped in the breeze coming from the sea.

They took us to the citadel located in

the middle of the city. The citadel was built more for the appearance of force rather than any strategic initiative. It was in no position to defend the city should it be attacked. But then, the Zoarinians were confident that was an option beyond the realm of possibilities, as who could face their superior numbers on the field of battle and win?

The streets were thronged with the denizens of the city, who were just as colorful in attire and appearance as their city. Rich colors and a plethora of wares for sale were to be seen on display all around us. One got the feeling that anything, and everything, could be bought in this city if the price was right. I knew full well the dark hidden secrets that lay around each street corner and in the people themselves. Seeing all this

again brought back the buried memories of my years spent in the arena dungeons. The memories forced their way into my consciousness and made me long for unconsciousness or a diversion of some kind so that I could push away the dark thoughts swirling in my mind.

We were led, chained, into the governor's judgment hall. Rich gilded tapestries hung from the high walls around us. The ceiling of the hall was vaulted along its entire length in a display of powerful craftsmanship. Ornate chandeliers hung down from the center beam of the roof and illuminated the hall brightly, for there were no windows to shed their natural light on the scene. There was an elevated dais at the far end of the hall located under the ceremonial banner of the city of Cassis.

Court guards were lined along the walls and we passed through them on our way to the upraised dais and the figure that sat there.

Reaching the dais, we were forced to kneel at the base of the steps leading up to it. Iraca, the governor of Cassis, spoke in a smug tone of voice, “Well done, Lent! You shall be richly rewarded for your invaluable services. You may go now to collect them.” He waived Lent off with one hand.

“Thank you, sire!” Lent said as he fairly bounded to his feet and turned to exit the room, only to be met with a sword that sliced through his middle. Half turning back to the governor, which tore the imbedded sword from the executioner’s hand, he stared disbelievingly up at Iraca. As the fear of

death clouded into his face he croaked out, “You promised me a reward! You promised!” He sank to the floor, as his disbelieving eyes remained focused on the governor.

The governor sneered down at Lent, “I’ve given you the only reward that every Valley Lander can expect at the hands of the Zoarinian Empire, which is death! Get him out of here! He’s staining my rugs!”

The governor returned his attention to us as Lent’s body was dragged away. “And now, let us get down to business. It took some doing Roric, but I have to congratulate you on delivering the boy safely into our hands.” The governor chuckled. Puzzled, I looked over at Larc, who looked back at me blankly and shrugged. “You didn’t think we knew

about the boy's father spying on us and the supposedly valid intelligence that he had gathered on our battle plans for our conquest of the north, did you?" the governor asked. Laughing he continued, "We fed him that information. It's all quite useless you see, with just enough truth added in to keep it believable. Everything you've done and risked for this boy has been for nothing!" The governor was clearly delighted with himself.

"I don't understand! Why is the boy important? He's just a harmless boy! Let him go! He's done nothing wrong!" I spoke angrily, shaking the chains binding my hands in front of me.

"My dear boy, you don't understand the rat's nest that you've become involved in, do you! The boy is more

important than you know and far more important than just a common brigand such as yourself!"

I looked at Larc, not understanding, and then back to the governor as he began to elaborate.

"We would have preferred his mother, but alas, she slipped through our fingers years ago."

"My mother is dead!" Larc said defensively, speaking up for the first time.

"No, she's quite alive and well actually. She is a member of the Valley Lander high council. In charge of their security sector, such as it is," mused the governor.

"We suspected that the boy was still in Kharta, but we lacked knowledge as to where he might be. The boy's father

had outlived his usefulness, and the decision had been made to terminate him, when we received word through our sources of the intended rescue of the boy and his father. The father may have outlived his usefulness but the boy, however, is still quite useful to us. Through him we will manipulate his dear mother to allow our agents access to strategic points of interest, which will aid us in our invasion of the Valley Lands. What do you think will best get the picture of the new state of affairs across to his mother, a finger or a whole hand?"

I lunged for him, gaining several steps up the dais, before I was jerked back to the bottom by the guards behind me.

The governor got up with some effort, "Roric, you too have outlived your

usefulness. The only reason that I don't end your miserable, misbegotten life now is that your demise has been requested by other important parties in a much more exciting manner, so I am led to understand. Take him to the high priestess! She has requested an evening's time with the famous outlaw before he meets his demise in the arena tomorrow. No doubt this evening's entertainment will make the pain of what you will be losing tomorrow all the more acutely felt!" The governor burst out laughing.

His laughter was soon followed by the echoing chorus of guards and courtiers up and down the hall.

Chapter Four

Temptations Lane

I was led back out of the citadel and into the city. Larc had been drug off into the inner depths of the citadel, kicking and screaming. Hot anger coursed through me, but I kept it from showing and passively followed wherever my captors led me, biding my time until a chance to escape presented itself.

About an hour later I found myself climbing the stairs of the temple of pleasures, as they were often called throughout the Zoarinian Empire and

neighboring lands. My steps, the steps of an unwilling man, were far different than those of the eager steps of the frequent visitors of this place. The sounds of drunken revelry spilled out of the temple balconies and polluted the evening air. I had no desire to see any of it. In short, these temples of pleasure were an abomination.

They were populated with the fair youth of the empire. It was considered a great honor throughout the land of the Zoarinians to be selected as a temple girl or boy. The position brought wealth to their families, who, all too willingly, sold them to the temple magistrates. The boys and girls were raised to attend to the carnal and ceremonial needs of the temple consortium and its body of believers.

A believer was anyone who could pay enough to the temple magistrates to buy their way in the door to enjoy the forbidden pleasures that lay within. The temples were viewed with favor by almost all Zoarinians, as they brought entertainment and diversion from the stresses of everyday life to the general populace and wealth to those in positions of power.

It was the desire of almost every Zoarinian to see and participate in what lay beyond the gilded doors at least once in their lives. Those who had visited once felt an even greater desire to return and waste their lives laboring to fund the continued pursuit of the ultimate in self gratification. The depravity didn't stop there, however.

The children, who resulted from the

frequent liaisons of the temple priestesses, were sacrificed to the gods of the Zoarinian Empire upon birth. It was believed that these acts of innocent human sacrifice, in homage to the gods of the land, renewed the land by keeping it fertile and the people healthy. It was a custom that was observed by many outside the temple grounds and throughout the Zoarinian Empire. To their way of thinking, more sacrifices could only be a good thing if it brought continued prosperity; not to mention freeing the parents from the need of caring for unwanted offspring.

As I was led up the stairs, I thought over all I knew of the customs of these people. I shook my head in wonder over their lunacy. I thought of my own mother and tried to picture her offering me and

my brother up as sacrifices and I just couldn't. My parents had something in them that had set them apart from these people and they had been hated for it. With the Creator's help, I'd become just like my parents, that is, if I survived long enough.

The Creator must surely hate the activities of these people! All I could wonder was why He hadn't already torched the place! For their sins, these people were certainly deserving of destruction, even as I had been. I had turned to a different path, but I doubted that these people would ever do that, as they loved the twisted lives that they led and had no desire to change.

"The city remains because I have those yet within it that are faithful to Me," came the whisper into my

consciousness. It answered my question and sent a ripple of awareness through me that my Creator had not forsaken me, but was even now here with me in this ordeal. It comforted me to know that I didn't have to face what lay beyond the doors ahead alone and I felt strength flow through me at that awareness. With renewed confidence I lifted my head to face the future head-on.

Completing our journey up the wide steps we made our way through the open doors of the temple. Fires blazed brightly in the temple, keeping the cool evening air at bay. Vibrantly colored silks and crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings and the massive pillars of the temple halls, while vibrant tapestries adorned the walls. The scenes portrayed around me were set off by the richness

of their surroundings. Some sights and sounds disgusted me, while others threatened to enslave me with the tempting pleasure they offered.

Trying to control a body I suddenly hated, because of its betrayal of me, I turned my head forward and concentrated on two pillars at the end of the long hall across which we were traversing. The women here were very attractive, and the sight of their barely clothed or completely bare bodies, as was the case for some, threatened to overwhelm my senses. The seductive welcome in their eyes and the sensual grace with which they moved was as provocative as the sight of them. The activities of the men around me, however, acted as a slap in the face, keeping my perspective of the

wrongness of this place alive in my consciousness.

I was filled with disgust as I saw what they were doing in various places in the hall around me. Their activities reminded me of the vileness that had only been too common in the dungeons of the arena, when men had forgotten their created purpose and settled for something less and unnatural. Boys being used in the place of women was horrible and yet the room was filled with such debauchery and worse. Even the women were inordinately focused on giving each other pleasure, which made no sense to me.

Was this display of hedonistic wantonness supposed to be the example of what the world should be more like? If it was, I wanted no part of such a

world where everything that had been created so perfectly had now been reversed into the shameful self degradation of an individual's created glory and purpose.

It was as if, in the height of the immoral decadence which was on display all around me, the beauty and rightness of one man and one woman enjoying each other had been twisted into a thousand disgusting lesser forms of affectation. Why would a man hunger for something other than the beauty of a woman, and why would a woman settle for the affection of another woman, when only a man could ultimately fulfill and complete her deepest needs?

I thought of my mother and father and the way they had been with each other. My mother had been a beautiful woman

too, but she would have looked completely out of place in this hall. Not for any lack of beauty on her part, but simply because she wasn't the kind of person to share herself with anybody else other than my father. Often, as a boy, I had covertly observed instances where she would simply look deeply at my father or say something softly to him; which usually resulted in their unexplained absence, often lasting hours, a short while later.

Witnessing how they had been with each other had both relaxed me and made me want the same in a relationship one day. My mother hadn't had to dress as these women did or display half the open eroticism that they displayed to completely overwhelm my father. I had never once seen him regard another

woman other than my mother. What they'd had was special in a way that wouldn't and couldn't be understood in this place of such moral reversal and discontentment with what was naturally ordained.

The beauty of these women only went skin deep and knowing that helped me to disregard any earlier desires I'd had for them. The women that had drawn seductively toward me seemed to sense the change in my demeanor and, like candles extinguished, their looks of open invitation disappeared and were replaced with disinterested looks of hostility as they moved away to partake in pleasures elsewhere.

Feeling the weight of the spirit of the place lift off me with my denial, I noticed something about the place that I

hadn't seen before. In the bare open areas of exposed wall between the rich tapestries, shadows danced.

The shadows numbered many more than the people moving in front of the light, given off by the many fires throughout the great hall. There were thousands of them! A sudden chill swept through me as I heard the sound of terrible laughter ring throughout the hall, drowning out all else. It almost paralyzed me mid step, so frightened was I at the sound of the laughter.

"Peace Roric, you can hear them, but they can't touch you as I have sealed you for My purposes as long as you remain faithful to My will."

I felt peace settle over me as I felt the words pour into my innermost being, even as the sound of laughter grew

louder and more hateful in pitch all around me.

Curiously, I looked around the place. The laughter was deafening, but no one here seemed to be hearing any of it. Not even the guards, who prodded me along, gave any indication that they were hearing what I heard. Were they all so unaware of the foul spirits they were keeping company with?

There was no peace in this place, other than the peace I felt within my own soul at the steady words of encouragement spoken into me by my Creator. What must hell be like when all those lost and led astray, by their own desires of self-gratification, became aware of where their paths of pleasure had taken them and whose will they had been so busy accomplishing while

alive? What must the full weight of the emptiness of their lives and actions feel like, when it became clear to them what they had missed out on for all of eternity?

It was scary to know how close I had come to making the same mistake myself. It was even scarier to think of falling back into my errant ways and rejecting the ways of the Creator, whom I was just now learning to serve. I said a silent prayer for the futures of all those around me. I prayed that they would wake up to the reality that I was even now beginning to see as plain as day. Who knew? Perhaps it had been someone's prayer for me that had steered me back onto the right path in life.

At last, we came to a pair of double doors at the end of one of the long halls.

One of my guards stepped forward and knocked on the door.

"Enter," came the muted reply from within. The guards swung the double doors open and I entered the room, which was shrouded in darkness. A single candle, on an end table near a shuttered window, cast its glow feebly out into the room.

"Leave us!" came a sharply spoken command from a darkened corner of the room.

The guards shifted hesitantly as they glanced at each other uncertainly, "Go now!"

The guards hastily exited the room closing the heavy doors behind them as they left. Many a man who had defied a temple priestess, or even just displeased one, had found himself dead or wishing

that he was dead. My own family had once fallen prey to such a vindictive action by a priestess.

I stared into the darkened corner of the room where the voice had come from, hoping to discern who or what resided there.

As if in answer to my probing gaze, a voice softer and more feminine than it had sounded before replied, “You have your father’s way about you, that is of a certainty.”

A shadow separated from the darkness of the corner of the room and became clearer as it came into the dim light of the candle and was revealed as a beautiful woman. She carried herself with grace and dignity, which was hard to imagine in a place like this. She was

resplendently dressed in a scarlet colored gown that echoed the temple's opulent embellishments. Her choice of clothing, while provocative, was not what I had expected of a high temple priestess. She was more covered up rather than less, which puzzled me considering the attire or lack of it by the other women I had seen so far. I was puzzled, until I gazed into her eyes and face.

Her face was evenly proportioned, with clean straight lines and skin that showed no signs of wrinkling or the effects of a hard life spent surviving in the elements. Deep blue, intelligent eyes gleamed like faceted sapphires from her face. It was her eyes that hinted at what made this woman more formidable than any other woman in the place. I felt the

impact of her gaze on me like fire! A man could easily lose himself in a pair of eyes like that. Panicking somewhat, I broke eye contact with her and made to step back, but the door was there. I pressed back against it, wanting out of the room.

The priestess said, even softer than before, “And his self control, too.”

I looked at her again quickly and saw that her face had changed. Her face was now filled with a look of sorrow and remorse that I would never have expected to see in a place like this.

The realization of what her words hinted at flooded me with anger, and in two steps I was across the space between us with my chained hands wrapped around her throat. She made no move to resist as my hands tightened on

her throat.

"It was you that destroyed my family! Everything that's gone forever and that has happened since is because of you, isn't it?" I cried out, giving her a violent shake.

She nodded, even as a single tear welled out of the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek. As the tear touched the skin of my hand and dissipated, so did some of my anger. 'She deserves to die, and pay for what she has done!' came the angry thought coursing through me as I suddenly felt resistance to killing her.

My hands tightened further around her throat as I asked, "Tell me, why shouldn't I end your worthless life here and now?"

"The children!" she responded, half

choking, which caused me to see that I was practically strangling her to death.

I loosened my grip some and she gasped for air. Sensing that it was somehow wrong to kill her in cold blood, I stepped back, disgusted at myself and puzzled at her answer as well.

"The children? What about these children?" I asked roughly.

Moving to a chair in the room, she sat down somewhat stiffly as she felt at her throat with a hand.

"You were saying about the children?" I restated testily.

Looking back up at me she began, "After your father refused all of my advances I felt gravely insulted. I was young then and full of myself. I made up my mind to kill him and the woman that

he had chosen over me. If he wasn't going to be mine, he wasn't going to be anyone's. You've seen this place and the living filth of its occupants! I loved it and all its unseemly passions with all my heart."

I looked down at her condemningly, seeing through her words what had brought the end of all that I had held dear in life.

Crying softly she continued, "Which explains why I sacrificed two of my own children to the gods of this land. I did it myself, with these two hands! Do you know how real a curse can be? I only became aware of the curse my life had become after I ordered your father's death and received back word of its completion. Instead of joy at the news, all I felt was a crushing emptiness. I

threw myself into the acts of selfish indulgence that this place has to offer, but there was no joy in any of it. No peace! I became aware, for the first time in my life, of just how meaningless my existence had become. I looked at everything that I had done and I was overwhelmed by the grotesque monster that I had become. I couldn't stand it! The willful slaughter of my own babies and your family haunted me day and night. I made up my mind to end it all. I went to one of the high balconies of the temple. I was balanced on the railing of the balcony, ready to jump, when a warm breeze blew the scent of a nearby flower to me. The smell of the flower overwhelmed me with its fragrance. It was the first thing I had truly sensed in the weeks of grayness and internal

misery. It got my attention like nothing else. It reminded me of the sweetness of spirit that I had lost. When you live as I had done, you find out very quickly that there are powers that go unseen in this world. There is evil. This place is a place dedicated to the worship of that evil. The dark spirits of this place dominate the people within. They revel at our carnality and our lustful desires. They feed off our foolish sins and encourage the people of this place to greater extremes of depravity. Why do we do this? Why do we serve such dark masters? These dark spirits create nothing but havoc and suffering wherever they go. The seeds of impurity spill out of this place and others like it and infect all that surrounds it. As everything is reduced to self expression

and selfish desires, kindness of spirit is lost and the only love remaining is love of self. I was their instrument. I allowed myself to be used by them to do unspeakable things. All this was made real to me, as I smelled the purity of the flower's scent. There was no hope left in me that anything could ever redeem what I had lost, until that flower reminded me that there is a Creator. A Creator that made everything to be good. It was I that chose to use my beauty for my own selfish whims. It was I that made what was beautiful into a thing to be loathed. The smell of the flower let me know just how far I had fallen from the good creation I was created to be. I was about to jump when a man's hand appeared beside me as I stood on the railing. He asked me if I would like to

step down. I asked him who he was because I had never seen him before and he did not look like a man who would frequent a place like the temple. He smiled and said, 'I am the Son of the Creator and I would like you to look at that flower over there a little closer.' I don't know why, but I took His hand and let Him help me down. I followed the aroma to the actual flower and I was surprised. It was a single little blossom on a vine that was gnarled and almost broken off in places. I had assumed that the aroma was from the flowers planted by the temple gardeners as there are many flowers around the temple. I had smelled none for weeks, except for this one. The vine clung precariously to the granite of a temple pillar. It wasn't planted in the fertile ground of the courts

below, but it sprang out of a crack near the top of the pillar. The flower was the only one on the vine and it was small, but it was beautiful. I leaned closer to look at it and smell it once more. Peering into the flower the colors faded and were replaced with a reflection of my own face. Drawing back startled, I turned to the man, whom I hadn't noticed standing there. 'What is this?' 'Treorna, the flower and the vine represent your life,' He had replied. 'You have rooted your life in a precarious spot and the paths you have taken and the decisions you have made have hurt you severely, but yet you are very precious and not something to be cast away. Won't you change your path and follow Me? Let Me plant you in a sure place and give you the nourishment needed to grow and

flourish into the person you were created to be.' He spoke kindly. ‘Me?’ I asked, in disbelief. ‘Yes.’ ‘But I’m filthy and I’ve done things! Unspeakable things! How can You want me after the things I’ve done?’ Looking at me He said, “What you have said is true. You are guilty of much and deserve death, but I offer you life. Follow Me and forsake your past deeds and do them no more and I will forgive you and give you a new future. One that will last forever.'”

She paused in her narrative. Still not quite believing her story, I said peevishly, “So, I guess you didn’t jump.”

Smiling, she looked up at me and said, “No, Roric, I didn’t jump.” Feeling like a chastised little boy under her gaze, I fidgeted, waiting for her to continue.

She began again, “I accepted the new

path offered to me and it completely changed me. Since then, I've never been the same. I could have walked away from the temple life then and there and enjoyed a peaceful life away from the darkness of this city. However, I got the feeling that although I had the Creator's blessing to leave there was more to be gained by staying here and helping to right the wrongs of this place. I've had to be wise about it though. The people here see only what they want to see. The vision that you saw, when you first came in here, is still what they see because that is what I want them to see. It is safer that they see me as such so that the mission that I have undertaken has less of a chance of being discovered."

"This mission concerns children?" I asked.

Nodding her head she said, “Yes. You see, contrary to popular belief, there have been no sacrificial slayings of newborns since I took over the high priestess position in charge of the sacrifice. Only a select few know of this, however. The children are switched for fake doll babies before the ceremony and, as high priestess, I preside over the ceremony as the head executioner. A position is unchallenged by the other priestesses as they much prefer someone else to perform the actual sacrificial slaying of their newborns rather than themselves. The real babies are smuggled outside of the city to an outlying farm that I’ve set up to care for them.”

Crossing my arms I stared at her, “I find it hard to believe that this has

evaded the notice of the temple priests!"

"Oh, but it hasn't. They have known about it from the beginning."

At my puzzled expression she explained, "You see, it has been increasingly difficult in recent years to find girls and boys that have the innocent appeal that is craved by the temple's most ardent financers. As the societal life of the Zoarinian Empire has decayed, so has any semblance of morality in its youth. It may sound like an oxymoron, but innocent children are preferred by the temple priests, who are the first to initiate them into their new life of whoredom. Not surprisingly, the children of this land are far from innocent when they come to the temple doors, which isn't surprising given the hedonistic examples that their parents

hand down to them. I suggested to the high temple priests that the continuing financial support of these grounds and festivities would be best served if the children meant for sacrifice were instead raised apart from the society, until such a time was needed for a renewal of the currently available flesh. They would then be able to provide their most affluent backers with fresher product, so to speak. The priests have been only too willing to provide assistance with their part of the subterfuge. Most of the girls and boys here are riddled with diseases that are carefully concealed by the priests so that they can continue to reap profits, but it is increasingly hard to disguise the sickened state of the temple consorts. The priests have decided to do away

with all the current stock and bring in the children that I have rescued over the years to replace them, which will allow them to raise the rates because of the higher quality of the new stock. They couldn't be happier with me or my plan. As it is, they stand to make a lot of extra money. They will be collecting them from the farm at the end of the month, which is where you come in, Roric."

"Me?"

"Yes, I need someone to get those children to safety in the only place left that is safe for children to grow up; the Valley Lands. There they will have a chance at life and, most importantly, a chance at learning the Creator's ways and His purposes for their lives. Will you do it, Roric? Will you help me save these children?"

Not wanting to believe her, but not being able to deny the honesty and clarity with which she had shared her story, I asked, “How would I go about doing it?”

Excited, she rose from her chair and appeared much younger for a moment, “The wagons are leaving now that are meant to pick up the children. I want you to intercept them, pick the children up at the farm, and get them safely to the Valley Lands.”

“I’m going to need help to accomplish all that, and this,” I said, raising my chained hands, “might pose a problem.”

“It has all been arranged. I have set up a plan to rescue you from the arena tomorrow; however, the rescue cannot be attempted before the second round of the games. Which means you will have

to survive the first round! Can you do that?"

Looking at her wryly, I noted her doubt of my capability for survival and I responded cockily, "I'll make it to the second round."

"Good!" she said smiling. "I have no doubt that, with the Creator's help, you will."

"What does the first round of the games consist of, by the way?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. They haven't told anyone. All I know is that it involves animals and that it's not expected that you will survive past the first round."

"That sounds like fun. You're sure no one suspects your ulterior motives concerning these children?" I asked.

I watched a darkness come into her eyes that made me sorry I had asked the

question.

"Why should they? After all, I sacrificed my own children on the altar, didn't I?"

Trying to soften the bitterness I saw in her face I said, "You were forgiven for that, weren't you?"

She nodded her head, "Yes I was, but I fear that I may never quite be able to fully forgive myself."

I had one more question, "How soon can I expect pursuit after I pick up the children?"

"A couple of days at the best. Although you may have close pursuit the whole way."

"You know that your part in all this is likely to be exposed if you stay," I said.

Giving me an evasive look she said,

“I will do whatever
I need to in order to make sure those children have a chance at a better life.”

Going to a cord hanging on the wall to her right, she pulled it, which would summon the guards. Coming once more to stand before me, she reached a hand up to touch my cheek and said, “Your mother and father would be very proud of you! I’m sorrier than you can ever know for taking them from you!”

The doors opened and as the guards entered I witnessed a transformation occur before my eyes as she spit out, “Get this arena rat back to his hole in the dungeons! I’ve had my fill of him tonight!”

Chuckling, the guards pulled me roughly from the room and back down the hall that we had come across earlier.

The party was still going strong, but all I could think of was the cold cell waiting for me, and what awaited me tomorrow in the arena.

Later in my cell, which oddly felt like home to me, I stood holding the bars of the window, reflecting on everything that had happened. If one thing had become clear, it was that I was not in control of anything in my life. I thought I had been, but there was an unmistakable order to the events happening in my life all the same.

Was the Creator really orchestrating my life, or had everything been merely chance and circumstance? Giving up, as I already knew the answer; I sank to my knees onto the cool dirt of the cell and did something I hadn't done since I was a boy. Something my mother had insisted

that I do every night, and even throughout the daytime. I didn't know where to start. The prayers of my boyhood seemed inadequate to say what I felt needed to be communicated. I decided to talk to my Creator as if He were a friend standing beside me.

"Creator, I'm not sure about where to begin here. I've done a lot bad things, for which I'm very sorry! Things I had to do to survive. At least that's what I tell myself. Well, anyway, here I am with a chance to do something noble with my life. As You know, I've been trying to turn my life around and the path I've felt you leading me down has led me here. I have a chance to do something meaningful; a chance to save these children the priestess has rescued. It's something I know my father would have

done if he were alive and able to do so. I guess what I'm saying is, that even though I don't deserve Your consideration, I'd really appreciate your help in staying alive in the arena tomorrow so that I can help those children get to a safe place. I guess that pretty much says it all. Oh, one more thing, be with Larc tonight and help him stay strong and help me get him to safety, too."

I felt a tingling sense of peace descend upon me as I prayed for the others, which calmed my spirit about tomorrow's troubles.

As an afterthought I added, "Thank you for the time I did have with my mother. She tried to teach me about You, but I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention. I regret that! If You would

consider teaching me about Yourself again in some way I would really appreciate it!”

The night air was still and quiet. No answer. Remembering my mother, I thought of how some of her prayers weren’t answered right away either. She had said that it was up to the Creator, if He chose to do what was asked of Him, but the important thing when waiting for an answer was to be faithful and keep praying. Maybe an answer would come in the morning, hopefully in time for my date with the arena. I wasn’t nearly as confident of surviving the first round as I had led Treorna to believe that I was. Moving over to the cell wall I leaned up against it, as I had many times in the past, and went to sleep almost instantly.

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The darkness in the cell started to glow slightly. Like a warm wave it washed over Roric repeatedly as he slept, and it kept at bay the dark memories and insecurities that wanted to intrude into his sleeping mind all through the night.

"Roric."

"Yes, mother?"

"Time for your study of the Holy Words."

"Mother, can't we do that later?"

"Roric, you will find out that in life you can't always put things off to a later time and have everything still work out right."

"Then maybe we can skip study time for a third time and that will be once and for all! Ouch! Alright, I'm ready!"

"Sit down over there, Roric. As I've

told you before, we only have remnants of the Book that the Creator wrote, but those remnants that we do still have can help us to live a righteous and pleasing life. A life that honors our Creator and that serves His purposes."

"It always seems like we have to do everything for the Creator. What does He do for us?"

"He did everything for us, Roric. When Adam and Eve sinned in the beginning, on the first world, He could have washed His hands of us and we would have all been doomed to everlasting death. But He didn't leave it like that. He gave us His Holy Word and even sent His Son to die for us that we might have life forevermore, if we believe."

"I don't understand that part."

“You have to take it by faith, Roric. Until you actually believe in the Son of God and what He did for us, you aren’t saved.”

“Well, I guess He’ll just have to make Himself real to me, for me to believe.”

“Oh, He will Roric. In His good time He will make Himself real to you in a powerful way. He will use you greatly in some great endeavor to the benefit of His everlasting kingdom.”

“How do you know He’ll do that?”

“I have faith that He will, even as I ask Him for it every day in my prayers, Roric. The Creator has done everything for us and not the other way around. Simply trust Him and have faith, and in the passage of time all will be made right, you’ll see.”

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“Wake up, tiger bait!”

Jarred awake by the kick to my side, I jumped to my feet. The memory of my mother quickly faded as the reality of my current situation set in. I was quickly outfitted and shoved through the tunnels of my old haunts. I could hear the noise of the crowd, roaring in anticipation of the coming bloodlust. Protesting loudly, the rusty arena door slowly rose upward. I stepped out onto the sand of the arena, not waiting for the push from behind.

The sandy floor of the arena stretched out before me and I advanced into it. The dusty tan color of the sand was mottled in places to a dark red, which helped mark the spots where mortal life had been lost. Casting my gaze upwards, I took in the crowd assembled in the

bleachers rising on all sides above the arena walls. They were shouting, as they usually were, in a mixture of anticipatory excitement and blood lust. They were eager to see suffering and bloodletting.

All the old memories came flooding back to me now. Mentally attempting to shake them off, I remembered my dream from the night before. I hadn't dreamed about my mother in years, but her lessons of yesterday were very real today too. Emboldened by the need to survive, and the belief in my new-found faith that I could, I stepped into the center of the arena boldly. I stood there, patiently waiting for what would come next, as the crowd of onlookers shouted obscenities and jeers.

A sense of excitement rippled through

me as it always did when the fight was about to start. I didn't have to wait long. Seven arena dungeon doors began to creak open and through the half open doors, seven starved Attorgron tigers clawed at the dust in eagerness to get into the sunlight. They sprang into the open arena, at first giving each other cautious looks. Not liking the roaring of the crowds or their exposure to an unknown situation, they slunk around the arena as they got their bearings.

One tiger, maddened by the need to get free of the exposure and noise of the arena, tried to climb the arena wall, but it was too high and he slid back to the arena floor, to the tune of jeers from the crowd at its failed escape. I had seen it all before many times, except I had never faced so many tigers at once.

Usually I had other companions to help whittle them down, or to at least be chewed on, while I took care of my own skin and, when I could, that of my friends. I had no armor this time either, just an arena short sword and a small round shield.

Soon the inevitable happened; they noticed me in the center of the arena and their first instinct to escape was taken over by their second great need, hunger. They approached me from all sides their eyes glowing with the intent to rip me apart. I had to admit, faced with these odds it was an extremely likely scenario. The crowd's anticipation was a palpable sensation in the hot, still air of the arena. Sweat coursed down my back in rivulets under the tunic I wore. I couldn't win this one! If there had only

been three or four maybe, but seven! I remembered my mother's words and her belief that her Creator could do anything. I really couldn't win this one. The sword dropped from my hand to plop into the dust of the arena floor. I took the shield off my left forearm and dropped it too. Spreading my arms wide I looked up into the blue sky overhead.

"Creator, it's all yours. Thy will be done."

I waited with baited breath, as did everybody else in the arena, for what would come next. The husky roars of the tigers intensified. It wouldn't be long before they attacked. I heard the scramble of claws scraping on dirt behind me and I couldn't help but flinch, as I waited for the subsequent impact of fangs and claws ripping into me; but it

didn't come.

"I Am mighty to save and intercede on the behalf of those who put their trust in Me. My creation knows My authority and obeys."

I heard the words as clear as day, as if they had been spoken against my ear and yet nobody stood with me in the arena. The roars of the tigers were gone and all I heard was a choked whining.

I opened my eyes, which I had shut reflexively when I had heard the scramble of claws behind me, and looked for the tigers. They were all slinking away from me as fast as they could go, each heading to their respective dungeon chambers. The crowd watched in stunned disbelief, as the tigers disappeared back into their holding cells.

The crowd broke out into angry muttering, which was only a façade to mask their unease at what they had just witnessed. The governor stood up in the royal pavilion and screamed, “Seize that man at once!”

The main doors of the arena burst open and a group of thirteen horsemen spilled into the arena. Turning to face this new threat I watched the guardsmen sweep across the arena toward me. They weren’t guardsmen! I recognized Seth first and then the others. Seth broke from the bunch and reached his arm out to me. I grabbed it and using momentum I flung my body up onto the back of the horse behind him. The other riders formed a protective shell around us as we wheeled around to race toward the still open doors of the arena.

We peeled through them in a cloud of dust, as we headed into the city at large. I could hear shouts of dismay ringing out behind us as the crowd reacted to my unexpected escape. Chaos ensued in the marketplace, as we rode down merchants and merchant's wares alike in our mad scramble to get free of the city before the street gatehouses were closed.

Approaching the eastern gate at a full gallop, I saw that it was still open. The guards were still laying at ease to either side of the street. We made straight for the open gate. The hooves of our horses pounded hard on the cobblestoned street surface, announcing our approach to the guards. Halfway to the guards, we charged through a flock of chickens, that parted before us in a flurry of feathers as

they squawked madly at our sudden disturbance of them.

The guards hesitated in the face of our head on charge toward them, unsure as to what was taking place. They seemed to come to a consensus of the minds and threw themselves to the sides of the alley to avoid the hoofs of our horses as we streamed out of the street gate into the glorious freedom of the countryside. After several miles were behind us, we pulled up to check for signs of pursuit. No dust clouds were visible in the shimmering heat waves of the plain. The escape had been such a complete surprise that they hadn't even yet been able to mount a chase. Leisurely, we rode on through the day until we stopped to camp early that evening.

I got down from the horse and greeted my old companions warmly. The hulking form of Olaf was last to come forward. Gruffly he held up one huge hand that grasped three chickens and asked in his deep gravelly voice, “You hungry?”

I laughed, knowing his gesture of food was his simple way of saying ‘Welcome back I missed you.’ “Yes, Olaf now that you come to mention it, I’m starving!”

The rugged terrain of his battered face creased up in an expression I knew to be a smile. “Good!” he said, with a voice like thunder that fairly rocked me back on my heels.

Everyone laughed and we began the preparations of making camp, all the while talking and catching up on what each of us had been doing since we had parted company. “Seth, what happened

back there at the swamp base? It was a wrecked mess when I passed back through it."

"Traitors that's what!" replied Seth angrily. "As soon as you were out of the mix, various members of the group we hired on started fighting for the leadership of the group. We wouldn't have it. Instead, we insisted that you would return, and that none of them were fit to fill your shoes as leader. Some of them must have gotten jealous and reported our base's location to the Zoarinians for the reward they were offering. We barely had time to get away before they were upon us! What was left of the group split up and we haven't heard from them since and good riddance it is to be away from them, I'm thinking!" Seth finished heatedly.

I shook my head solemnly. It was times like this that a man found out who his friends were. Later, after we were through catching up and were lounging around the fire with full bellies, I looked around at my friends and said, “I’m going back to the city tonight.”

None of them were too surprised at my declaration of intent. Rolf spoke up from a dark corner of the camp near the edge of the firelight, “To get the boy?”

Looking at his shadowy outline silhouetted against the deep blackness of the night behind him, I nodded.

“I will go with you. You will need someone to hold the horses and help clear the way.”

Looking at him now, I remembered back to that day in the alley when we had escaped the arena and I had

motioned for him to join us. Looking back, I now realized it had been one of the best decisions of my life.

It was far better having this man as a loyal friend than a potential enemy, that was for sure. I smiled, “It will be dangerous my friend. We may not come back.”

I could detect the form of a rare smile in his voice when he replied, “Such is life, my friend. When do we go?”

“Now,” I said as I got up.

“We will go too!” Seth said, as he got up from the ground, followed by the rest of the group.

Turning to look at them, I shook my head and said, “I do not deserve the honor you give me to be your leader. But as you do give it, even so must I honor it and give you direction as to what I feel

is best. Rolf is right, the job I must do tonight is one best done by only a few, as too many of us may be recognized before we complete the objective of freeing Larc. I have made a change in the way I wish to live my life. When we escaped from the walls of the arena three years ago, my one thought and purpose was to remain free and to make those who wronged me pay for what they had done. At the very least, I wanted the option to die as a free man. We have done much to repay what was done to us, but we can still never kill enough of them to get back what was stolen from us. Instead we have become more and more like them. We have continued the cycle of violence that was first used against us. But something that we can do to break the cycle of useless violence

that we've been caught up in is to use the skills and the experience they taught us," I gestured towards the city glowing faintly off in the distance, "To fight for something that's worth fighting for, even dying for. The land of my ancestry is a place where men still worship the Great Creator who made this world and all the others. The Creator God is real! I know this from my own personal experience! I've never seen the land of my ancestry, but yet I have been told of it. The people there still believe in the Great Creator and that is one of the reasons that our oppressors, the Zoarinians, are so committed to destroying them. Protecting such a people, protecting the right to freely worship the God that I serve and put my trust in, is worth fighting for, even dying for. It may not be for you, but

it is for me. Instead of wealth won by the swing of my sword, I choose a life where my actions bring life to others and wealth is measured by how many good friends I have. Where, one day, I hope to have the faithfulness of a good woman and the love of my own children. If you choose to continue following me, it will not be because of me or any purpose of man, but it will be because we fight for a higher cause than any of our own. We will live and die based on what the Creator wills for us. There will be no more me or you, there will only be what the Creator wills. If you wish to continue with me, this is the way it will be. None of us here are good men by our past actions, but all of us here can be better men then we have been in the past, with the hope of an eternal destination other

than hell, which is what each of us deserves. The decision of what you do now is yours, but if you follow me, you know where I stand." I finished laying it all out there and waited for their response.

Renaldo stepped forward and said, "This Creator God you speak of, if you say He is real then I believe you, and I want to serve Him too, even if it costs me my life."

As one man the rest of them stepped forward and echoed Renaldo's sentiment with statements of fealty to the God I served; a God they hadn't even experienced yet. What had I ever done to deserve the amount of faith they placed in me?

Olaf was the last to speak, "Master, I trust you and if you trust this God you

speak of, then how can I not trust Him too?"

"You all stand affirmed in this oath to serve the Creator?" I asked, looking around.

"We do!" thundered Olaf, over the rest of them combined.

"Then I would like to say a prayer over us and our new quest."

I sank to my knees to pray. The humbleness of the action seemed fitting in this moment in time, as I was humbled beyond measure that such men would trust their souls to be guided by me of all people. I heard the sounds of the others falling to their knees. I couldn't help but peak at them. These weren't childhood companions, coerced into praying by their mothers like I had been, but instead these were rough men of war with the

scars to prove it.

They came from different cultures and spoke multiple languages that I didn't even know and yet they humbled themselves before a God they believed in, simply because they trusted me to know the right path to take in both war and life. Tears coursed down my cheeks at the high level of trust they placed in me and I felt humbled beyond belief to be before such men, whose faith seemed greater than my own.

"Creator, by faith these men believe in You as I do. By Your mighty actions You have performed on my behalf and because of the mercy You have freely given me, I cannot but adore, serve, and worship You. Guide us through battle and peace. Show us the paths to follow and those to avoid and above all teach

us Your ways so that we can be more like You, a living testament of Your glory. May praise for You forever be on our lips. Whether in death or in life may we always serve you. Glory in the highest is Your Son's, who made redemption possible for us, your humble servants, from this day forward. In His name I ask these things and say, Amen."

The words of the prayer had seemed to pour out of my soul, coming easy to my lips, like a stone wall crumbling before the force of a mighty stream of water. And like a stream, which pours out water continually, a mighty wave of invisible fire fell from heaven and enveloped us! We were not burnt, but the deep wells of our spirits poured forth utterances in languages unknown to us and yet known to the Creator, who

listened to our utterances and spoke life back into us.

He gave us far more than we could ever hope to have given Him in return. I don't know how long we sobbed and spoke praises in an unknown tongue to the Creator of all life, but we eventually arose of one accord as new men, with God-given purposes to fulfill. The source of our strength was secure in our hearts. We looked at each other with nothing left to be said as all of us were forever changed by what had happened this night.

"Rolf, get the horses. We will need to leave soon, before the night advances much farther, if we hope to rescue the boy. The rest of you," I said, turning to look at them, "I want you to apprehend

the wagons bound for the farms, where the children of the high priestess' I told you about are being held. If the priests get in your way kill them, but above all rescue the children. Take them to the Valley Lands and tell them that it was Roric Ta'lont that sent you. They are a people that believe even as we now believe and they will not turn you away. Have you any questions?"

"We will do all as you have said brother!" replied Seth, as the rest nodded their heads in agreement.

And with that I wished them well and walked towards the horses that Rolf had saddled.

Chapter Five

Cliffside View

Quietly I walked down the dimly lit dungeon corridor. Everything had proceeded better than I could ever have even hoped. After we had slipped into the city on the back end of a late night caravan, we had made our way to the citadel without being stopped. Using uniforms supplied by Rolf, who had adeptly procured them from two permanently resting soldiers outside the citadel, we had made our way into the inner workings of the citadel with

comparative ease. Rolf was back up at the other end of the hall waiting in concealment in case, as he put it, ‘Any more throats needed slit’.

He was really a peculiarly gifted individual in the art of killing and more than once I was grateful that I had never faced him in a death match in the arena. Unwelcome memories rose up to overwhelm me, as I remembered the friends that I had been pitted against in death matches. The way the life had drained out of their eyes, as they lay on the arena floor, was an almost intolerable thing to bear in remembrance.

Stumbling on a loose stone I almost fell, but it helped me to regain my composure and pull me free from a past I wished had never happened. I had

banked all my hopes on Larc being in one of the private cells, rather than the main dungeon holding area.

All the cells I had passed were empty except for the one where I now stood. Leaning close to the damp wood of the cell door I whispered, “Larc?”

I heard rustling from within the cell, as somebody got up and moved towards the cell door.

“Roric, is that you? Get me out of here!”

“Hang on, I’ll get you out of there, but be quiet!”

Drawing back slightly, I studied the door. It was old and showed signs of rot in places. The door consisted of vertical planks of wood for the main body of the door with two crosspieces at the top and bottom of the door. The crosspiece at the

bottom was soft from rot caused by the continual dampness of the dungeon floor.

I used my sword to pry off chunks of the bottom crosspiece, until it was broken in half in one spot. Then I pushed on the bottom of the vertical board directly where I had chewed the crosspiece board away with my sword. It bent inward as I put pressure on it. Larc grabbed the board from the inside and pulled as I pushed. The board moved inward suddenly, and was accompanied by a loud squeak of protest, as the rusty nails pulled loose in the top crosspiece. I quickly looked around to see if the noise had alerted any of the guards. I paused for a moment and, hearing nothing, I turned back to the door. Pushing on it once more left a gap big enough at the bottom of the door for

Larc's skinny form to squeeze through.

Larc's arms locked around my middle in a tight grip as he mumbled something incoherently against my chest. A warm sense of being needed coursed through me as I patted his back awkwardly, not sure what to do with the unfamiliar emotional embrace.

"Larc, let's go. We need to get you out of here before daylight. Stick close behind me."

Reluctantly, Larc broke contact and followed me back up the dimly lit corridor. Larc jumped like a startled rabbit when Rolf stepped out of the shadows at the end of the hall.

"I got this for the boy," Rolf said, holding up a dark traveling cloak.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"The guards in the guard room had no

more use for it," he replied simply.

"I see. Let's get out of here before you alter the population of the citadel too much!" I spoke with a smile on my face as I headed into the darkness of the night, eager to leave the confines of the dungeon.

I saw Larc take the cloak from Rolf and put it on, all the while keeping a wary eye on Rolf, as if he was a snake poised to strike. It didn't help that Rolf smiled back eerily at Larc's wariness of him, egging the boy on.

There probably wasn't a living guard left anywhere in the confines of the dungeon. Larc stayed close behind me as Rolf ghosted up ahead of us. I looked out the open dungeon doors and there, as bold as daylight was Rolf strolling over to three horses, which were saddled and

tied to a hitching post. They hadn't been there before! I guess the plan had changed again.

Gritting my teeth, I walked as nonchalantly as I could towards the horses, followed by Larc. I hated improvising a perfectly good plan when it wasn't needed. I had just lifted Larc up into the saddle of one of the horses, when a cry of pain rent the still night air. Wheeling around to face the citadel, I looked up in the direction of the cry, expecting to see guards swarming out of their stations, but no guards were visible. I looked at Rolf, who was already in the saddle; he too was puzzled that no one had responded to the cry.

"It was the cry of a woman, in a lot of pain I think. It came from up there," Rolf

said, pointing at a window three tiers up the citadel.

Turning back to Rolf and Larc, I addressed Rolf, "Take the boy and rendezvous with the others. Don't wait for me. I'll catch up with you."

Rolf nodded and started for the small postern gate we had come through earlier, tugging on the reins of Larc's horse in one hand as he urged it to follow along after him. Larc made as if to protest leaving without me, but I motioned him to silence.

"Go with Rolf. He'll keep you safe," and with that, they were gone.

Making my way up the various levels of the citadel, I was careful not to expose myself to any sentries. I closed in on the window the scream had come from.

Reaching the window at long last, I cautiously peered up over the sill and into the room. I sucked in my breath at what I saw. The room was brightly lit in the very center of the room where a stone table stood, but the rest of the room was in deep shadow. A woman I could barely recognize as Treorna was tied down, stretched out on top of the table.

She was covered in blood and had clearly been tortured for what must have been hours. Having seen many people die painful deaths, I could tell that she was near death herself. A dark robed figure stepped out of the shadows surrounding the table. I was disturbed that I hadn't noticed the dark figure until now.

I could hear Treorna gasping for

breath as the figure came and leaned slightly over her. From the sound of her breathing I could tell that they had broken some of her ribs. My fingers tensed as I grasped either side of the window. My intellect was struggling to hold my heart back from accomplishing its desire to wring the life out of anyone that could perform an act of such brutality and heartlessness, as the one I was witnessing.

Gaining some measure of control, I cautiously studied the hooded figure standing next to Treorna. I didn't like the menacing aura that seemed to be emanating from him. His presence in the room added a palpable tension to the air that started to make me feel dizzy, as if I was losing control of the moment.

I had felt the feeling once before in the

arena many years before. There had been an arena champion from the city of Rauel that had once been the most feared fighter in the entire arena world, by slave and guard alike. He had fought with unimaginable vigor and was utterly ruthless in his approach to killing. It seemed like he thrived both on the pain he caused to his adversaries in the ring and on the adulation he received from the bloodthirsty crowds. He would toy with other fighters, as if they were mice and he was the cat offering them no escape other than playful torment. The crowds had adored him.

Once I had been close to him in an adjacent holding cell before the onset of a series of arena games. He was sitting calmly on his bunk, as one who was at peace with the world, biding his time

until his match started, when he noticed me examining him. He had turned my way and stared me directly in the eye. My eyes had locked with his and I had looked deeply into them searching for answers. At first there had been a flat glassy nothingness, which was disturbing in and of itself, but then his eyes had started to gleam as if from some unholy fire from within. I had felt like I was being seared by fire from the inside out. I'd had to break my stare and look away.

I had been soaked in sweat, as if I had just come through a grueling ordeal. My actions had seemed to amuse him and he had started to laugh with an inhuman squalling cackle that was nerve jarring. He'd cackled insanely the rest of the time that remained before his match

began.

Coming back to the present, I continued studying the hooded figure within the room, noticing the similarities I felt he shared with the crazed arena fighter from the past.

Suddenly, he spun in my direction seeming to sense my study of him somehow. I ducked below the window sill, and even though I was sure that I hadn't been seen by him, I still felt exposed to the whole world as I clung to the side of the citadel beneath the window.

A pain filled cry emanated from inside the room, "Run Roric! Save yourself!"

After a brief moment of hesitation, I flung myself recklessly back down the way I had come, vowing to myself to

avenge Treorna's suffering, if it was the last thing I ever did. I leaped onto the remaining horse and raced out the side gate moments before it clanged shut.

I had barely made it thirty yards past the gate when I was almost knocked from my saddle by a blow to my back. Holding onto the pommel of the horse with one hand to keep from falling, I reached back and felt for what had hit me. An arrow shaft was lodged deep in my side.

I couldn't do anything about it now. I had to get away from the city first. The whole citadel had suddenly come alive, like someone had kicked over an ant hill.

I made my way rapidly out of the city following the same route I had taken into it earlier in the day, only this time pursuit was close behind.

*****

Marfoul turned away from the window and made his way back over to Treorna.

Treorna looked up at him, with clarity only given to those near death sometimes, and said, "That man is going to be used as part of the Creator's plan that even you won't be able to stop!"

Treorna wheezed painfully for breath and Marfoul chuckled. "My dear, you would have to possess means far above the primitive implements of this world to hinder me in my work."

"That can be arranged, as well you know," Treorna gasped out.

Marfoul, angered by her words, hissed, "Where do you summon up the nerve to tell me about things you know

nothing about? You stupid little priestess! Look at you lying here, all pathetic and wasted of life! Are you going to tell me that someone like you, who has done our will and our bidding all this time could possibly grasp or have any understanding of the limitations by which we are held?"

"Yes," Treorna said softly, as her eyes began to glaze over.

Marfoul, seeing her close to death, grabbed her head and forced her to look at him. "My master has all the power here! If you thought your suffering was almost over, think again priestess! Soon you'll leave this mortal world and enter my domain, where I will personally see you suffer far worse things, for the length and breadth of all eternity. There is no hope for you

anymore do you hear me?" Marfoul said, as he shook her head roughly.

Treorna's eyes opened briefly once more and she said, "My name is Treorna. Remember it well, because you'll hear it again before you're cast out of your habitation. I ceased my priestess duties for you long ago in order to serve the will of my Creator instead. I will join what the Creator's Son has prepared for those who believe and walk in the ways of the Creator and there is nothing that you can do to stop me, but your portion will be as you claimed for me, an eternity of hellfire and damnation!"

Maddened, Marfoul reared back from the table and a dagger materialized in his hand. He rammed it with all his force down through

Treorna's heart, but she was already gone. Her face, despite all the pain she had been made to feel, was wreathed in a peaceful smile, which only maddened Marfoul more.

The sentries outside the door abandoned their posts and ran blindly down the hall to get away from the hellish tantrum going on within the room they had unfortunately been tasked to guard. The demented screams of their master chased them down the hall.

*****

I leaned heavily into the mane of the horse that I rode. The mane was thick with lather, and through the fog in my brain I registered that neither I nor the horse were going to be able to go on much farther.

The horse stumbled into a depression and caused the broken off arrow shaft lodged in my side to move painfully. The moment of clarity, brought about by the sharp pain, awoke me to the realization that the horse was starting to fall forward. I kicked my legs out of the stirrups moments before the horse's chest made contact with the ground.

The impact threw me from the saddle into a cluster of boulders to the side of the trail we had been traveling. I screamed as the arrow worked deeper into my side. I managed to briefly sit up and take in my surroundings before the darkness overwhelmed me. I was at the beginning of the Ernor Hills, not far from my home. How ironic I thought, before I passed out.

*****

It was hot. Slowly my eyelids fought their way open. It was hard because they felt glued shut and foreign to me, but there was something moving nearby and then something pecked my leg hard.

My eyes shot open at this new source of pain. Vultures! A whole flock of them covered what had been my horse in a busy feeding frenzy. Now one of the buzzards was getting the idea that I was on the menu as well. Panicked at the thought of being eaten alive, I managed to move my legs and waive my arms some, which left me panting for breath and exhausted.

The vulture fluttered back a couple of feet and cocked its head at me. It then proceeded to settle down and wait. Vultures prefer to eat the soft organs and tissues first, such as the eyes, but they

rarely eat something that is still alive and protesting. Scrunching back deeper among the boulders and brush, I tried to make myself inaccessible to their probing beaks. I felt like I would pass out at any moment and eventually, against my will, I did.

*****

I could feel a gentle breeze touching my cheek, as I heard the sound of a musical instrument floating on the breeze. My body felt at peace, surrounded by a firm softness. I had made it to heaven after all. I hoped it wasn't a mistake that I had been allowed in, because it felt too secure and peaceful here to leave. Even if it was a

mistake to let me in, I decided that I would bask in the moment as long as they would let me. I turned on my side. Big mistake!

The attempt to turn on my side caused pain to flood through me, which brought my eyes wide open. Not heaven after all, but not hell either. I looked around and began to take an inventory of the room in which I found myself. I remembered the arrow wound and I located the source of my pain behind some white cotton bandages on my lower left side. The broken off arrow shaft was gone. Everything else seemed to be where it should be and functioning, which was a relief as I remembered fighting off the vultures.

Turning my attention to the room I was in, I discovered it to be simply decorated but very homey, despite the lack of ornamentation. The room was very clean and well maintained. Just then the door opened and a girl with blond pig tails walked in with a tray. When she noticed me awake I watched her eyes grow comically huge. The tray and its contents crashed to the floor as the girl disappeared down the hall calling out for what I took to be her mother, as she frantically declared to all that the stranger was awake. Soon an attractive middle aged woman appeared in the doorway with the girl, and a smaller boy I hadn't seen before, who peeped around her dress at me.

"Well, it's good to see our guest finally awake! I must apologize for the

mess Dorie made of your lunch," she said, as she moved to clean up the broken dishes on the floor.

Moving to rise up, I groaned aloud with pain. It felt like there was a hot poker in my side that someone was twisting around savagely. Suddenly the woman was at my side helping me to sit up.

"Dorie, fetch those pillows. Now!"

Reluctantly, the girl approached with two large pillows, which her mother took and put behind my back. I lay back against them feeling about as capable as a sick kitten. I was completely vulnerable to these people, but thankfully they seemed more interested in my wellbeing than my demise. Maybe that was because of the money they could get for turning me in, came the

corresponding dark thought.

"There now. I bet that feels better, to get into a different position."

"It does. Thank you," I said finding my voice, which sounded very scratchy.

I croaked out, "Ma'am, I can't stay here. I'm wanted by some very bad people that would cause harm to your family. If you help me get up, I'll get out of here right away."

I moved to get out of the bed, but she stopped me.

"Now, you let us do the worrying about our own safety. You sit right back in that bed and relax and get your rest. Dorie, go get some more broth for Mr.?" she asked, turning to me with a question in her eyes.

"Roric."

I watched a spark of recognition pass

across her eyes for a moment and then it was gone and she turned to the girl and said, “Dorie, get the soup for Roric, if you would please and make sure to bring some of the bread that I made this morning too.”

A big man stepped into the room. He had to be over six and a half feet tall if he was an inch, but it wasn’t his height that was solely impressive. The man was built like a bull with corded, bunched up muscles that stretched out the seams of his shirt. His voice sounded like the rush of a blacksmith’s bellows when he spoke, “My name is Eliak. This is my wife Samantha, my daughter Dorie, and my sons Elim, Jash, and Niall.”

Besides the little boy I had seen before, I saw two older and stalwart

looking boys standing out in the hallway beyond their father.

"Eliak, this is Roric," Samantha said.

When she said my name a similar look of recognition also passed across his features, which caused me to wonder what they knew about me. Had they seen my face on a wanted poster? Were they even now thinking of collecting a reward for my head?

Eliak asked, "Your father, was he called Lorn?"

I nodded my head in confirmation as I decided to trust these people a little further.

Eliak nodded in return, "I knew your father. You are welcome to stay in our home as long as you like, Roric son of Lorn."

And with that they made their exodus

from the room leaving me with the soup and bread that Dorie had brought.

They knew my father! I searched my memory, but I could not place them anywhere in it. The body's necessities took over and I started to consume the food in front of me with a passion. However, eating had the effect of making me very tired and I drifted off to sleep against my will, my questions remaining unanswered.

*****

All I had were questions for the good people that had taken me in and cared for me. At first, they were reluctant. Then parts of their connection with my parents became clear.

"I knew your mother as a girl. She was one of my best friends when we

were young. We lost contact with each other until we met again as newlyweds. Eliak was in the army and he was transferred to the garrison at Kingdom Pass where he was under the command of your father, who had just recently married your mother. Those were good times." Samantha finished softly.

"My father was in charge of Kingdom Pass!" I exclaimed.

"Yes and he was one of the best to ever command there," Samantha replied. "He gave it all up for your mother though. She did not like the fighting and the constant danger your father faced. Not to mention the attempts on her own life, which led to contention between her and your father's family. Your father knew that the decision to leave the Valley Lands would not be a popular

one so they simply left in the middle of the day one day without warning. There were only a very few of us that knew of your parents decision to move here to the Ernor Hills. It was a secret that we closely guarded. I can well understand why they wanted to get away from all the rigors of a life spent fighting in a constant war and dealing with the intrigues of the high council. We had just moved here ourselves for much the same reasons, when we heard of what happened to your family. The report that we heard was that all of your family had been lost. I mourned a long time for my dear friend and her family, but I'm comforted to know that she's in a good place and that if such things are permitted I'll see her again one day."

"You believe in the Creator as she

did?" I asked.

"Yes. I wouldn't have gotten very far in life if I hadn't," Samantha replied softly.

"She was always trying to teach me of the Creator, but I'm afraid I didn't listen very well or care as I should have at the time. Now I do, but I know very little about the Creator or His ways and yet He has revealed Himself in a powerful way in my life. I feel a deep hunger to know more and to understand the meaning of all this," I said, gesturing around me to everything and nothing in particular, "And what my place and purpose is in all of this. I know what to do that's right in front of me, but no more past that. It is very frustrating!"

Samantha smiled a little, "How you remind me of my early days in wrestling

with my newfound faith. Don't worry, Roric, about the future. Your path will be made clear in the Creator's good timing. It may mean a lot of patience and faith on your part, but it's always the best path taken. What is important though, is that you have set your heart on the task of learning what the Father of all life has for you to do in this life and He will not disappoint you in this. Be patient Roric, for understanding will come in His good timing and all will be made clear, you'll see."

"You sound like you've experienced the process many times. Tell me, does it get any easier?" I asked.

"Yes and no. Faith will always require surrender and trust, but as time goes by and you see more of the Creator and His work in your life, the easier it

will be to believe. The more you believe, the more faith you'll have to see you through your journey. I have a lifetime of watching the Creator's intervention in my life to attest to His good mercies and blessings. The Creator is always faithful to those who are faithful to Him; this is as much of a certainty in regard to your walk with Him as I can tell you, Roric. Now, come and help me get these herbs we've picked back to the house. We'll need them for the soup tonight," Samantha slipped an arm through mine and let me lead her back to the house.

*****

I spent three weeks with the Kurt family in the little valley among the hills that they called home. During this time my wound had almost completely healed

up and I was eager to meet up with my companions and learn of their outcome and that of the children, but I was reluctant to leave the generosity of this kind family.

They had shown me what it was like to be part of a family again, but I had to leave. I said goodbye to each of the Kurt family individually over the course of several days, leaving Samantha for last. I had talked to Eliak the day before at the horse corral situated behind the barn. Eliak, besides farming, also bred horses and not just any kind of horses at that. His horses were among the finest I had ever seen.

He kept two breeding herds. One was ruled by an older stallion named Ervallion. Ervallion had a stately intelligent manner about him that I liked.

The other, smaller herd was chaperoned by a big young stallion named Flin.

I had stood next to the corral fencing that evening when Eliak had appeared at my side. He moved as silently as a cat, for being such a big man.

We stood silently for awhile admiring the beauty of the majestic creatures in front of us. Ervallion, upon seeing his master, came up to the fence and extended his nose to Eliak, who responded by reaching out his hand to fondly stroke the stallion's muzzle. Hand and nose met in a symbolic gesture of friendship between human and animal that would have been hard to equal in any friendship. One had the sense that there was a long history between them, which Eliak confirmed. "Ervallion and I have traveled far together, haven't we

old boy." Patting Ervallion's neck Eliak looked at me, "He was a gift from your father."

Astonished, I looked back at the horse. Seeming to read my mind Eliak laughed, "Yes, he is old! Like me, he's older than he looks, but like me he still has what it takes."

At Eliak's words the slack muscles in Ervallion's body tensed, as he swelled up his posture in response to his master's praise. Eliak continued on, answering my unspoken question, "Your father was my commander. We were on a mission patrolling our interests in the Litian Plains. We were about to be ambushed when I spotted some Zoarinian sanctioned bandits in hiding up ahead of us. We turned their near ambush of us into a rout on their part.

We killed most of them and captured the rest. It was a great campaign victory. As the unit's commander, your father was summoned to the high council to be specially honored for the success of the mission. He, among other things, was given Ervallion as a gift for his service. However he refused, telling all present that the success of the mission was due to me and insisted that they give me the gifts and honor of victory instead. Your father was not the kind of man that cared about achievements or glory. He was a good man. I……all his men, would have done anything he asked us to do."

Eliak gripped the fence post with one large hand as he spoke in remembrance of the past. I almost expected to hear the wood squeeze flat under the grip of this bear of a man.

“Your father had the true gifts of a leader. He didn’t have to raise his voice to be instantly heeded by his men or offer them any other inducement than his word for them to believe him. His men knew that he would die for any one of them if need be and that he always had their best interests at heart. It was not right for him to die the way he did: Not having a chance to face his enemies with a sword in his hand. In some ways, you remind me of him a lot.”

I spoke softly into the evening shadows, “I wasn’t very close to him. I felt like he disapproved of me in some way. I think now it was really just that he lacked the ability to communicate to me in the way I needed. I would have liked to have known him better.”

“That was how it was with my father,

too. I made sure to not let that distance happen between my children and me," Eliak said.

"You have been very kind to me, Eliak. I wouldn't have made it without your help. Thank you."

Eliak ignored my outstretched hand and reached out and enveloped me in his mighty arms in a bear hug that surprised me.

Drawing back slightly, until his hands rested on my shoulders, he said, looking deeply into my eyes, "The best advice I can give you is to trust in the Creator and follow His direction. It has served me well all my life. The time in your life will come, Roric, when all hope will seem to fade. In that moment, look to the Creator and He will fight for you and lift you up to a place of honor. But, like your

father, I hope you give the glory that you receive back to whom it truly belongs. It is the Creator's strength and not any of your own that will sustain you in the harsh moments of life and help you to do what you are destined to do for His kingdom."

Nodding my head in acceptance of his words I replied, "I've already started down that road it would seem. May the Creator give me the strength to complete the journey."

Smiling, Eliak slapped my shoulder, "He will. Now I wish to return the gift that was given to me by your father. After all, it does say in the Holy Words that it is 'more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Puzzled, I followed his hand gesture. He was pointing at the younger stallion

in the adjoining corral. Flin flicked up an interested ear at being the topic of discussion.

"One of my brood mares escaped into the inner canyons of the Ernor hills where the wild horse packs roam. She was bred by a wily old stallion that has evaded my capture on several occasions, but I was successful in getting the mare back from him. Since then I have been content to let him rule his kingdom as I do mine. Flin is his colt and a finer young stallion would be hard to find. He is as Ervallion was in his younger days and perhaps more. I give him to you, and may he serve you well."

Wordlessly I stared at the magnificent animal that had just become mine. Never had I received such a gift.

I spent the rest of the evening listening

to old war stories of Eliak and my father. It felt good to stand next to someone who had been a friend of my father. It was almost like getting to be near him again. I soaked up the words that filled in the missing gaps of my father's legacy, finding room within myself for growth to be more like he had been in life.

The next day, as I had expected, I found Samantha in her flower garden, because that was where she usually was at this time of late morning. I paused, admiring the simplistic beauty of her flower garden before I approached her. She paused from her weeding and glanced up, somehow sensing my presence.

She smiled, "Good morning Roric,

can I help you with something?"

"No. No, actually I've come to thank you for all the help and kindness you've already given me and to say goodbye." I choked the words out with more emotion creeping into my voice than I had intended.

She got up from her knees and motioned me over to sit on a bench under an arbor which was wreathed with several different flowering vines.

Sitting down, she took my hand. Holding it between hers, she looked up at me and said, "Roric, I would like to pray with you before you leave. Do you mind?"

Shaking my head, I watched as she closed her eyes and began to pray.

"Dear Lord, I thank you for sparing the life of Roric and for using us, your

humble servants, to help him. Lord, I pray that you will go before Roric as he leaves us and help him to live a life that is pleasing to You. Help him to find the answers that he seeks and release him from the bitterness of his past. I pray that You would provide him a hope and a future as Your word says. May your will be done in his life all his days, in Your Son's Holy Name I ask these things, Amen."

We sat there quietly for a while, listening to the bees busy at work on the flowers.

"I don't deserve everything you and your family have done for me Samantha. I really don't. I've done things that would cause my own mother to turn away from me," I said reflectively.

"Then you didn't know your mother as

well as I did Roric," she replied.

"Roric, you must understand something about the Creator. The Creator loves you unconditionally. He has a hope and a future for each one of us who believe in His name and the name of His Son and what His Son did for us. This is the case regardless of what we have done in our pasts, so long as we confess our misdeeds and live a life that seeks to please Him in the present. Roric, something that will help you a lot is to work on building a personal relationship with your heavenly Father. The Creator isn't just up there," Samantha gestured up to the sky, "He's all around us, involved in everything seen and unseen."

Unseen, I thought to myself, remembering the things that had been

happening lately that testified to a much greater influence than mere coincidence. There was no doubting the unseen Divine presence, which had stifled the tiger's roar and given me utterance in an unknown tongue which had brought peace into my soul.

There was also a darker unknown force at work. I remembered the man from the arena dungeon and the hooded figure, who had been torturing Treorna.

Seeming to read my mind, she went on, "There is much that takes place in the world around us that we are not aware of Roric. We call it the spirit world and it contains both good and evil. I know that you have seen what evil can do. Be wary of something in concern to evil, Roric. Evil can take many forms and on the surface appear not to be evil at all.

But even as dark as things can appear in this life, it is important to see the whole picture and know the full power of the Author of all life. The Creator can do anything, and is involved down to the minutest detail in everything around us. Evil does not triumph over the good things of the Creator's creation."

"Are there good things that are not of the Creator?" I asked.

Shaking her head she said, "Even though it may appear that there are, we know that there are not, because of what one of the Holy Scripture verses that we still have says. It basically says that every good thing is of God. And the way to tell whether something is good is whether it confesses that Jesus is the Son of the Creator and that the Son has come in the flesh and is He who was slain, and

is now the redeemer of all mankind. The Holy Scriptures illustrated it in a simpler way with an allegory concerning two different fruit trees. One tree bears good fruit; the other bears bad fruit. You can discern whether or not something is good or evil in life by the fruit it bears, whether it be good or bad fruit. The condition of the fruit alerts you to the author of the situation."

Soaking her words in as if it had been my own mother's sound wisdom I sat for awhile longer enjoying the peace of the garden and her presence.

"I have much to learn, but I understand more than I did before. I thank you," I said smiling fondly at her.

"Roric, if you have gained spiritual insight through any words of mine don't thank me, but rather the Spirit of the

Creator that works through me to accomplish something greater than I could ever do on my own. Come, let's go into the house and I'll help Dorie finish putting together your provisions for the journey and then we'll say goodbye."

Reluctantly getting up, I followed her into the house quietly reflecting on all she had said and how much I already missed her and her family. As I crossed the threshold of the door, I heard a gasp that sounded like Dorie and I sensed a sudden movement in the room ahead of me. Before my eyes could adjust to the dimmer interior light, a crushing blow hit the back of my head and I was falling into a black void that opened up in front of me.

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Slowly consciousness returned and with it the sensation of pain, which kept my eyelids firmly shut. My head felt like it had been used in a game of street ball.

I became aware of the sensation of something else disturbing, a rocking motion of my whole body. Yes, I was swinging, or maybe I had been hit harder on the head than I had realized. Heat! The sensation of heat also occurred to me. The thought of swinging, combined with heat, reminded me of a pig roast, except in this scenario I would be the substitute for the pig. Panic at the possibility of being cooked over a fire can provide amazing recuperative powers. I sat up in my swinging prison and opened my eyes painfully against the bright light. Coming quickly to an awareness of my surroundings, I was

glad to see that there was not a fire kindled beneath me. Instead it had been the heat of the mid afternoon sun beating down on me that I had felt. As for the swinging, I was suspended in a sturdy looking wooden cage, which hung over the side of a wagon.

Hearing the murmur of voices coming from behind me, I turned as best as I could within the tight confines of my suspended prison, still not comprehending the situation well. A cold liquid sensation engulfed me from my head down as I saw a figure off to my right throw something at me. Coming to a full realization, I looked around me as water dripped off my face.

A large group of angry people were gathered along a narrow bench in the lee side of the hill that overlooked the

Kurt's family farm in the valley below. Near the edge of the gorge, surrounded by Zoarinian guards, stood the Kurt family. Gripping the bars of my cage with white knuckled fingers I tried to call out to them, but was stopped by a voice off to my right.

"It won't do you any good to cry out to them, Roric. Besides, haven't you caused them enough trouble already?"

I turned my attention to the voice's owner and saw the robed figure from the citadel, who had tortured Treorna. Every fiber in my being united in that instant in an overwhelming desire to see this man, if you could call him that, utterly destroyed.

Meeting my stare and seeming to take great amusement from what he saw there, he leaned forward and tauntingly

said, “Yes, I know you hate me. How helpless you must feel, almost as helpless as poor dear Treorna was. She begged for me to kill her in the end, crushed by the fact that her God did not come to her rescue. I, of course, had to heed her request. So I cut out her heart while she recanted of her treasonous betrayal of the sacred trust bestowed on her as a high priestess.”

I lunged for him, a guttural roar passing through my lips. My fingers narrowly missed the fabric of his clothes, as I reached for him through the bars. He stepped back from my cage laughing uproariously at my attempt to grab him.

His cold lifeless eyes flickering their disdain for me reminded me of a snake. He spoke again, “Don’t worry Roric, the

headache you've caused us will soon be over; but first what do you say to a little entertainment? Oh, by the way, the name's Marfoul, the author of your demise and all you hold dear." He gave me a mock bow.

Marfoul rose from his bow cockily and then pranced away from me towards the crowd gathered on the cliff top overlooking the canyon. "Good people of the Zoarinian Uplands, loyal friends of the cities of the Plain, hear my words."

The crowd ceased their muttering as they turned all their attention to the devilishly commanding figure in front of them. "These citizens that stand before you are spies of our hated nemesis, the Valley Landers."

Boos erupted from the crowd.

“Yes, yes I know. It’s hard for me to believe too, that people such as these could make their home in our midst under the pretense of being loyal citizens, and all the while they were plotting our demise behind our backs.”

Roars of anger erupted from the crowd as they pushed against the guards holding them back from the Kurt family, who were arrayed along the cliff’s edge.

“Should we offer them forgiveness for their trespasses and let them go?” Marfoul asked.

Shouts of "No, kill them!" erupted from the crowd.

Marfoul shrugged his shoulders and glanced at me, his eyes sparkling with mischief, “What can I say, the people have spoken. Who am I to say otherwise?”

Shaking the bars of my cage I screamed, “Let them go! They’ve done nothing wrong! If it’s blood you want then kill me, but let them go! They’re innocent!”

Marfoul laughed as he advanced toward Samantha, “Afraid I can’t do that Roric. They are, after all, traitors for harboring and abetting you. Worse than that, they are Creator-worshipers.”

He seemed to spit out the last word with utter hatred. Turning to the crowd he announced jubilantly, “I think it’s time to get the festivities you came to see underway, don’t you?”

The crowd roared its approval, not knowing what was going to happen but expecting to see a good show, especially whenever one of the Temple Brotherhood was involved.

Marfoul reached an arm around Samantha's shoulder, who tried her best to pull back from him, but he wouldn't let her. She was at the end of the line. Her three boys and Dorie stood between her and Eliak. All of them had their hands bound in front of them, connected to a single length of rope.

Suddenly, Marfoul bent and kissed Samantha forcefully on the mouth for a long moment, even as she resisted bitterly. Eliak roared like an enraged bull and started toward Samantha and Marfoul, but was brought up short by several spears leveled against him.

Marfoul drew his head back sharply, blood staining his lip from where Samantha had managed to bite him. He struck her sharply across the face with the back of his hand.

Marfoul, seeing that Eliak was about ready to walk through spear points to get to his wife's side, sneered and said, "Well, if you want her that much big boy, go and get her!" And with that taunt, Marfoul shoved Samantha over the cliff's edge.

Samantha's face was white with terror as she fell, but she mouthed three words to her family before she disappeared over the edge.

"Samantha!" Eliak roared out, as he ran towards the edge of the cliff.

The slack quickly disappeared from the line between Samantha and her eldest son, and as the line drew taught it jerked him off his feet along with his two brothers and Dorie. He slid off the side of the cliff after his mother before he had a chance to catch a grip on the

cliff top. He was soon followed by his brothers and sister. They tried desperately to hold onto something to halt their free fall, but failed to do so as they were dragged toward the edge screaming hysterically in terror. As Dorie disappeared over the edge she screamed out, “Daddy!”

It could have all been over then but for one thing: One man’s love for his family and the will to do whatever it took to protect them. Uttering a cry that rocked the hills, Eliak bellowed, “Creator give me strength!”

The rope went taut and the crowd sucked in a collective gasp. Eliak remained standing, how I do not know. He was poised on the very edge of the gorge with the rope gripped in his bloody hands. Giving one great heave,

he jerked up on the rope and managed to get it over his shoulder. Blood ran freely from his bound hands where the rope sawed into his wrists. He turned away from the cliff's edge.

It looked like he would be pulled over backwards for one moment when he turned, but he managed to stabilize himself and then he began to walk. Short step by short step, the rope inched up over the cliff's edge. Dust rose from each heavy laden step forward, and all that could be heard in the stillness was the heavy breathing of Eliak.

The crowd remained breathless, as they witnessed the super human struggle taking place before them. Suddenly, Dorie was at the cliff top pulled along by her father as she made every effort to stand and help ease her father's burden.

The youngest boy made it over the cliff's edge, slowly followed by the second oldest boy. Both boys fought to get to their feet.

Gaining their feet they began to trudge after their father with all their heart. The untested muscles of two boys performing more than many a grown man's ever will. Elim, the oldest boy, made it over the edge and got to his feet and added his strength to the line.

Eliak fell heavily to his knees, the life spent out of him, but he still continued to crawl forward, even as droplets of blood sprayed the dust in front of him from lungs that were shattered from the strain of the pull.

Finally Samantha made it to the cliff top, as her lips moved fervently in what I knew were prayers to her Creator.

Samantha and her children rushed to their father's side just as he collapsed into the dust of the cliff top. They gathered around him, touching him with their bound and bloody hands, praying fervently for his life like only a praying family can.

Tears streamed down my face as I gripped the bars of my cage impotently. I turned my head to glance at Marfoul. All smiles and false joviality were gone and were now openly replaced with a naked hatred that radiated out from every part of his being.

Marfoul lifted his arm and broke the stillness of the moment, "Kill them! Kill them now!"

As dazed guards clumsily rushed forward to do his bidding a miraculous thing happened. I felt as if I must be

dreaming, even though I knew I wasn't. A strong wind blew onto the cliff top, knocking the hats off several of the onlookers in the crowd.

A void of air formed immediately, following in its wake, which seemed to suck all the breathable air from the cliff top. Breathless, I watched as flashing thunderclouds that blocked out the sun materialized all around us.

In my days in the arena I had spent many nights locked up in rusty metal cages when thunderclouds like these would storm in. Those nights had been a living horror for us, who had been locked up in those cages.

Continuous air to ground lightning strikes would occur all around us as we sat huddled in the middle of our cages, soaked and shivering in fear from the

storm and the dampness of the rain. I had learned early on to stay away from the bars and standing pools of water after having witnessed one man blown apart from a lightning strike to his cage, against which he had been leaning. It had left a lasting impression on me and a respect for the power of lightning. This storm had no lightning, but it had the electric feel of it all the same.

The crowd and guards drew back in fear. Marfoul, seemingly coming unhinged by the fast approaching storm, screamed at the guards, “Kill them now, you carrion swine!”

The guards, coming out of their daze, moved back towards the Kurt family, who hadn’t moved the whole time nor ceased from praying. The guards, now more afraid of Marfoul than the

approaching storm, rushed to do their assigned task with swords lifted high. The storm hit the cliff top and out of it materialized beings clothed in flame. They strode purposefully from the storm towards the cliff top. Each fiery being intercepted one of the guards headed for the Kurt family.

Their appearance was fierce and terrible, and as they approached they lifted one hand and withdrew swords that seemed to be made of light itself from behind their backs. In one fluid overhand, downward motion they ended the lives of the stunned guards. As the guards hit the ground, the warriors of the storm turned towards the crowd and advanced purposefully towards them. At their approach, the crowd broke and fled, trampling over each other in their

haste to get away from the flaming swords of the avenging warriors behind them. After the crowd had fled I looked around for Marfoul, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Then I saw two of the warriors headed my way, while the others gathered around the Kurt family, who seemed to be in a world all of their own as they prayed. I watched the warriors of fire approach and knew that I too was going to die soon. As they drew near I tried to maintain eye contact, but could not and looked down awaiting the killing stroke that would end it all. Instead I was greeted with silence and a long pause, which caused me to look up tentatively.

They stood there and seemed to be waiting for me to acknowledge them in

some way. “Are you going to kill me?” I asked.

They smiled, which caused a feeling of peace to well up inside of me, despite the fury of their presence and appearance. One spoke, “No, it has been appointed for you to see what is going to take place here and to be strengthened and encouraged by it. Come and see what the Lord will do.”

“But I……” No sooner had I had begun to say that I couldn’t because of the cage I was in, than I found myself on my feet walking in the direction they indicated.

I stopped when they did, one on either side of me. There on the cliff’s edge, seemingly unaffected by all that had transpired around them, kneeled the Kurt family, still deep in prayer. I felt like I

was in a trance as one of the storm warriors that had freed me left my side, approached the Kurt family and knelt down by Eliak's side. He leaned forward and touched Eliak with a pierced hand. Nothing happened for a moment and then I saw Eliak move and get to his feet, followed by his family.

The ropes fell off their hands as they did so and piled up at their feet. Incredulous, I turned to the warrior directly to my left, "How is that possible?"

"As it is written, 'The prayer of a righteous man availeth much,'" said the warrior angel.

"Watch." The angel gestured with one hand towards the Kurt family.

The figure who had touched Eliak was saying something to them that I could not

make out, but the whole family seemed to be hanging on every word that was spoken to them. The man who spoke held his hand out and over the cliff's edge, and immediately a doorway wreathed in light formed in the darkness of the storm cloud. Without hesitation Eliak, holding Samantha's hand, moved toward the door, walking through thin air to get to it. He paused at the door and let Samantha pass through ahead of him and then the rest of his family, one by one.

The light was indescribably beautiful as it shimmered from the doorway in waves of color too numerous to count and in brilliance too difficult to describe with words. The shimmering light obscured what lay beyond the doorway. "Where are they going?" I asked, completely awestruck by what I was

seeing.

My fellow observer, in a tone that expressed wonder at what he too was watching said, “To a place prepared for those who believe in the Son of the Creator and obey His Father’s statutes; a people that willingly forgo the sinful pleasures of this world. A peculiar people, who seek the heavenly Father’s desire for their lives first, as they lay all other cares aside. It is for these people, who have no place here in this world and for whom this world is not worthy, that such a resting place has been prepared until scripture is fulfilled and the end has come and all things are made brand new.”

I watched as Eliak disappeared through the doorway, followed by the Kurt family protectors. Not fully

understanding what I was seeing, but knowing the deep yearning I felt within me for what I knew to be the truth, fully understood or not, I asked, "Can I go with them?"

A voice of authority, which felt as if it could crush me and yet breathed life into me at the same moment, spoke off to my right, "There is a place for you there Roric, and for all who have asked forgiveness in My name and live a life sanctified before Me."

I fell to my face, unable to stand face to face with my Creator's Son. Everything I had done wrong or imperfectly in this life rose up against me like a suffocating cloud of oppression.

"A repentant heart is precious to the Father. Be bound no more by your past

deeds and your fears of the future; for I am with you always."

Unable to speak past the waves of emotion racing through me, I still framed a word in my mind, "Why?"

"Because I love you. So much so that I died for you and rose again so that you might live forever with Me in my Father's presence. Stand now, Roric."

I was on my feet facing the Savior of all mankind, without knowing how I got there. I recognized the figure of the man then as the one who had healed Eliak. How could I not have known who He was earlier? It was so clear now!

"Roric, will you follow me?"

"Yes!" I said, without hesitation.

"Will you obey me and go where I will send you?"

"Yes!"

“Forsaking everything for my namesake, even your life?”

Panic filled me. Was I going to fail? Was this a test? I stuttered to form an answer, suddenly unsure of anything when it came to my own strength to do the simplest of things,

“I’m weak, but if You help me I will do it.”

“It is enough, as My grace is sufficient for thee and My strength is made manifest through your weakness. Go, and may the Spirit of the Creator that dwells even now within you, comfort and strengthen you for the tasks I have set for you. Call upon My name and I will hear you and rescue you from all your enemies and troubles. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Roric, know that the plans I have for you are good

and not evil. Be at peace and become one of My precious jewels, set in a place of honor for all eternity. The harvest is ready, but the workers are few and yet My Father's will shall be accomplished. Awake to your place, Roric, set your hand to accomplish My Father's will and be blessed." He smiled then and began to walk away with the remaining protector towards the door in the storm.

Almost frantic I yelled out, "Master wait! What is it that I should do for You?"

Turning He said, "Be My holy warrior first and foremost and live according to My Father's Word and His Holy Words only and all will go well with you. As you learn the Words of My Father and depend on His Spirit to guide you on

your journey, the hidden mysteries since the foundation of all creation will be revealed to you. You will see through the darkness and overturn the blindness and oppression of many. If you but believe and pray down the Creator's blessings, nothing will be too great for you to accomplish in My Father's name."

My Master turned towards the door and stepped through it, which melted around Him into nothingness. There was the sound, as if a thousand lightning bolts went off at once and then there was complete silence as the clouds disappeared.

I blinked my eyes against the harsh early afternoon sunlight that had suddenly appeared and blinded me. I wheeled around and surveyed the cliff

top, as I shielded my eyes with one hand. Everyone was gone except for the dead guards and what the crowd had left behind in their mass exodus to escape.

Had everything I remembered really just happened on this quiet and deserted cliff top? I felt such a lightness of spirit within me! The Spirit of the Creator within me felt like a happy babbling brook overwhelming its banks in the time of spring rains. I let it. My mouth fell open and words with no meaning to me poured forth in exaltation and praise to my Heavenly Father. A sense of purpose and a feeling of being loved welled up inside of me such as I had never felt so keenly before.

"Thank You God, for freedom from the bonds of this world. May I ever please You and never disappoint You."

Feeling released by the Holy Spirit I stood, but it would have been nice to stay in that place of oneness with my Creator forever. I walked over to the cliff's edge and peered into the valley below. Smoke still rose from the ashes of what had once been the Kurt family's homestead. Anger at the senseless destruction of a place that had been like a home to me these past few weeks caused my fists to clench tight. People like Marfoul, that could commit such atrocities, had to be confronted and now I had the heavenly authority to do it. Turning from the cliff's edge, I looked through what had been left on the cliff top.

I personally didn't care for any of the poorly made weapons the guards had on them and I had all but given up hope,

when I came across a set of three Nizak fighting knives on the last guard. Forged by the hill tribesman of the Khartian Mountains, they were excellently made. They measured a little over a foot from hilt to point and were slightly curved up towards the point, but not too far to negate their ability to be thrown accurately. Their true usefulness in battle was in close hand-to-hand combat, one in either hand with the third in the waistband to replace a thrown or lost knife, if need be.

They were the only things worth taking from the cliff top. Gathering them up and stashing them in my waistband I headed northwest towards the Valley Lands. I hadn't gone very far when I came to a small stream lazily making its way down the steep hill. Overcome with

thirst, I drank deeply as I splashed water up onto my head. My head still hurt from the blow I had received earlier in the day and the cold water helped with the pain.

I heard rustling in the brush across the stream from me. Going completely still, but poised to move at a moment's instance, I slowly lifted my head to look across the stream. There stood the stallion named Flin, saddled and fully provisioned. He was munching on some tender leaves from the bush he stood next to. Eliak or one of the boys must have saddled and loosed him before the Zoarinians could intervene. Lifting my head heavenward, I said a silent thank you for the provision of the gift I had thought lost to me. Looking back at Flin, I saw him flick his head over his

shoulder in the direction of the Valley Lands.

"Okay boy, we'll go. Have some patience, it's been a long day."

I got tiredly up to my feet, grateful that I had a horse to ride. My head throbbed steadily as I approached Flin and laid my hand on his neck and then pulled myself into the saddle. He accepted me as his master without resistance, of which more than just my sore head was grateful.

Chapter Six

Campfire

Two days later the Litian River lay just ahead of us. Just as darkness was looming dense we drew up alongside of the river. The river was in flood stage caused by snow melt from up in the higher peaks of the mountains. Flin started nudging forward toward the river, eager for the challenge. “Whoa, Boy!” I said, drawing back on the reins as I looked across the river to what lay beyond.

This was as close as I had ever come

to my ancestral home. The land that lay beyond was completely foreign to me, but yet it seemed familiar in some intangible way, as if I had been here before. What lay beyond this point I did not know, but I felt a sense of excitement welling up inside of me at the possibilities.

"Let's go, Flin."

Flin released his tensed up muscles and we fairly lunged into the fast moving current of the river. The icy cold water took my breath away as it rose quickly to my waist. Flin was a powerful swimmer and swam hard against the current to reach the other side. The current must have taken us a hundred yards or so downriver when I felt Flin's hooves dig into the opposite bank of the river and we started to climb up and out of the icy

water. Having gained a purchase on solid ground, Flin broke into a gallop, invigorated by the cold water and a general lust for life and adventure. Holding on tightly and enjoying the strength of the stallion beneath me, I grinned, sharing in the sentiment of the moment, and let Flin run all out across the plain towards the majestic mountains rising up before us.

As tall shadows began to form, the sense of being watched began to form as well. Several times I drew Flin up and paused to survey my backtrail, but I saw nothing there to cause alarm. There did not seem to be anything out there but me. Nevertheless the feeling of being watched continued.

The feeling reminded me of an

experience I'd had as a boy, when I had been but eight years old. I was coming home through a wooded glen near our home. My mother had sent me to our neighbor's place further down the valley with an herbal tea that had been needed to cure one of their little girl's bad, late spring coughs. I had stayed longer than I should have since the girl was quite pretty and had seemed very interested in my company. Not too many people ever seemed interested in having me around, except maybe my mother, so I had stayed, soaking up the freely given attention.

The evening shadows were thick on the land as I had walked through the glen on my way home, not looking forward to my mother's scolding for not leaving earlier. Suddenly the hairs on the back of

my neck had stood straight up, as some primal instinct alerted me to a danger I could not see. I had broken into an all-out run for home, not caring if I was making a big fool of myself, so convinced was I that something was out there intent on getting me.

I could see the glow of the kitchen light dimly ahead of me through the gloom of the forest. The darkness around me seemed to scream at me. When had it gotten so dark and why was that light so far away?

Crack!

I could now hear the danger some forgotten instinct had alerted me to! Panting heavily, my heart beat sounding like a drum in my own ears, I had glanced over my left shoulder and beheld a living nightmare closing in fast!

A hulking marsh cat, easily weighing over two hundred pounds, was leaping over deadfalls and around tree trunks heading straight for me, with no good intent toward me gleaming in its huge glowing eyes. My head whipped back around and I ran the most important race of my short life.

I don't know how I was able to keep my footing in the littered jumble of the forest floor, but I did somehow, leaping over rocks and almost slamming into trees several times. Suddenly, a large familiar hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed the front of my shirt, heaving me up through the air as if I had been no more than a feather's worth in weight, to land me behind a large sycamore trunk. Recognizing my father with a relieved gasp of air, I watched as

with one fluid motion he stepped out from behind the tree and unsheathed the old sword that usually sat above the mantle in our home covered in dust. With the grace of a cat my father quickly moved towards the approaching feline, shortening the distance dramatically.

The marsh cat, sensing the easy game of ‘tag you’re it’ had altered significantly, tried to stop, as its massive muscles clenched tight and its paws dug up furrows in the loose debris of the forest, but it was too late. My father’s quick advance had closed the distance between him and the cat, and with one smooth overhand swish of the blade the big cat’s head went rolling into the underbrush, as its body fell lifeless at my father’s feet.

Bending slightly, my father calmly

wiped off the blade of the sword on the cat's fur. Straightening up from his task, he turned towards me and contemplated me quietly as he put his sword away.

"Are you all right, son?"

My mouth too dry to talk, I had nodded.

Coming up alongside of me, he had put his big hand on my shoulder, a gesture which offered me reassurance that everything was okay.

"Let's not say anything about this to your mother, okay son?"

"Yes, Father!" I responded emphatically, relieved.

We headed for home walking side by side.

"Father, can you teach me how to use a sword like that?"

His big hand resting on my shoulder

had squeezed hesitantly and then, after a long moment, he had said, “We’ll start in the morning.”

I never again looked at my father in the same way after that experience. He was more than just a father that cared for my needs, now he was also a force to be reckoned with. He was dangerous. I had wanted to be dangerous like him.

Coming out of my reflections of the past, I eased Flin towards a small brook up ahead of us that ran along the base of an upthrust of rock. It was dark in the shadow of the cliff that I had chosen to make my camp under, which was good because it would obscure my plans from any prying eyes.

Normally, I would never make a camp in a spot like this and I was hoping that

whoever was stalking me did not know me well. My reasons for not liking the camping spot would have been quite obvious to an experienced traveler. I had been on the run from the authorities for years and I'd picked up some tips of what not to do during that time.

Building a campfire against a cliff face can reflect the light of the fire for miles around, even with a small fire. I had also learned, the hard way, never to camp near water; because both beast and man alike were bound to go near it for necessity's sake. Quickly, under cover of darkness, I gathered a large pile of dry wood from a nearby deadfall tree. I dug a shallow pit for a fire, only much larger in circumference than I typically would. I hurried down to the stream with my saddle bags which I filled up with

large round river stones. The river stones were ice cold from the cold, snow melt water coming down from the mountains. I made a hot rolling fire. A fire that was much bigger than was needed and would be reflected off the cliff behind me for miles around.

I made a great show of unsaddling Flin and making camp for the night. I even went so far as to make a quick batch of pan bread. After my meal, I surreptitiously surrounded the outer rim of the fire pit with the stones from the creek, as I appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be cleaning my dinner dishes. The fire had burned down some and now I built a trifold of sticks over the fire that would slowly release wood and keep the fire burning long into the night; only my trifold setup was going to

be a quick release mechanism in about a half hour or so. Moving to my bedroll to the edge of the fire's light, I lay down on it and paused for a few moments and then I carefully slid out the far side of it into the darkness beyond the fire's light.

I had made sure to throw my saddle outside the fire light's range earlier and I had hobbled Flin on a patch of good grass some thirty feet from the fire, another thing I would never have done if I was making a serious camp. Grabbing Flin's bridle, I quickly saddled him and moved off northward along the ridge, first walking and then riding softly as noise travels far after dark.

Pausing a half mile away up higher in the foot hills of the mountains, I listened for signs of pursuit, but I heard none. I watched the camp below me in the

distance, as I sat on top of Flin. Both of us were completely still and silent as we waited in the darkness of the night.

The sticks had fallen into the fire and were burning quite brightly now. Shadows suddenly appeared out of the darkness around the fire and not less than three lances were jammed into my vacant bedroll, while two other figures stood back and observed. Upon realizing my absence, I could hear voices raised loudly in argument.

Somebody was getting dressed down royally. Served them right, that had been a good blanket I had left by the fire, I wryly mused to myself. It was going to be a cold night without it, but I was glad I was able to at least still feel the cold. Having come to some consensus the shadowy figures by the fire stopped

arguing and were about to exit the camp when it happened.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Explosions rocked the night air in a continuous staccato of sound! I grinned broadly with satisfaction. This was well worth suffering a little discomfort, as I watched the mayhem breaking out in the camp below. I couldn't have planned it any better. The ice cold riverstones had heated up and blown apart at precisely the right moment. Chaos ensued in the camp below.

I doubted that the shattered stone fragments had killed any of them or even seriously injured them, but their sense of being in control of the hunt was gone as well as the advantage of surprise. Still smiling, I pulled Flin back around to the trail and proceeded slowly up the

mountain path by the light of the half moon that was glimmering overhead.

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After last night, whoever was following me could harbor no doubts that I knew of their pursuit. The dust cloud on my back trail was clear evidence that they realized stealth was no longer an option. Pausing on a ridge, I looked back at the five riders following me; Zoarinian Horse Guardsman by the look of them. They were pushing their horses hard to catch up with me and I made no attempt to hide my trail.

I finally crossed over a small crest into a valley in between some low mountains. On the far side of the short valley was a close knit grove of pine trees, which I now headed for.

The trees had grown close to each

other and there was little light in the dark confines of the pine forest. Having gone some distance into the pines, I dismounted from Flin and tethered him behind some deadfalls, where he was unlikely to be noticed right away. Putting a little distance between myself and Flin, I stopped roughly eighty feet back from the edge of the pine grove where it met the valley meadow I had just ridden through.

I climbed one of the pines until I was about twenty feet off the ground. Resting on a sturdy branch, I pulled two of the Nizak blades from my belt and waited for my pursuers to come to me. I was done with running. Last night had been all the warning that I was willing to give as to the danger of following me and they had not heeded it.

The day was hot for early spring, but it felt good within the cool darkness of the forest. After a while I heard the brush of a stirrup against a tree, accompanied by the sounds of movement from several riders in the close confines of the pine forest. They were riding single file directly following the trail I had left. In the darkness of the forest they didn't see me sitting motionless high up in the tree. I made sure not to stare at them directly as well, but rather I kept my gaze off focus. A concentrated stair can often alert the intended victim on some unconscious level to the unseen danger posed to them; why I did not know, but I had found it to be true nonetheless.

I waited until the middle rider of the five was directly underneath me and then

I jumped. Time seemed to slow down as I fell through the air. The ability of being able to plan a series of moves before the completion of an action is a hard won talent. So much energy and opportunity is lost in the panic of the moment.

In the beginning of my time in the arena I had relied on a nerved up approach to combat, with its basis rooted firmly in the simple need to survive. In that approach to fighting, one's ability to take damage better than and longer than your opponent, as well as the longevity of your energy level, is your only hope. As time had progressed, I had learned to tone down the chatter and focus on the simplicity of the action required, ignoring the less important factors and unnecessary movements. I had learned to fight smart.

Everything could come into play; environment, frame of mind, abilities of the opponent, surprise, and, last of all, mere chance. The risk was that some things were impossible to predict. But no risk taken meant survival was doubtful. Success often belongs to the one willing to sweep in and snatch it out of the jaws of indecision. As my feet landed on the back end of the third horse in the column, I allowed my momentum to force my knees into a deep squat. I immediately rammed my left hand, which was holding a Nizak blade backward, into the rider behind me where his armor meshed together in the center of his back. Finding the weak spot in the armor, the knife went in to the hilt.

Pushing off with both legs, I leaped off the back end of the surprised horse

straight at the fourth rider, dislodging my blade as I sprang forward. My left leg stretched out before me in my leap, cleared the side of the horse's head and landed on its front left shoulder. The momentum of my body pushed the horse to my left and I pushed off with that leg, sending me towards a pine tree beyond and off to the side of the rider. As I headed for the tree, I buried the knife in my left hand beneath the rider's shoulder where there was no armor.

I switched the knife from my right hand to my left in midair. Now free, my right hand wrapped around the smooth trunk of a young pine tree, which helped slow my momentum to the ground as I spiraled around the tree trunk. The last rider's horse, reacting to the fright of the other animals, was shying away from

me, causing the back of the rider to be exposed even as he struggled to regain control of his mount. Leaping onto the back of the horse, I made a quick slice across its rider's throat with the knife in my left hand. I continued on a controlled fall over the right side of the horse as the rider fell, clutching at his throat, over the left side of the horse.

I somersaulted to my feet in time to see the second rider in the column had pulled off to the side and was aiming an arrow straight at my chest. Throwing myself to the side, I felt the arrow slide along my ribs on my left side. Throwing the Nizak blade overhanded, I watched it hit him in the throat causing him to gasp loudly and drop the bow. He fell heavily to the ground, as his horse galloped off.

The first rider had turned in the

narrow confines of the forest and charged me now with his lance pointed down. Mere moments before he would have impaled me, I slipped behind a young pine tree. I heard the swish of the bladed lance slicing through the air where I had just been a moment before. Coming around the tree trunk, I threw my last knife hard and watched as it sunk to its hilt low down on the rider's back, piercing its way through the armor platelets. He managed to stay on his horse until he made it to the meadow before he fell off.

Grimly, I watched the fallen rider struggle to rise only to fall back to the ground. It gave me no pleasure to kill, but these men had asked for it by tracking me down. I collected my knives, not wanting to see such fine weapons rot

in the undergrowth of this dark forest. Reaching down to retrieve a knife, I winced as the arrow wound reminded me of its presence. My fingers found the wound on my side. The arrow had hit nothing vital, but it had left a nasty gash where it had skidded off my ribs, and the wound was bleeding profusely.

Flin perked up an ear at my reappearance and even looked halfway interested that I had returned. Gathering the reins I led him through the forest and out to where the last soldier lay. The warmth of the afternoon sun felt good after the cool moist darkness of the forest. Blood dripped off my fingers, which held a wadded up piece of rag to the wound in my side, as I approached the last soldier in the meadow.

The man was still conscious, but he

didn't have long by the looks of it.

Looking up at me he coughed up some blood as he shook his head, "Should have known better than to come after you! I saw you fight in the arena once."

"Who sent you?" I asked.

"Marfoul and some others like him. He doesn't like you very much," he said, grinning up at me.

A surge of pain wiped the grin off his face. He looked around at the beautiful mountain scenery. "Well, I guess this is as good a spot as any to die."

Looking up at me he said, "See you in hell, Roric."

With that last comment, which felt like a bad stain on the beauty around us, he breathed his last. Shaking my head sadly, I reflected on the wasted life that lay extinguished before me. A man that, with

his dying breath, had wished me to go to hell. Hell, thankfully, wasn't my destination anymore and nothing that anybody could say could ever make it so again.

I wanted to see what lay beyond the array of vibrantly shimmering colors of that doorway in the clouds, to be surrounded by people like the Kurts and my own parents. But most of all I wanted to forever serve the Creator, who cared enough about me to extend an invitation even after all the evil I had done.

Moving towards Flin, I started to mount him when I noticed his ears flicker and his head turn towards the path we had come through to reach this alpine valley. Moving around Flin's head, I took in the unpleasant sight of a long line of at least eighty mounted

riders stretched out across the narrow valley.

The line continued to advance as I mounted Flin. Sensing the tension in the air, I could feel Flin tensing up to make a run for it if I needed him to. “It’s okay Flin,” I said, leaning forward and patting his neck. Obediently he stopped nervously prancing and remained still, waiting for direction from me, one big mass of bunched up muscles. The riders drew closer and I saw that they weren’t Zoarinians.

They were Valley Landers. I relaxed even more as I saw Seth and Rolf in the column of riders. The latter two rode out to me at a full gallop followed by the other riders at a more reserved pace. Seth leaped off his horse and I dismounted. He embraced me in a bear

hug that I was ill prepared for and, grimacing slightly, I painfully returned it. Rolf, still seated on horseback, nodded his head silently in a welcoming gesture that I returned back to him.

"Seth, stop mobbing him! Can't you see he's injured?"

Seth stepped back and spread my vest back from the wound. Whistling through his teeth he shook his head, "Nasty, but not life threatening unless untreated. Here, sit down on this rock and we'll get you fixed up in no time boss."

Seth moved off towards his horse's saddle bags. Sitting down, I looked up at Rolf with a question in my eyes. Meeting my gaze he responded, "The children and Larc are safe."

Relieved, my attention shifted to the Valley Lander contingent of cavalry,

who had pulled up all around us. Their leader was an older man with a grey streaked beard and long hair that matched. That was where the effects of advanced age seemed to stop. His eyes were alive with a quick intelligence and he no doubt could still handle himself as a warrior given his strong warrior bearing.

"My name is General Nadero and it would appear that you have had a spot of trouble."

His words, while affable enough, didn't reach his eyes. I could see that he was deeply troubled over the appearance of Zoarinian troops so far within the outer borders of the Valley Lands.

I nodded my head in answer to his statement of fact.

“A man of few words I see. A good way to be in these perilous days I think. There are far too many yokels spouting off everything in their head.”

I was bemused at the sudden tirade by the older man. Somehow his eccentricity already had me liking him. “Pleased to meet you, General Nadero. I’m the son of Lorn Ta’lont and I wish to have safe passage into the Valley Lands.”

“But of course, it is our honor to welcome you home after so long; the son of one of our heroes and one of our proudest families. It will bring great joy to the people to know that a Ta’lont has come back to us in these dark times.”

Gesturing towards the fallen Zoarinians he asked, “Are there any more than these following you?”

“No, I do not think so, but I cannot be

sure of it."

"Well, let's get out of this valley before any more of them do show up. Are you able to ride, Roric? You look a little roughed up there."

Seth had just finished wrapping my side, which felt better with the pressure of the bandage against it. I rose to my feet and mounted Flin, who ambled up at the sound of the whistle call that Eliak had taught me to use.

One of the Valley Landers, intrigued by the uniqueness of my whistle call, tried to duplicate it. Flin didn't even so much as bat an ear in his direction.

"A fitting mount for a warrior such as yourself," said General Nadero, in frank appreciation of Flin.

"I need to meet with the high council as soon as possible General," I said.

“And so you shall,” General Nadero responded. “The high council is currently gathered at the Governor’s residence at Kingdom Pass. If we ride through the night we should be able to reach the wall by early morning tomorrow.”

Swinging into the saddle had caused the gash in my side to twinge again and my desire to talk had diminished considerably, so I just nodded and turned Flin towards the pass in the mountains ahead, where the fabled wall of the Valley Lands was situated at the head where the mountains gave way to the interior recesses of the Valley Lands. Flin fell in with the rest of the column of riders as they headed toward the homeland that I had never seen.

Chapter Seven

Strength of the Past

The glow of the early morning was beginning to lighten up the sky when we neared the end of the long pass through the mountains to the city of Kingdom Pass. As far as I knew, it was the only viable access point into the Valley Lands. It was said that there were other, smaller passes higher in the mountains, but they were extremely dangerous and hard to find and sometimes weren't open for years at a time.

Large, majestic, snow capped peaks

rose to the sky all around us, as far as the eye could see to either side of the pass. Never before had I seen such grandeur exhibited in nature. Earlier, the only definition to the land that could be discerned had been the deeper darkness of the side walls of the pass on either side of us as we had rode through the night. But now, a vast panorama of majesty rose all around us, steadily backlit by the morning sun which was burning away the misty fog cloaking the pass and mountains.

The floor of the pass was a relatively flat, dry creek bed that spanned roughly anywhere from five hundred to twelve hundred feet across. We rode on a slightly-elevated highway of crushed stone that led us ever upwards through the flats.

The walls of the pass rose into even steeper mountain sides further above us. Rounding a bend in the pass, I saw it before us, the wall of Kingdom Pass. The pass opened up into a wider space, and stretched across it lay the battlement fortifications of Kingdom Pass. It had been built long ago, just after the colonization of this continent had begun. Our forefathers had come across the northern seas in ships that were of a creation that had not been equaled since. I knew little of the early days of our world; only that we had come here from another world.

There had been sharp dissension among the early settlers over the use of technology that had led to a fracturing of loyalties, which had ultimately led to war. It had been a terrible war lasting

over a hundred years and it had culminated in the building of this wall. It had been an attempt for survival by those in the minority, who had believed that the technology that had been used to get to this world was no longer something that was good for the people to know. Building the wall had worked. For over six hundred years the wall and its defenses had stood as a dividing rod between those who came to be known as the Valley Landers, and the world at large that lay beyond the mountain valleys.

Now, as I looked at the wall being unveiled in the early morning light, I could not stop the sense of awe that overcame me at the sight of it. The wall and its towers appeared to be one massive block of golden mountain

granite that reflected the early morning light. The wall ran out into the valley in a soft bell curve that faced down the pass. The top of the wall itself was studded with towers and defensive battlements. The most interesting thing was that I didn't see any gateway through the massive wall. After a few moments of searching, I saw the gates. There were two of them, but they weren't in the wall itself. They were located in the walls of the pass to either side of the wall.

There must be tunnels behind the gates that led through the mountains on either side of the wall in order to access the city beyond. It was a smart way of resolving the inherent tactical weakness of a gateway. Gates are typically the weakest points in a fortification; get

enough ramming, bombardment, and a heavy enough massing of troops and any gate can fall; except maybe these gates. The angle they were at put them out of range of being directly fired upon by projectiles. The massing of troops in the narrow tunnels would create a bottleneck that could prove catastrophic, if they had death holes through which boiling oil could be poured down onto the attacking troops and the tunnels themselves could likely be caved in, if need be, to stop an invasion. If there was any weakness to be found in the defenses before me, it was probably the overconfidence of the soldiers defending it, thinking that the wall could never fail, which is a very dangerous weakness to have as overconfidence breeds laziness and inattention to detail.

As we drew near to the leeward gate I could see sentries ringed along the top of the wall above us, watching us intently. Upon seeing this place, it was hard to believe that my father had been in charge of all this at one point in time.

Silent, well hidden warriors rose up from the ground all around us, with arrows at the ready placed in their bow strings. Flin, not liking it, shied back, ready to make a bolt for freedom. Holding the reins firmly, I held our position in the line, as I frankly admired the outer guardsmen's skill at remaining unseen.

I had not suspected their presence until they had risen from the ground as quiet as shadows. Looking over at Rolf, I noticed that he didn’t seem to share my

surprise at the occurrence of the armed warriors. The man had senses as keen as any marsh cat.

The guardsmen, seemingly satisfied of our authenticity, eased off on their bows and parted to let us pass by, as the large outer doors of the gate ahead of us swung open without the barest hint of sound. We entered the tunneled gateway which was lined with lit torches and proceeded to make our way through the tunnel to the upper gate that opened to the city. The clipping of our horse's hooves echoed loudly within the confines of the tunnel which was carved out of solid rock. Coming to the second gateway, it too swung open before us without the barest hint of sound. As the doors swung out, a courtyard opened up before us that was ringed with soldiers

silently standing in formation.

The level of security was impressive. Making our way out of the courtyard, I got my first glance at the city that lay beyond the wall. The city lacked the size of the Zoarinian cities, as well as some of their appearance of opulence, but I liked what I saw here better. The buildings weren't grandly embellished, but they were neat, orderly, and solid in appearance.

There were throngs of people out and about their daily activities already, something that would have been an uncommon scene in any Zoarinian city, as they lived for the night and shunned the early light of day. Making our way through the crowded streets, we drew the attention of the early morning goers. Wondering what they were thinking, I

made chance eye contact throughout the crowd. Their expressions were almost universally curious, and I sensed a feeling of anticipation directed specifically at me.

We made our way through the city until we came to a larger and more opulent structure that was set apart from the rest of the city. We paused as the gates were opened and were ushered into a courtyard lined with ornately dressed guardsman. Pulling up to the stairs in front of the building, I dismounted and followed General Nadero, handing my reins to a man-at-arms who stepped forward. Moving stiffly, I fairly limped up the stairs. My whole left side was stiff from my injury and the long ride through the night. Seth and Rolf flanked me on either side.

Their presence made me feel more secure in this foreign environment.

We passed through several galleries, each filled with fineries more opulent than the previous room. Finally, we came to a grand central hall that was lined with men-at-arms and important looking people with less important, elaborately dressed dignitaries fluttering around them. The busy hubbub of the room dropped to a low murmur at our appearance.

General Nadero spoke softly to an attendant, who then turned around and announced to the hall, “Ladies and Gentleman may I introduce to you Roric Ta’lont, son of Lorn Ta’lont.”

Hushed silence followed in the wake of his announcement. I looked at General Nadero for direction. I was on the verge

of turning and leaving as I was not comfortable with the oddities of this type of social situation. He motioned me further into the room toward a broad table at the other end of the hall. I hesitated for a moment, but then I made the decision to carry this charade out to its conclusion and began to make the long journey across the room under the speculative stares of the many onlookers the hall contained. I felt entirely out of place in these rich surroundings.

I was dirty, my hair was unruly and hanging about my face, my tunic was stained with dirt and blood, and I felt like a sick kitten in need of a fluffy pillow and a bowl of milk. What was I doing here anyway?

This is where the path had led me so I needed to finish it, even if it was

embarrassing. Squaring my shoulders, I threw off the weight of the stares of those around me and focused on my destination. Before I reached the long table, behind which sat seven individuals, an attractive, middle aged woman broke from the seven and started to approach me. Obtusely I wondered if she was coming to criticize me for the trail of mud I was leaving down the middle of this beautiful hall.

Glancing around me to see if the sentiment was shared, I caught the heated glances of a group of finely dressed women. If I read the intent of their glances correctly, the furthest thing from their minds right now was the conspicuous trail of mud I was leaving. Their speculative looks of interest had me jerking my gaze abruptly back to the

approaching older woman, as a slight tinge of color rose to my cheeks.

Fighting, killing, and the rigors of survival were what I was well versed in; of the ways of women I knew almost nothing at all.

As the woman drew close, she reached out and took my hand in hers and said, as tears fell from her eyes, “Thank you Roric, for bringing my son back to me!”

This must be Larc’s mother, “You have a fine son my lady. Larc is a son that any mother would be proud to have.” Letting my eyes fall towards the floor I continued, “I’m sorry that I couldn’t also return your husband to you as well.”

She tugged on my hand and I lifted my gaze to hers again. There was no

condemnation to be found in her eyes. Looking deeply into my eyes she said, “Wilton knew the risks. We both did. I lay no blame for what happened to him on you, but instead I rejoice at the miracle in having my son returned to me. Thank you for allowing yourself to be a part of the Creator’s plan in saving my son as well as all those other children!”

She released my hand and stepped back, making way for a stately dressed, older councilman, who had come up as I had been talking. He had a small, neatly trimmed white beard and piercing blue eyes that seemed to look into my soul.

He stepped forward, laying a hand to my shoulder, and directed me with a gesture of his other hand towards an antechamber door off the main hall. “Affairs of state can wait, this man

needs medical attention! Clear out and get someone useful in here that knows how to heal! Make way there!"

I followed in the wake of the steely and somewhat cranky councilman. The interested people before us moved to heed his wishes.

A short time later I found myself sitting on a table in an antechamber room with an elderly man that I took to be a healer and a capable looking woman, who was assisting him.

"Lie back, son. Can't be having a hero dying on us now can we? Wouldn't look good for my reputation."

The old healer gave a raspish chuckle as he continued, "Not that I care about my reputation."

I lay back on the table and let him remove the makeshift bandage that Seth

had made. He muttered to himself disgustedly at either the condition of the bandage, or the wound, or maybe both.

"You may be a hero in the flesh, but you're a dumb fool when it comes to brains, boy! Riding all night with a wound like this!"

Lying back on the table I smiled to myself. I may be a dumb fool, but there was no doubt in my mind that someone bigger than me was pulling the strings of my life. If it was foolish for me to follow the path that the Creator had set down before me, then let me increase in the foolishness this world thought it to be, as I sought the wisdom of the Creator's will for my life.

The woman who was assisting the doctor watched closely as Roric's eyes

drifted shut in much needed rest. She leaned forward and brushed the hair off his forehead, as a mother would a young child's.

"Thank you so much, Lord, for your provision! We needed a Godly minded young warrior such as this, who seeks not for his own gain. Glory to You Heavenly Father, for in our hour of need You have provided!" she finished saying softly, as tears fell.

The old doctor glanced up at her words and then back down at where he was working on cleaning out the wound, "Amen," he said softly.

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I felt the breeze on my cheek before I heard the accompanying sounds of a

bird's call echoing in its wake. Opening my eyes, I took in my surroundings. I wearily admitted to myself that this was beginning to become something of a habit of sorts; waking up completely disoriented in a strange place. I didn't care for it. From the looks of it, I was still in the governor's mansion I had entered earlier.

That must have been yesterday as there was a new sun rising outside. I sat up in bed, wincing as I did so. My ribcage was wrapped in bandages. It felt a good bit better than it had yesterday, but it still smarted painfully if I twisted too much.

"Decided to join the land of the living again I see, my boy."

The words emanated from a darkened corner of the room. Peering into the

corner I heard a chair scrape against the stone floor and I saw a figure rise up and come towards me. The shadowy figure used a cane to walk. He came into the light and I was shocked to see a resemblance to myself in his face, although more timeworn and wrinkled.

It didn't surprise me when he said, "As you might have guessed we're related, you and I. Your father was my son, which makes you my grandson. Long have I wanted to see you, but I feared to never see the day come."

He leaned heavily on his cane for a moment as his eyes rested on me. "Oh to God that your father, mother and brother could be here too! But at least I am not without comfort in that I, at least, have you! Come, my boy! It's time that you saw your new home, that is if you

choose to make it so."

I got to my feet stiffly and before I could resist, aged but still strong arms enveloped me in a bear hug that caused the pain in my side to intensify slightly.

My arms closed gently around the older man. It caused me more pain but I could tell he needed comforting and I was the closest he could ever come again to experiencing the embrace of his own son.

Breaking off he suddenly stepped back, "Enough of that! I'm getting as sentimental as a woman in my old age!" He cleared his throat.

Looking into his eyes I could see the hint of tears there, but I would never have shamed him by mentioning them.

"As I said, I'm your grandfather, Thaddeus Ta'lont. Come with me boy,

I'm sure you're full of questions and I'll answer them as best as I can, but first I believe these gentlemen wish to have a word with you. They have been most insistent, even to the point of waking you, but I wouldn't hear of it. A wounded man needs his sleep! It's the best thing for him. I should know since I've been in that predicament enough myself!"

On and on he prattled incessantly, but I didn't mind. Pulling on a shirt and pants, which were lying on a nearby table, I followed him into the other room. There were three men gathered there.

The youngest one of the bunch said to Thaddeus, as he limped forward with the use of his cane, "Good to see you out and about, away from that mountain

fortress you keep yourself cooped up in, Thaddeus."

"Wish I could say the same about you Oswald, but I can't bring myself to."

The remark brought a dark look to Oswald's face. Something about the man put me off and I had to admit I didn't care for him either.

The older of the two remaining men, the councilman from the court yesterday, nodded his head respectfully at Thaddeus as a slight smile touched his lips, while his companion's face was wreathed in a huge grin at Thaddeus's snub of Oswald.

Thaddeus nodded deferentially to both of them and turned to gesture to me, "Gentlemen, if I may, let me have the honor of introducing my grandson Roric Ta'lont, my sole heir."

Again Oswald's face tightened up as he and the others welcomed me. He would bear watching more closely.

Later, as I stood on a porch of the government building, I gazed at the breadth of the wall that dominated the one end of the town, and I couldn't but help reflect on how much my life had changed once again. I had a grandfather and a castle with extensive lands that I was to inherit one day. I was a wealthy man, with a family and a place to call my home, if I wanted it.

How strange were the ways of the Creator; to elevate an escaped arena slave like myself to a position of such wealth and honor. I had told the three men earlier all that I knew.

The news of Lent's betrayal was a

sore point that I could see greatly bothered Romnan, the older man, and Elim, the other councilman.

I left nothing out, especially about how Wilton's reports had been fabricated lies told to him by the Zoarinians through the years and how everything had been a setup in order to get Larc so they could control his mother.

Thaddeus had sat quietly, staring at nothing in particular most of the time and at Oswald the rest of the time, which seemed to annoy Oswald. Which was probably the intent of my grandfather all along. Romnan had ended the meeting by saying, "Thank you Roric, your information is most valuable to us, as is your heroic deed in rescuing the children. We'll leave you now in the

care of your grandfather, as I'm sure you have lots to talk about."

As he made to leave the room, he pulled to the side and waited for the other two to leave first before saying, "Roric, when the time comes, I hope you will consent to join in the fight for our freedom. I need men like you. There are few left short of Thaddeus's age that know what war can truly be like."

"He's right Roric, there are few who have the ability and strength to lead and do what needs done!" Thaddeus added.

Not wanting to disappoint them, but feeling the need to slow things down I said, "I need some time. A lot has happened to me recently, but this I can tell you. I will do all that I can to defend the right of people to worship the Creator."

Romnan and Thaddeus both smiled.

Thaddeus patted me on the back, "That's all we would ever ask of you, my boy. If the people remain faithful to the Creator then He'll be faithful in continuing to take care of us."

That conversation had taken place hours ago and now I watched the activity on the wall and in the town as the sun set behind me. A sense of responsibility weighed down upon me for everything and everyone I saw, but I resisted it. What could I do? I was just one man. In the morning I was heading out with Thaddeus towards my family's ancestral home, which I was looking forward to. The fortress lay at the base of the northern mountains and was an area known for severe storms. Fittingly, the castle was called Thunder Ridge.

Chapter Eight

Escape into Peace

Krista

12 years earlier

The streets of Zoarestran, a small town situated on the eastern side of the Plains of Zoar, were dark and deserted as the rain hammered down in the early morning hours. The only light came from the night lanterns that glowed dimly in the gloom of the night.

A shadowy figure flitted from

doorway to doorway seeking shelter from the rain that beat down mercilessly, a figure that had come from the direction of the slave holding pens.

The night watchman, standing in the stoop of a bakery shop, came to the likely conclusion that the figure was either an escaped slave or a thief, as nobody else would be out on such a night.

Somewhat reluctantly because of the heavy downpour, the watchman stepped out into the rain, “Hey you, stop there!” he yelled out.

The slim figure froze in place at the voice of the watchman. The watchman, noticing a bundle in the arms of the figure, hastened his pace towards the shadowy outline in the rain. He was sure he’d caught a thief in the act. This meant

good things for him. Apprehending thieves in the act was highly looked upon by his superiors, not to mention the gratitude of the shop owners who would fatten his pocket with coin for his good work on their behalf.

Frozen with fear, Krista stood still as the watchman approached. She shivered as the icy rain drops fell on her head and trickled down under the worn rag of the tunic she wore. She clutched the bundle tighter, trying to shield it from the storm. She was so cold her teeth threatened to rattle out of her mouth.

"You're but a slip of a girl!" the watchman said, somewhat disgustedly, seeing his reward vanish before his eyes.

"What are you doing out in this

weather girl and what have you got there?" he asked, making a move to grab the bundle in her arms.

His outstretching hands jarred Krista out of her fearful trance. She jumped back out of reach, the sudden move causing the bundle in her arms to cry out weakly.

"Hey, what is this?" the watchman exclaimed in surprise.

Noticing her shabby attire for the first time the watchman came to a swift conclusion, "You're a slave, ain't yuh?"

At those words Krista turned and fled.

"Hey, stop you slave!"

His fingers narrowly missed grabbing hold of her shoulder as she slipped past him down a dark alleyway. She ran as fast as she could with the bundle in her arms, stumbling over cans and refuse left

in the alleyway in her haste.

The watchman stopped at the alleyway entrance. He wasn't about to go in there after her, as the light from the street glinted off the red eyes of hundreds of disturbed rats. It had only been one little slave girl holding a baby. She wouldn't have brought much at auction anyway.

Krista didn't stop running until she was several blocks away. Wheezing from the exertion of running through the darkened city, she looked behind her for any signs of pursuit, but there were none. She pulled back the edge of the blanket that was wrapped around the bundle in her arms. The baby's blue eyes were closed and it had turned very pale.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Krista.

She had seen that look of pale stillness before. Frantically she put her hand on the baby's chest, but she could feel no movement there and the skin was cold. Big tears welled up in her eyes and then spilled down her cheeks as she gently rocked the still baby in her arms.

Later, she got up as dawn's first rays started to brighten up the gloomy morning and made her way towards the wharf which was nearby. Making her way down to the shore of the river, she lowered the baby into the murky waters. For a moment the baby's face was visible and then it was gone.

She had been making her way past the guards last night, intent on escaping the holding pens and the short hard life of being a slave, when out of the dark a hand had feebly grabbed her. Gasping in

surprise, she had spun towards the unseen hand to see a thin woman with dark shadows under her eyes standing there in the gloom.

"Please! Please take my baby with you!"

" I…. I….I can't! I wouldn't know how to care for it!" Krista stammered out, stepping away from the woman.

The woman had followed her though and, despite her protests, pressed the bundle she held into Krista's arms.

"My baby is dying here, just like I am. Take my baby so that he can at least die free. Won't you please do this for me?" the woman begged, falling to her knees before Krista, as she held onto Krista's dress. Krista wanted to refuse as her chances of escaping were slim enough already, having a baby along only

increased the likelihood of being caught. She had looked down at the bundle in her arms and a pair of blue eyes had met her own. She had tightened her hold on the bundle instinctively, met the desperate gaze of the baby's mother and nodded.

"Oh, thank you, dear sweet child! Thank you!" the grateful mother had said.

Krista had stepped back into the shadows and crept along the wall leading to the last guard post holding the baby close to her, hoping that it wouldn't cry out.

She'd heard the woman briefly say something before she was out of sight, "May the Creator protect you."

Krista broke from her reflection of the

night before and reached one grubby hand up to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"I wonder what his mother would say to me now?" Krista said softly to herself in sorrow.

Shaking her head she made her way up from the river's edge to the wharf above. Lost in her sorrow she was not as careful as she should have been. The morning had progressed more quickly than she had thought. Workers and tradesmen were already busy about their business. She gasped, realizing her mistake. She was noticed almost at once by one of the field masters that she worked under in the firan cane fields.

"You there! Stop slave! Get her! She escaped from the slave stockade!"

Suddenly everyone became an enemy to her. She ran, trying to elude the

outstretched hands of the people all around her.

She slid under a table holding produce and bounded up on the other side of it. Up ahead of her was an alley, if she could only reach it she might be able to outrun her pursuers and find a hiding place until nightfall, when she could sneak out of the town under the cover of darkness. She sprang for the alleyway, but a hand grabbed her by the calf and flung her backwards. She landed hard in the middle of the street. Muddy water and refuse splashed up at her landing and soaked her in its filth.

An angry mob had gathered around her and she was cut off from any chance at escape.

She turned around on the ground, trying to avoid any of her would be

assailants, as the field master who had first seen her spoke up loudly, “Let’s just kill her! She’s not worth much and we’ll make such an example out of her that no other slave will even think about escaping!”

Krista curled up in a ball and screamed as they began to kick and hit her, yelling insults and curses at her as they did so.

Krista landed hard against the side of the curb, waiting for the next hit, hoping that she would die soon. Life was just too painful and hopeless to keep fighting. The expected hits didn’t come.

That was strange, Krista thought slowly, her reasoning foggy from the hits she had taken to the head. One eye was swelled shut, but she could still partially see out of her right eye. An old woman

was yelling at the group who had been beating her.

The old woman reached for something at her waist, which she then poured into the outstretched hand of the field master. He grunted something and moved off. The old woman motioned to another man, who then approached her, picked her up and slung her slim frame across his shoulder. The movement caused pains to shoot throughout her abused body and she eagerly welcomed the comforting warmth of unconsciousness, as it surrounded her with its dreamless cloak.

*****

There was warmth and pain, but Krista tried to focus on the warmth more than the pain. Warmness enveloped her. She couldn't remember a time in recent

memory when she had been so warm and cozy.

She heard rustling near her and her eye popped open defensively. She was in a room dominated by a roaring fire in the hearth next to her. The floor was made of old worn boards and she lay on some sort of a pallet of blankets on top of the boards. The sound she had heard had come from the hunched figure of a woman working over a table that ran the length of the small room. There was a window across from her. It was open and through it Krista could see stars in the night sky. Feeling the need to escape, she began to move her legs into a position to spring towards the open window. The pain of moving her legs was excruciating and she must have made some noise that alerted the woman

of her consciousness.

The woman turned and she briefly recognized the old woman from the street before she crammed her one good eye shut. She heard more rustling and then steps that drew closer and closer to her. She tried not to cringe as the steps drew close to her, but she did.

Thunk!

Krista flinched hard, causing more pain to herself, but it wasn't because she had been hit. Peering through her eyelashes, she saw a big bowl sitting on the floor in front of her nose with steam rising slowly into the air. The steamy smoke drifted over to her and her stomach began to rumble, telling her just how long it had been since she had eaten. Her hand started reaching out for the bowl, with a mind of its own, when

caution got the best of her.

Where had the old woman gone? The answer came from a rocking chair on the opposite side of the hearth.

“Eat the porridge, dear child. Heaven knows you have need of it!” the old woman said.

Against her better judgment, Krista pulled the bowl closer and started eating it with her fingers, ignoring the spoon that had come with it.

“Easy now, easy now, there’s more where that came from dear! No need to eat so fast! You’ll do yourself more harm than good doing that!” the old woman said hastily.

She rose from her chair, went to a table, picked up a large tankard and withdrew what looked like a ball of cloth stuffed full of leaves. She came

close, got slowly down onto her knees, and offered the tankard to Krista. The bowl empty, Krista pushed it aside and warily took the outstretched tankard. It was heavy. She sniffed it suspiciously, but all she could smell was an herby sugary smell.

"Drink it all. It will help ease the pain and the stiffness you're feeling," the old woman said.

Krista sipped it a little. It was good! There was actually sugar in it! Slaves were never given such luxuries!

She looked up at the old woman suspiciously, wondering what her angle was. Seeming to read her mind the woman's wise old eyes met hers.

"You are not a slave while you reside in my home, but rather my helper, if you would care to be. I bought you to save

your life. You can relax. You are safe here. My name is Sansa Denas. What might your name be young miss?"

After a long pause Krista responded somewhat hesitantly, "Krista."

"Is that all?" Sansa asked.

Krista nodded her head slowly.

The old woman reached over and pulled the heavy blanket up over Krista's slim shoulder.

"Rest now my dear, there'll be more time to talk in the morning."

Krista watched as the kind old lady got painfully back up to her feet and moved away towards her rocking chair. Her eyelids got harder and harder to keep open as she watched the old woman rock by the fire. Never before had she had such good food to eat. The warmth and comfort of the cottage and

pallet she lay on did the rest and she was soon asleep.

*****

The old woman studied Krista as she slept deeply on the pallet by the fire and wondered again if she had made a mistake in buying the girl. She couldn't afford to make more enemies than she already had.

Buying escaped slaves had a way of being looked down upon by the local townspeople and she depended on those same people for her business. Looking again at the girl she shook her head, but of course she had made the right choice in saving the girl's life. She would just have to face the trouble when it came and come it would.

*****

Krista opened her eyes slowly. That

was an improvement from the day before, as both eyes opened easily. The cottage was the same as it had been the night before except it was better illuminated now by the strong late morning light that streamed in from the open doorway. There were jars and pots littered and stacked precariously all over the long tables that dominated the one room cottage. From the ceiling hung bunches of dried wildflowers, branches with leaves, and bundles of what looked like herbs.

The aroma of the cottage was almost overwhelming in its panoply of smells, but it was also somewhat invigorating. She pushed the warm blanket back and got slowly to her knees and then to her feet. Everything hurt but it was all moving and that was the good thing. She

bit her lip against the pain and hobbled resolutely towards the open door of the cottage.

The sounds of woodland and meadow songbirds greeted her as she leaned against the doorpost, resting for a moment. The sun was warm against her face.

The cottage sat in a clearing in the forest and the old lady was busy working over an old black kettle that was boiling happily over a little fire. As Krista drew closer to the fire and her kindly new master, she could see that the old lady was busy in the process of making soap.

“Quickly dear, could you fetch those chopped up Asthan blossoms on the platter over by that tree?” the old woman asked, somehow knowing she was there

without ever looking up.

Krista moved gingerly towards the platter and returned as quickly as she could with it, handing it to the old woman.

“Thank you dear,” Sansa said, as she stirred the Asthan blossoms into the thickening mixture in the pot.

*****

There followed a period of time in Krista’s life unlike any she had ever before experienced. Her relationship with Sansa Denas was more that of a granddaughter to a doting grandmother than that of a slave and her master.

Sansa taught the girl all she knew of the art of being a natural healer and herbalist.

Krista grew and flourished under the benevolent and kindly Sansa and Sansa

had the daughter she had never had, but always wanted.

Chapter Nine

Responsibilities

Roric

I rode at the head of the column eager to see the home of my ancestors. Thaddeus didn't ride any more due to the pain it caused his bad leg. He rode in a carriage farther back in the column, every part of him still yearning for the freedom of his youth.

This was the third day of the journey from Kingdom Pass and still no words

could come to me to describe the beauty of the land that was on display all around me. Ancient primeval forests pocketed the dips and hollows of the mountains and valleys, while vast stretches of open grassland stretched out like a patchwork quilt over the rolling terrain of the valley bottoms. The terrain was broken up here and there by rocky up thrusts, which penetrated the seas of grass like ships at full sail. The snow capped ridges of the mountains rose up to the sky to our right, as everywhere gurgling brooks ran down from the mountains spilling their cold waters into the seas of grass on their endless journey to the sea. Waterfalls could be seen in the distance as they cascaded down from the mountains. A cool wind that felt just right blew into my face and rippled

through the tall grass around me as far as the eye could see.

My eyes drank in the paradise I was riding through, relishing every moment of it. Here and there isolated cottages and groups of dwellings could be seen with their cultivated fields and orchards. It was midday when my eyes saw, for the first time, the home of my ancestors, Thunder Ridge.

The castle was built out of the side of one mountain and lay nestled in a cul-de-sac formed by several others. Towers rose majestically from the tiered castle fortifications echoing the grandeur of the surrounding mountain peaks. A huge waterfall tumbled down the sheer side of the cliff to the left of the castle. The stream that the waterfall formed, spilled into a moat, which flowed around the

front of the castle wall and exited at the far end. It fell in a shorter waterfall at the end of the moat to continue lazily downhill where it swung around the village located at the base of the mountain against which the castle was constructed. The castle was built of the same golden granite as that of the wall at Kingdom Pass.

The castle and its towers were wreathed with flowering vines that bloomed white and let off a honeysuckle smell that I could already smell on the breeze. This was Thunder Ridge. Unknowingly, I had stopped to gaze with wonder upon the still distant castle. I didn't notice my grandfather's carriage until it drew up beside me and stopped.

"Quite something, isn't it my boy?" Thaddeus asked, smiling proudly.

I nodded my head, at a loss for words.

"Beautiful and idyllic as it may look Roric, it has stood up to its fair share of war. Five times the village has been razed to the ground and once the castle itself was almost taken in a prolonged siege. That, of course, all happened before the wall at Kingdom Pass was built," he finished.

We started out again and soon we were entering into the village commons. They had apparently been expecting us and knew of my existence. People, my people, were thronged around us as we passed through the village. The people were shouting and singing ancient songs that struck cords that had never before been played within my heart. The women and children showered us with flowers, while the men respectfully

saluted us with swords and fists held aloft. I and my arena friends trailing out behind me had never before witnessed such a spectacle of welcome. I felt countless hands touch my legs reverently as I rode by, as if to feel if I was real or not. I brushed by them and heard their words of blessing and greeting like the endlessly repeating litany of a chorus.

These people were welcoming me as if I was one of their favored own. If this hadn't felt like home before, they were certainly making it feel so now. I raised my hand in welcome to these people, feeling that it was too small a gesture to convey the emotion I felt for these people's welcome of me. I was home and the welcome these people gave me had already won a very special place in my heart.

*****

I stood bathed in moonlight on the balcony of what was to be my room from now on. The rooms were carved out of the very mountain itself and were accessed by a tower that buttressed up against the side of the mountain. From my vantage point I could look out over the whole castle and the entire valley beyond the walls.

Thaddeus had given me the option of choosing any of the luxurious quarters within the castle, including his own, but I had liked these rooms, far from the great hall of the castle, the most. It was a new experience having four walls around me that were not a prison meant to keep me in, but rather a home.

Most of the townspeople had long since settled in for a well earned

evening of rest. They were a hard working people. There were no slaves at Thunder Ridge or in the village beyond. Smoke from their dwellings rose lazily into the cold still air of the night. Even though it was late spring and warm during the day, the temperatures dropped rapidly after sundown. Yes, this is where I would stay. This was my home now.

A combination of many things about the entire castle area imparted a feeling of permanence to my new home; the formidable strength of the castle fortifications, the strong capable looking soldiers that manned her walls, the wholesome townspeople, who had welcomed me as their own, coupled with the beauty of the natural grandeur of the castle's setting, not to mention the

long standing traditions of the place. All had played a part in my decision to stay. My arena mates hadn't left my side since we had arrived. Their slavish loyalty towards me, while it could often be annoying, was also heartwarming. They had insisted on having the quarters that were housed in the tall tower off to my left, which butted up against my cliffside quarters. Sinking to my knees, I left my hands on the balcony railing in front of me and prayed to my Creator.

"Dear Creator help me! I've made a decision to stay, but I fear that my decision will be in vain if I do not have Your blessing. With Your help, I can do anything. Help me lead these people well in times of peace and war. Please Lord, help me be Your faithful servant first and foremost and may I never fail

You. All I have is Yours. Use me as You will for Your purposes. Thy will be done and thank you for all that You have richly given me, which is far above anything I could have ever asked for or even dreamed."

I got up from the cold stones of the balcony floor and, bidding the moonlit valley one last look, I retired to my warm quarters to rest, even though I could have stayed out there all night looking out over the land.

*****

I walked through the corridors of the castle headed for the hall to which I had been summoned by my grandfather. The clothes I wore had been delivered to my quarters early this morning and had been accompanied by a note that stated that I needed to come to the chamber that I

was headed toward now. As I made my way past servants and guards alike, I was the recipient of overly reverent displays of respect. I had to admit that I did feel rather lordly, as I strode through the timeworn halls of my forefathers.

The orange tunic I wore, on which was the family crest of arms, was trimmed on the fringes and arms with tanned deer hide. The crest of arms itself was unlike any I had ever seen before. The crest was of a doubled edged sword shining brightly, its point thrust down into a field of azure blue from which lighting strikes of a fiery gold color radiated out into the surrounding azure blue sea. The crest was surrounded by a burnt orange backdrop with the words, ‘Keepers of the Word’ written in purple and outlined in silver across the top of

the crest. My pants were of a deep purple with silver stripes going up and down the sides. It may have been a bit ostentatious, but I liked it.

I entered the hall where all the hubbub and chatter was coming from, figuring that was as good a guess as any as to my destination. When I entered the room full of finely dressed people, the chatter immediately stilled. Was I in the wrong room? I kind of hoped that I was and I was about to turn away when I saw Thaddeus in the glittering throng. He came to my side with a sly smile. What was he up to? He turned to face the crowd of castle lords and their attendants.

"My fellow lords, it is with great joy that I present to you all my grandson and only heir, Roric Ta'lont."

Instead of applause at the proclamation, I was surprised to see looks of seriousness come over the faces of the finely dressed northern castle lords. They set down their cups and approached one by one to stand quietly before me and Thaddeus. They then knelt down on one knee before me, surprising me even further.

One lord spoke up as a spokesman for the others. “It is with great relief that in these troubled times the Creator of us all has given his servants a warrior of the house of Ta’lont to once again lead us into the battle fray. We, and all that we possess, are at your disposal for the great conflict ahead of us all.”

With that he bowed his head in a show of fealty, which was echoed by the others. I stepped forward and knelt as

they had done before me. At my strange action they looked at me curiously.

"I am but a common man. I have been a slave and now I am a free man. I am not worthy of the honor you bestow on me as your leader, but I accept it. I ask, rather than a belief in a man of the house of Ta'lont, that we all rise giving our fealty and faith to the Creator of us all, who is able to deliver us from our enemies far above the actions of just one man."

The castle lord's spokesman shook his head wonderingly and said, "Long has it been said that the aspect of humility present in those of the house of Ta'lont has been forever their greatest of strengths."

I rose and the castle lords rose with me. I raised my hand in a clenched fist,

“Not by might, not by power, but by the Spirit of the Living God will we attain the victory over our enemies.”

In unison, the castle lords repeated my words, shaking their fists in the air, while those in the hall around us erupted with applause at my choice of words. I turned to my grandfather, who leaned heavily on his cane, emotion heavy upon his face.

“The Creator is good to show an old man once again the strength and righteousness of my son magnified even greater in the form of my grandson. The blessings of the Creator upon you my son! You have made me a very happy old man!”

I turned back to the room and the continued applause. How had a farm boy - former arena slave - former robber

baron, come to a position of prestige such as what had been bestowed on me? The Creator's doing was the only answer to that question. He certainly wasn't a respecter of persons to have picked someone like me for such honor.

The castle lords came forward and introduced themselves to me. Their spokesman was Nannarin of Castle Esthol. The other were as follows; Rangold of Castle Ells, Stanith of Castle Rantha, Aenas of Castle Sarta, Kerr of Castle Fidnal, Sasta of Castle Varrow, and Banthus of Castle Erginal. Seven castle Lords in all, representing the entire northern side of the Valley Lands.

Servants brought out trays loaded with delicacies and I was fairly mobbed with questions on tactics, religion and what not when I would much rather preferred

to have sampled the contents of the trays which were vanishing fast. Such are the trials of leadership I thought to myself, as lord Rangold held onto my arm, jabbering out a plan to defeat the entire Zoarinian Empire in a campaign lasting only three months.

A cloaked figure moved away from a window looking into the hall and started down to a lower section of the wall. This upper section of the wall wasn't typically put under guard, so the spy made his way towards a guard house and down the stairs it housed, into the castle grounds. As he slid into the guard house, a strong brown hand seized him from behind. The spy gasped loudly as a sharp blade was shoved between his ribs and twisted.

The spy slid to the floor dead and Rolf stepped into the morning sunlight with a grim smile on his face. His master's business would remain his and his alone. He ambled into the hall, not liking the crowd, but understanding the need for it.

*****

I felt Rolf's gaze on me and as I looked at him I saw his brief hand gestures. Gestures that told their own story if you knew how to read them.

I nodded my head in confirmation that I understood and Rolf left the room.

I was going to have to warn my grandfather about Rolf's intolerant nature and his tendency for exterminating vermin. I turned and my eyes met those of Thaddeus. He lifted his goblet of spiced wine in a silent toast. He had

clearly witnessed the whole exchange and guessed what it had been about. His eyes were twinkling with glee. Into what exciting times it seemed we were all hurtling. I shook my head at the irascibleness of the old man. My reprimanding look only seemed to encourage him more. He ambled over to me, setting his empty cup down and snatching another from a passing servant while en route to me.

"Ahh, the intrigues of court life, such as they are. You'll learn my boy, if you live to be too old for anything physically useful, that there's always the intellectual pursuits of a fine game of chess or cat and mouse, if you will, for the sure minded. When I lose the ability to play the game of intrigue you have my permission to bury me," he slurred out

drunkenly.

I took the cup of wine from his hand and placed it on a passing servant's tray as deftly as Thaddeus had snatched it from one earlier. Turning back to Thaddeus, I was surprised to already see another goblet of wine in his hand.

He smiled and said, "Roric, I only allow myself excess when excess is manageable."

He said it without any hint of the slurring I had detected before. My already considerable respect for my grand sire only increased. It was a valuable lesson to learn. Affectation of a condition of weakness can often deceive a confidant opponent into dismissing an individual's worthiness and threat as a possible opponent.

"Rolf said the spy was of our own

people and not a Zoarinian."

A dark look came over Thaddeus' formerly cheerful face. It was a look of tired but determined tenacity.

He looked back at me and said, "Roric, there are many secrets that I keep and many would like to know them. Some of the secrets I keep are as old as our time on this world. I promise, I will tell you what you need to know when you need to know it. But I pray that your consciousness remains free of what I and those before me have known and protected our people from for so long. There are those within our own people who would use the secrets that I, and others like me, protect for their own benefit. Secrets that, if unveiled, would likely bring about the fall of our people and even perhaps our world."

There was a faraway look in his eyes as he said that and then his eyes refocused on me.

“You have made me very proud today my boy. All will be well now, I’m sure of it.”

He walked away then, suddenly looking very old, and I wondered what kind of secrets there could be, to have such an effect on him.

Chapter Ten

Beaten but not Broken

Krista

Krista brushed back the tendrils of curly auburn hair that had fallen across her eyes. The forest was just starting to wake up and it was her favorite time of day. A scattered songbird here and there twirled his good morning song in the cool, crisp morning air. The morning fog

still hung close to the ground in isolated pockets of the forest.

Some might have been afraid to tread the mist-shrouded forest for fear of what unseen mysteries and dangers the mist might hide. But to her it was as the comforting folds of a warm blanket on a cold night. She had come earlier than usual to the forest this morning to collect the herbs that she and Sansa needed for the cough medicine they were going to make later in the day. She had to go to town and purchase the alcohol needed for the medicinal tinctures.

She was not looking forward to that. She never did. She avoided the town and its occupants as if there was a plague upon the place. But Sansa was too feeble to make the journey any more. Krista knew what awaited her and she couldn't

help but cringe inwardly.

Later, after she had picked the Amarano leaves, the Vantak roots and the Zantar blossoms that they needed for the cough tinctures, she found Sansa by the old kettle in front of the small cottage that she had called home for many years now. She came up to Sansa and set down the bag of herbs. She leaned forward and fondly kissed the old woman on the head.

"A watched pot never boils, dear Sansa."

Sansa looked up and patted Krista's hand. Krista's eyebrows quirked up and a smile teased at the corners of her lips.

"Sansa?"

"Yes?"

"Your pot is boiling."

"Oh, you rascal you! You've done it

again. Now, off with you to town to get the tincture fluid."

Krista moved off towards the town with a laugh, getting a weak pat on the bottom for her impudence as she slipped past. Krista's good mood departed as soon as she had lost sight of Sansa.

Soon, the thatched roofs of the village by the river appeared, with its cultivated firan cane fields spreading out and around it. Instead of going down the main street, she slipped down the back streets trying to keep a low profile. As far as she was aware, she made it to the general store without being noticed. She made her way to the front of the store on the main street by way of a side alley.

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Mr. Lethergood looked up when he heard the door open and frowned when

he saw who was there. It was the slave girl that Sansa the healer kept in her employ, as if she was a daughter and not a slave. And what a fine looking slave she was.

The curious scar that marred the one side of her face did not mar her beauty at all, but instead he had often thought that it gave her a rather exotic appeal. He had watched her change from a thin waif of a girl into the generously curvy young woman that she was now. He had thought about finding out for himself what lay beneath the tattered but respectable clothing she wore more than once, but something about her always stopped him from taking advantage of her. She had the most direct way of looking at him, like she could read his mind, which made him

feel uneasy.

He got the distinct feeling that if he ever touched her, that somehow, someway she would find a way to get back at him. So he had made it a point to touch her with his eyes only and be content with that. She glided up to the front table where he stood. There was nothing slave like in the proud way she held her head up with her shoulders squared back.

"Can I help you?" Mr.Lethergood asked. Mutely the girl handed over a list and he took it from her and studied it. It was the same as usual, some sugar, bread, quite a bit of tincture fluid and some other items. He left the counter to start filling the order, making sure to eye up the girl's emerging womanly figure as he did so.

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Krista stood as still as a stone at the counter as she looked out the window into the street beyond. She could feel Mr. Leathergood's lustful gaze upon her like an old stained cloak that needed to be washed and beaten dry in the sun or preferably, in his case, just thrown into the fire.

One hand tightly gripped the small paring knife that she held, tucked in the folds of her dress. She was careful to keep it out of view of the shop owner. She was ready, as she always was, for the worst to come out in humanity, men especially.

Mr. Lethergood finished packing the items together and told her the price. She counted out the coins, inwardly proud of herself for the ability to figure and count

money, but she let nothing of it show on her face, which remained fixed in a look of cold serenity. She gathered the box up and left the store, feeling his unwanted gaze on her swaying hips as she exited the building.

The fresh air felt like a revitalizing cool bath after a day of working in the mud as she stepped outside. She swiftly made for the side alley. After she was in the alley, she stopped and quickly stuffed the biggest bottles of the tincture fluid down her shirt where the bulk of the bottles were hidden by the woolen coat she wore and the curves of her emerging figure. Making her way to the back alley she hurried down it. She heard a snap behind her and swung to face the sound of the noise. Too late! What she had been hoping to avoid had

happened yet again. A group of neighborhood kids had formed. Although they came from poor families they were not of slave lineage. People raised near the bottom of society often take pleasure in lording over someone of lesser importance than even they are, such as a slave. They closed in around her. There were five of them, all boys.

"Give us the box, slave, and we won't make it too hard on you," one said self-confidently.

Krista shook her head in defiance and waited for the inevitable. The boys came at her from all sides. She took the brunt of the hits even though she was older and bigger than the boys, but she was dealing out some damage too. One of the boys picked up a piece of wood and wacked her across the back of the head hard,

making her briefly see stars. She fell to her knees, half screaming from the pain of her throbbing head. The boys quickly closed in and started to kick at her.

Krista's hand found the knife tucked in her dress and without remorse she drove it through the calf of a leg extended out in the process of hitting her. The boy screamed like a stuck pig and hobbled down the alley, screaming for help. Krista got back up to her feet holding the knife out, waiting for the next challenger, but the boys had enough.

"Quick, grab her stuff and let's get out of here before she sticks another one of us! You're going to pay for that slave!" yelled one boy.

She took a menacing step in his direction. Grabbing her stuff, he and his buddies took off down the street at a run.

After they were out of sight she reached to feel her shirt and see if the glass bottles were still intact. They were. She breathed a sigh of relief. She always bought extra stuff that they didn't need so that the street boys would think that they had gotten the best of her, when they stole or destroyed her boxed goods.

She made her way out of the village without any further problems. She neared the little cottage in the woods to find Sansa still sitting by the fire. She tried to straighten her gait and not show the bad limp she had gotten from the fight. She brushed the blood away from her split lip and turned her head to the side, letting her curly hair fall forward to block off view of the injury from Sansa.

"Here you go Sansa," Krista said,

setting the bottles of tincture fluid down beside her.

"I'm kind of tired. I think I'm going to go lay down for a while. You can go ahead and start the cough medicine without me."

She turned toward the cottage, but Sansa's sudden grip on her arm stopped her. The grip on her arm pulled her back around and an aged finger lifted her chin up and brushed her red curls off to the side.

"Oh dear child, not again! Look at what those hooligans have done to you! That's it! I'm going to town and having a talk with those boys' parents and…!"

"Sansa!"

Somewhat shocked at Krista's angry tone of voice, Sansa stopped in mid sentence.

“Sansa, that would do no good and besides I’m a slave in their eyes! This is how slaves are treated! Things are never going to change!”

Krista gently pulled out of Sansa’s grasp and limped over towards a small brook that ran past the cottage. She sat down on the cool grass and stretched out her sore leg as big tears welled up in her eyes. She brushed them away before they could slide down her cheeks. She never cried, for what good were tears anyway? They had never changed anything for her.

She hadn’t noticed Sansa’s approach until she sat down on a stump beside her, “Come here child.”

With little protest Krista let Sansa pull her head over onto her lap. With her fingers, Sansa started to brush the tangles out of her curly hair as she had

done for many years. Sansa had been more of a mother to her than her own mother had been.

"Krista?"

Krista looked up and met Sansa's gaze.

"One day things are going to change for you, for the better darling, of this I am certain."

"How do you know that? Has your God been talking with you again?"

Sansa didn't let Krista's caustic attitude affect her, but replied kindly, "Actually, I was talking with Him the other day and He left me with the distinct feeling that after I'm gone you'll be taken care of and that you will know happiness as you have never known it before in life."

"And when is this happiness going to

happen?" Krista asked mockingly.

"In the Creator's good timing you'll see it come to pass my dear. I know you've never fully shared my belief in the God of Heaven Krista, but don't doubt me when I tell you that He's not only real, but that He always keeps His word. This revelation of your future after I'm gone has given me peace."

"I only believe in what I can see, Sansa. After you're gone happiness will be a long dark hallway with a light at the far end of it that I'll never reach before it's extinguished. Promise me you won't leave me Sansa! You're the best thing that has ever happened in my life!"

"Krista, my time is drawing near and there's nothing I can do to stop it. But if you trust me at all, know that what I've told you is the truth and that it will come

to pass. Hold on to what I've told you when times grow dark in your life and have faith that what I have told you will come to pass."

Krista laid her head back down hoping that Sansa's words would come true, but all she felt was a growing sense of dread for what the future would bring.

Chapter Eleven

The Past?

Roric

Rolf followed me down the main street of the village of Thunder Ridge Castle. The village itself was called Ta'arny and I had visited it often since my arrival at the castle. It was like walking through a part of living history, a history that was now mine. The town's people left me alone for the most part after acknowledging my presence with a

warm welcome of good morning, which I returned in kind. They knew where I was headed.

I was headed to the chapel, which was the center of every Valley Lander town. The building wasn't pretentious, but it was beautiful. It was made out of cut stones that had come from the original chapel. It had been burned down four times over the years. As it was being rebuilt, as much of the original building was incorporated as possible which created an eclectic appearance. Flowering vines twirled their ways up the rough stone sides of the chapel, gracing it with their blossoms. The dome of the chapel was of an aged, white plaster veneer and there were words scrolled around the dome that read, 'Until the Savior comes, we fight on.' It

was a saying that dated back to when all the people of this world had belonged to one tribe, the Vallians.

I passed under the oaken door lintel into the spacious chapel beyond. There was a sense of peace within the chapel that soothed my soul. Passing through the rows of seating, I went out a side door on the far end of the chapel. Rolf stayed in the chapel. I think he found it soothing as well and usually stayed inside when I came to the chapel garden. The side door had already been open and I stepped into the garden beyond. The morning sun touched my face as did the pleasant aroma of the meditation garden. The garden was enclosed within a courtyard that was located off the chapel building. It contained a central reflecting pool with paths that radiated off it

throughout the garden plantings. What interested me most about the garden was not its plantings or its peaceful beauty, but rather what was inscribed all over it. The stones of the pathway, the courtyard walls, and even the boulders situated in the landscape plantings were all artfully inscribed with the fragments of the Holy Scriptures that were still left to us. I had spent hours in this garden going over the fragments of the words of the Creator. It was both exhilarating and frustrating to see so many of the Creator's words. It was frustrating because there was so much missing. One could get the jist of it, but not the full substance or even the contextual meaning of some of the passages.

"Frustrating, is it not?"

Surprised, I turned away from the

inscription on a boulder I had been tracing with my finger. It was the head priest of the chapel. He was a rather enigmatic individual. It was hard to read what went on behind his intelligent eyes, but I liked him all the same.

"Good morning John," I said.

The priest smiled and said, "Good morning to you too, Master Ta'lont. Sorry to break your meditation of the scriptures, but I could not but help notice the troubled look on your face. I guessed that it had to do with the fragmentation of the scriptures left to us."

"You are right of course. Do you think we will ever know all that has been said by our Creator?"

"Indeed I do, but what is most important is that, until that day comes, we keep saying and believing in what

we do have."

Nodding my head in agreement I added, "It's hard to inspire others when blind faith is needed to believe as we do though."

"And yet we believe. Why is that Roric?"

"I suppose because I know that the Creator is real."

"And why is that?"

"Because He has made Himself real to me in my life and the situations I have faced. There is no reason left to doubt that He isn't real. I just wish I could know more of Him than what is left to us," I said, gesturing around me at the fragmented inscriptions scattered throughout the garden.

"I have wished much the same all of my days here in the Valley Lands," John

reflected.

"You are not of Valley Lander heritage?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"No, I was not born here. You might say your grandfather picked me up on an excursion of his into the Attorgron Forests."

"Picked you up?" I asked leadingly.

"Yes, my parents were killed and I had no place to go. Your grandfather raised me as if I was a son, along with your father. I am very grateful to him."

"What was my grandfather doing in the Attorgron Forests?" I asked, still perplexed by this out of place revelation about my grandfather.

John looked at me speculatively before he answered.

"That would be a matter for your grandfather to divulge and not me. Time

is growing short though and your grandfather is too weak to return there. You may get the answers you seek before much more time goes by. That is all I will say."

"You and my grandfather share several common characteristics it would seem," I said, letting my frustration with all the secrecy going on around me show.

John laughed, but then sobered quickly.

"It is not easy, what your family has done since our people have come to these lands. They have protected us from secrets that have the capacity to destroy us all. It was one of the reasons your father gave for leaving. Do not be too hard on your grandfather. He has only been doing what he has thought was best

for us all. Now, I must be off. I have a wedding to perform in a small community not far from here. Good day to you, Roric."

As he left I watched him go, somewhat resentfully. All the peace and tranquility I usually felt when I came to visit the chapel was gone. It was obvious to me that the priest had wanted to arouse my curiosity about what secrets my grandfather held, but why?

What was his angle in all this? And what had my grandfather been doing in the Attorgron Forest lands during a time of war, when no Valley Lander went farther than the gates of Kingdom Pass? It was time for my grandfather to answer some questions. I strode abruptly back towards the castle.

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My grandfather's eyebrows arched up slightly when I slammed his study doors closed behind me. I came over to lean on the front of the massive mahogany desk that Thaddeus sat behind. The desk's surface was a jumble of parchment papers, sketches, books and eclectic artifacts.

"The secrets about this place and my families' role in them won't wait any longer!"

Thaddeus's eyebrows rose up further, "What brought about this outburst? I thought I had at least a month or so to prepare for your orientation."

"Orientation?" I asked leadingly.

Thaddeus waved his hand, gesturing my question away, and brought the focus back to his question.

"This morning at the chapel, the head

priest made mention of yet another disturbing occurrence on your part. You were in the Attorgron Forest on some mission during the last war. Why were you there?"

"I might have known that troublesome priest John was involved!" Thaddeus said testily, closing the book of papers he had been looking through with a huff.

"He said you raised him as a son, alongside my father?"

The old man grunted his assent and then added, "The secrets the Ta'lont family protects were tasked to us alone to safeguard and not to outsiders, which has made him increasingly jealous over the years!"

"Well, I'm a Ta'lont and I want to know what is going on around here."

My grandfather met my stare for a

moment and then looked down at the desk in front of him and grumbled something unintelligible.

Looking back up he said, “Alright, orientation starts now!”

Reaching over to a figurine of a rearing stallion on the corner of his desk, he turned it to the right and immediately there was a snapping noise behind me. I whirled around to see several metal poles rise out of the floor in front of the doors, which blocked the study off from any access from the outside.

Turning back to Thaddeus I heard him grumble as he got up, “So much for a late breakfast.”

Thaddeus shuffled stiffly over to a stone wall, grabbing his cane en route. On the wall between two bookcases was the suite of armor of the house of

Ta'lont. Thaddeus touched the different colors in the suite of armor in a seemingly random sequence. As he finished touching the different colors, an area of the wall roughly in the shape of a doorway became translucent. I stepped back in shock and looked at Thaddeus. I had never seen anything such as this occur before. Thaddeus stood looking at me, not offering any answers. Regaining my composure I stepped forward and touched the shimmering doorway.

Snap!

"Ouch!"

I painfully shook my finger hard through the air. My whole body hurt from touching the shimmering curtain, especially my heart.

I looked at Thaddeus and I saw him smile grimly and say, "Sometimes, just

like seeing, feeling is believing. Put your right thumb on the sword of the coat of arms and hold it there for a second."

I did so and watched in disbelief as the veil of shimmering light over the doorway disappeared, to be replaced by the entrance of a hallway beyond. Thaddeus stepped into it and I followed him. We moved into the darkness, which was only dark for a moment, as the floor began to illuminate with ambient light, the existence of which I couldn't have explained if I had bothered to try. As Thaddeus progressed down the long hallway, there was a feeling of falling through space that made me feel slightly queasy. Suddenly, we came to a room at the end of the hall that lit up brilliantly as we entered.

"This, my boy, is what it's all about,"

Thaddeus said, gesturing around us.

The walls were lined with books elegantly enclosed behind glass doors. There was one shelf that had only five books displayed on it. There must be something special about those books. I looked at Thaddeus, only to see that he was studying me intently.

"What are all these books about, especially those?" I said, pointing at the five books displayed by themselves.

Thaddeus went to a chair and sat down. He gestured towards the only other chair in the room. I sat in the chair and waited for Thaddeus to explain.

"Now for a history lesson, which doesn't leave this room! Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded.

"It all began a very long time ago,

Roric. Before the first settlers arrived here on this world that we call home, they came from another world, and before that they came from the first world called Earth. As a people they became extremely advanced in all areas of science and technology. The people of the first world, to whom the Holy Scriptures of the Creator were first given, began to rebel against God exceedingly. Our ancestors left the first world, Earth, to escape the growing corruption of the people around them. They left and settled on other worlds that the Creator had made. Eventually, after much time had passed, they returned to Earth, fleeing from a war on the other worlds where they had settled. They found the Earth greatly changed. Sometime after they had left, the Creator

had destroyed the planet with a worldwide flood and only one family was saved to repopulate the planet. That family had advanced considerably in both numbers of people and technology since the great flood that had decimated the earth, and it was these people our ancestors found when they returned. The Earth was much different from when they had left it and our ancestors decided that it was for the best not to remain on Earth, but instead they left and came here and this is where they stayed. Before they left the Earth the second time, they took with them the one thing of value that they found there, the Holy Scriptures that were inspired by the Spirit of our Creator. Sadly, the integrity of the Holy Scriptures was lost to us in the conflict that arose among our people after they

settled on this world. Which is why we are left with just the tattered fragments that managed to survive the civil war that befell our people. As I said, our ancestors were extremely advanced, far and above what we are today, but they came to look at their proficiencies in technology as their greatest downfall. I'm not sure why they came to believe that, but some felt it very strongly while others did not, which is what caused the conflict among our peoples after settling on this world. In the conflict that arose, our forefathers, later to be known as the Valley Landers, were able to seize all the forms of higher technology and subsequently destroyed all traces of the technology. Or so it was said at the time. While it is true that most of the technology was destroyed, some was

kept in case there was some need of it in the future. This place is the last repository of our ancestors advanced knowledge and it has been our family's greatest secret and responsibility ever since then. The responsibility of keeping the secret is now passed on to you as well as the paradox of our ancestors as to what to do with it. All of these books contain the knowledge of the greatness of our ancestors. These books hold many wondrous things Roric, cures to diseases, sciences that would make our lives easier and would allow us to live lives of luxury, advancements to give us victory in battle and so on. The weakness of any great concept of thought or science though, Roric, isn't the knowledge itself, but it is the way it is used by the individual in control of it.

The result can be either good or evil, but it can affect many, if not everyone on that world or even farther out to other worlds. This is why I think our ancestors abandoned their technology. In hopes that forsaking it would lead to a society where a single person's error of spirit would not lead to the downfall of many by the selfish use of knowledge by one individual or only a few. Like I said, it is a paradox. The one thing that we could really use and that would advance our society is also potentially the worst pitfall of all, if used wrongly. What do you think of all this Roric?"

"I don't understand it! We are about to be potentially overrun by a stronger enemy and you're telling me that we have the power to stop that invasion, but we can't use it because it could lead to a

greater evil! What could be worse than the defeat and enslavement of our own people? These books over here have written on them that they are Holy Scripture. Why is this desperately sought for knowledge being withheld from the people? Are these not holy works of the Creator's Scripture?"

Thaddeus paused for a moment before answering, "Partially yes, but they originated after the original body of scripture was irreparably damaged. They contain many fanciful stories and questionable doctrines that do not line up with the original Holy Scriptural fragments that we do still have. Those five books are compilations of what their authors thought the original authors should have written, but didn't. What truths, if any, that are in them are

hopelessly scrambled and beyond usefulness other than to succeed in leading one astray from the truth, even if meant well. Trust me Roric, I have read them. They appear legitimate and believable, but there is something that disturbs my soul and steals my peace as I read them. Is there wisdom to be found within them? I would say yes, but I do not trust the wisdom that they contain, as I do not know the source of it or where it will lead."

"If all these books pose such a moral risk to our society as you suggest, why are they still in existence?" I asked.

"Those five books were all seized from the Zoarinians. It was the basis for their argument to legitimatize their right to power in the early days. It gave them a persuasive argument to inspire their

followers, which our faction couldn't afford at the time. Without the technologies in the other books or the ideologies contained in those five books, they were unable to sway the people of our faction over into their belief structure and so we persevered in our beliefs even though we had but fragments left of it to inspire faith. We believe that these books are one of the primary objectives of the Zoarinians. They wish to capture them in their invasion. Thus, the books offer us a bargaining tool of sorts, at least that is the view of the high council. It is not mine, because if the Zoarinians were to regain any of these works it would give them untold access to redefine this world's belief structure however they pleased. If it were up to me, I would

have destroyed them long ago, but my hands have been tied by the high council. Now the decision rests with you as the next heir of the Ta'lont line. Either use the technology to benefit our society and gain us victory in battle, at the risk of recreating the mistakes of our past, or do nothing with the knowledge and risk it falling into the hands of the enemy, which would most certainly lead to a bad outcome all around and perhaps even cause implications beyond our world as well. The choice is yours, choose wisely!"

A long moment passed as I thought about what needed to be done, because something had to be done. "I think its faulty thinking to keep secrets such as these around that could end up destroying our own people, if we were

to simply use them for our own benefit; and if the intention is to never use them, why keep them around so that they could be potentially used against us?"

Thaddeus was looking at me intently, as if his next breath hung on my unspoken words, "So what would your course of action be Roric?"

"I would destroy this room and all its contents and stop playing this game of hide and seek."

Thaddeus's scrutiny of me did not waver in the slightest, "And what of the council's demands for the preservation of these works and the possibility of needing some of these secrets to defeat the Zoarinian invasion of our land?"

"My first duty is to the people and not the well being of the council's political motivations. Second, I will live and fall

in this life according to my own merits and the strength that the Creator endows me with and not rely on dusty secrets of questionable origin to deliver me the victory."

Thaddeus smiled and I saw him relax visibly, "Good, that is what I hoped you would say. It relieves me to hear you say what you just did."

"What did my father say?" I asked softly.

A dark look came over Thaddeus's face for a moment and he didn't answer right away.

"Your father agreed with you about the council's political motivations, as do I, but he thought that the knowledge should be left to the people to decide what they wanted to do with it. I could not condone that. I saw the release of

such darkly tainted material to my own people as a recant of my sworn duty to protect them from something I could prevent. So I persisted in hiding the secrets of our past from them. I fear that was also the wrong strategy. I have come to believe in my old age, and by the experiences gained over a lifetime that, if something is of a dark nature, don't shake hands with it and don't keep it in the closet. Instead, take it out and burn it and let the ashes fall where they may."

Thaddeus rose from his chair, as did I.

"Congratulations for arriving at the decision that you have, which I believe is the right one. It is regrettable that I did not arrive at the same conclusion a lot faster or this whole crisis could have been averted long ago. Roric, it is not

going to be easy to get rid of all of this," Thaddeus said, gesturing to the room around us.

"Why?" I asked.

"None of what you see is real. This room is a technological façade of the original. I used the technology to put the images that you see in this room. The originals are hidden at another location unknown to the council."

I looked at Thaddeus and we both said at the same time, "The Attorgron Forest trip during the last war."

Chapter Twelve

Upheaval Begun

Krista

Krista watched the minnows congregating around the piece of bread she had thrown into the brook. She hadn't done much of anything today but laze around in the coolness of the forest. Being out here alone in the forest almost made her think she was as free as the songbirds fluttering around in the branches overhead. Until she

remembered that in everybody's eyes, except maybe Sansa's, she was nothing but a slave. She was something to be used, sold and discarded at an owner's whim.

Oh well, life was what you made of it and at least hers, for right now, was the best it had ever been. She was living in the moment as tomorrow was no guarantee in her world. She ambled back towards the cottage regretting her laziness. Sansa had probably needed her for something hours ago.

Her route back brought her within sight of the village and she gave it but a passing glance. Her eyes flew back to it in surprise at what she had seen. There were columns of smoke billowing into the sky from many of the town's buildings, which were wreathed in

flames. She could see people running around in the town, but mostly they were fleeing from it! Instead of fighting the fires, their only purpose seemed to be escaping the town. Other figures in the scene seemed more purposeful.

Attorgron Slavers!

The thought occurred to her and she was immediately sure of it. Rarely did the slavers venture so far into the west for fear of angering the Zoarinian controlled interests too much, but apparently they had thought it worth the risk.

“Oh no! Sansa!”

Krista tore off through the forest towards the cottage. She leaped over fallen logs and dodged tree trunks. Her feet were steady and sure in the dense littered undergrowth of the forest even in

her haste. She could see smoke ahead of her in the cottage's clearing, which made her pace quicken even more. She burst into the clearing and saw Sansa weakly protesting as several men carried the medicinal wares of their healing trade from the cottage. One of the men, a big swarthy skinned brute, back handed Sansa so hard that she was thrown backward several feet and fell across the doorway of the cottage.

Krista screamed in heartfelt pain at the sight and ran to Sansa's side. Sansa was still conscious, but barely. She recognized Krista, smiled softly and reached up to brush some of the fiery curls off her forehead.

Weakly she said, "Remember what I told you dear, the Creator is going to keep you! Remember?"

Tears streaming down her face and with her lips quivering from unspoken cries of sorrow, Krista nodded her head.

"Good. You have been the joy of my later days child, God bless you! I have to leave you now. He's waiting for me."

With a look of peace wreathed across her face, her eyes closed and the breath left her body, as she was held clutched in Krista's arms. Krista started shaking uncontrollably, tears streaming from her eyes as short strangled gasps for air forced her lungs to open and close.

"Hey look at this one mates! She's a ripe one for the picking! I saw her first!"

The lurid meaning of the slaver's slurred out statement broke the solitude of Krista's grief over her kind hearted caretaker.

Krista listened to the voices of the

slaver as he approached from behind her. Something crystallized and snapped within Krista and suddenly, with a scream of rage, she turned from Sansa's lifeless body to face the big slaver who had killed her. He approached her now with nothing but evil intent in his small beady eyes. She grabbed the small paring knife from her pocket and fairly sprang upon the surprised slaver.

He tried to protect himself, but to no avail. The small blade of the paring knife flashed again and again in the fiery light of the burning cottage which couldn't compare to the intensity of the rage that had befallen Krista. The slaver crumbled to his knees and then pitched over onto his face, already dead from a dozen or more stab wounds. Lost in her hate filled rage, Krista continued to stab

the inert form of the man, until a terrific blow from behind hit the back of her head and knocked her over onto her face. Not wanting to succumb to the enshrouding darkness, Krista fought to keep her eyes open, but failed more than she succeeded.

She felt herself being picked up and slung over what felt like a shoulder. Battling unconsciousness, she lifted her head and looked back. The cottage was engulfed in flames now. Everything she loved gone within a few pain filled moments. Giving in to the darkness she collapsed, devoid of any hope for the future, as her world once again burnt behind her.

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Krista grew conscious of a rough jolting motion and painfully opened her

eyes to see the cause of the strange jerky movement. She was in a farmer's cart surrounded by half a dozen other young girls. She closed her eyes again, knowing without further explanation the conditions of her new reality.

She was a slave once more, except this time with a different intended purpose. For a moment, she wished in vain that the boards of the cart would melt and the ground below would swallow her up and that her life would be over.

Sighing, she accepted the fact that she wouldn't be that lucky to die so easily. Slowly she got to her knees and leaned back against the side of the swaying cart. Looking around, she could see that all the eyes of the other occupants of the cart were on her. She recognized some

of them; the milk man's daughter, a buxom blond who looked like she was about to die of fright, a city councilman's daughter, as well as two other prominent citizens' daughters and two other girls of lesser birth that she didn't recognize.

The councilman's daughter, even though afraid of what her fate might be, could not hold back from the snobbishness that seemed to go with members of her social status.

"We thought you were dead. I'm glad to see that you're not."

Gesturing to the slavers she said, "Now they can make sport of you and leave us for ransom."

Krista smiled grimly, "Elise, you'll soon find out for yourself that there will be no ransom, other than that which your

future owner pays for you. And that will only be for the privilege of doing whatever he wishes with you. Welcome to the life of being a slave, Elise."

Krista regretted the words as soon as she had said them. She had only meant to take Elise's cocky, high and mighty attitude down a few notches, but in doing so she saw that she had heightened the fear in the eyes of the other girls, which she hadn't meant to do. The facts were the facts though and they would all find out the reality soon enough.

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Later that day the slavers stopped to make camp in an abandoned village. The girls were herded into an old shack and made to stand against a wall stretched out in a line. Krista was the farthest one from the door of the shack. Standing at

the door to block any attempt at escape stood a wiry, evil looking slaver with crooked dirty teeth. He did nothing but grin and wink at the girls suggestively.

Fearful whispers began to rise among the girls. Abruptly, their whispers were interrupted by the opening of the door. Surprisingly, a woman stepped through the door and the brief moment of hope that rose up within Krista swiftly turned cold and died painfully.

By her clothes and the manner in which the woman displayed herself, Krista recognized the woman for what she was. She was the madam of a whore house or something close to it. She had come to buy new product for her customers.

Krista turned her eyes away and stared straight ahead, seeing her fate

sealed. The woman came closer to inspect the scared girls.

"My, what a pretty bunch of girls we have here and unspoiled yet at that! You'll bring a good price. Congratulations gentlemen on restraining your beastly natures!" She gave a raucous laugh, which was echoed by the men who had come in with her.

"We know how you like them, Esmerelda!"

"Excuse me?" Elise said, speaking up.

The bunch by the door turned back to the girls, amused at the query. Elise spoke again, pointing to the two noblemen's daughters, who appeared to want no part of what she was about to say.

"Excuse me Madame, but there's been a mistake! I and these two girls here are

daughters of wealthy men. We would be worth far more to you, if you ransomed us back to our families, than being sold as slaves. Also, ransoming us back would still leave you with four girls to do with as you pleased."

The madam studied Elise for a moment with an amused, sly look on her face. Turning back to the headman she held out a heavy purse, which she dropped into his hand.

"I'll take them all Ran except for that one," she indicated Elise. "She can keep your men company, while you plan to ransom her back to her dead family."

The men all laughed and one reached forward to grab Elise and drag her out the door, as she loudly protested against such treatment.

"Have them ready to go in the

morning. I want to get back to Tantarkus as soon as possible," Esmerelda declared, making her way out of the shack.

The door slammed shut, but it didn't shut out Elise's screams or the raucous jeers and laughter taking place outside the door in the camp beyond.

The girls started crying and moaning upon hearing the despicable acts taking place outside, as each of them imagined themselves in Elise's place. Krista sunk down with her back to the wall. The milkman's daughter beside her was trying to hold back sobs of fear, but failed miserably as the sounds from outside penetrated through the thin walls of the shack in which they were locked up. Krista reached over and pulled the girl close to her and held her.

The girl collapsed against her chest and sobbed openly in Krista's arms. At some point, after the screams had finally stopped and the noise had died down, the girls mercifully fell asleep.

They all had a fearful awakening just a few hours later when the door crashed open and they were dragged out into the early morning light and herded back onto the cart.

Krista briefly glanced over at last night's fire pit, only to look away quickly as tears came to her eyes at what she had seen. She hadn't cried once last night, but the sight of Elise's mangled and lifeless body lying discarded on the ground like mere trash was too much. Elise had always treated her meanly, but no one deserved what had happened to her. Thankfully the others didn't see her

or maybe they had just been too afraid to look.

The oxcart carrying them broke off from the main group and headed out with a smaller escort towards the Attorgron capitol buried deep within the forest.

They entered the forest two days later. Krista had never seen such a forest as this. It made her own beloved forest look puny and incomparable to the unmatched majesty of the forest that pressed in all around her now. How she would have loved to find its hidden secrets and pathways instead of being chained to the side of this cart bound for a destiny too hideous to contemplate!

Five days later, after passing through small villages almost swallowed up by the forest that encroached around them, they reached a larger city called

Santarus. It was the main economic hub of the Attorgron Empire. The capitol of the Attorgron Empire was another three days journey beyond it through the forest. For the first time in days, the girls were herded out of the oxcart and into an establishment that must, in these parts, qualify as an inn. Again they were lined up forcefully against a wall.

Esmerelda came into the room to stand before them. She regarded each of them directly with a hateful glare. It was hard to look at her and not be disgusted as the oppressive humidity of the day caused her greasy looking facepaint to run down her face.

“Alright girls, listen up. I have an extremely influential and wealthy client in this city who from time to time purchases fine products such as

yourselves to use as he pleases. You would do well to impress him as he pays me very well. If none of you catch his fancy, it will go badly for all of you! Do I make myself clear?"

The girls, for the most part resigned to their fate, nodded their heads, hoping at least for an easier outcome than Elise's had been, but Krista remained still. She would play no games of appeasement to the whore mistress who controlled their fate, even if it made things worse for her. Esmerelda, seemingly satisfied with what she saw, retired to a chair in the room to wait for the wealthy buyer to appear. She didn't have to wait long.

The door opened and a dangerous looking man stepped into the room and surveyed the room's occupants. Seeming satisfied that all was as it should be, he

stepped aside and held the door open for another individual. The man beyond the door stepped into the room. He was an older man, but he still had a look of strength to him, despite his evident age. He was richly dressed and moved with a commanding presence about him that spoke of an extensive experience of leadership, perhaps even some time in the military.

Esmerelda rose to greet him, but he cut her off with a terse statement, “These are the girls from which you expect me to make a selection for my new consort?”

Esmerelda, looking somewhat shaken, nodded timidly.

“Very well, then.”

He started at the beginning of the line looking intently at each girl and steadily

progressing down the line, with disapproval written all over his face at what he saw. Each girl fairly cowered under his intense scrutiny, until at last he came to the end of the line and Krista.

Krista, however, did not look at him, but stared straight ahead and showed no sign of cowering under his study. The man reached out and grasped Krista's chin with two fingers and turned her head to meet his eyes. Forced to stare at him, she hoped that her gaze remained enigmatic and didn't betray the loathing that she felt for him and all the members of his kind.

He released her chin, turned towards his man and said, "I'll take this one. Pay her what she's due." Her new master indicated Esmerelda.

Krista, somewhat shocked, watched

as her new master's hired man dropped several pouches into Esmerelda's greedy fingers. Then the hired man came over to her and grasped her left arm tightly, almost to the point of leaving bruises, and half pulled her behind him as he followed his master out the door.

Krista got one fleeting look at the other girls as she was pulled from the room. It was likely to be the last time she saw any of them again.

There was a carriage pulled up outside the inn into which she was thrust. She landed on the seat behind the driver, which put her opposite of her new owner. She struggled to regain her composure, as the man was watching her very closely, but she couldn't control the rapid rising and falling of her chest, which betrayed whatever calm she could

portray on her face. She felt so out of balance.

The carriage ride didn't last nearly long enough. When the carriage had come to a complete stop, her new master broke his intense and inquisitive study of her and got down out of the carriage. Her charade of being in control completely shattered at the knowledge that they had arrived at her new master's house. She sat in the carriage unsure of what to do next. Her master held out his hand in a gesture one would have expected to see a gentleman offer to a high born lady. She looked at the outstretched hand and her mind was suddenly made up as to what her course of action would be. She lunged for the carriage door on the opposite side, flung it open and bounded out towards the city

lights flickering beyond. Her blossoming moment of freedom wilted within three steps, as a hand grasped her forearm with the same bruising grip once again. But of course she had been a fool to forget the warrior companion of her master.

She would now most likely be severely beaten for her attempt to escape, and then something worse would happen again and again.

The man pulled her around to the other side of the carriage toward where her new master still stood. She kept her head lowered, not wanting to show them the tears of frustration that were welling up in her eyes. Once again she felt her master's cool hand touch her chin and direct the movement of her head upward. Expecting to see anger reflected in his

eyes, she was surprised instead to see a look of understanding.

“Freedom can often prove elusive to many of us in life, but one can find peace if they surrender to the inevitable. Even the life of a slave can be bearable, if one surrenders enough.”

He released her jaw and turned towards the mansion that must be his home. It sat at the end of a street, which gave it more privacy from the other mansions that lined the street. Its architecture rose impressively up before her. Still, it struck a balance of not being overly pretentious despite its grandeur. Everything seemed extremely well maintained and in order, like the man himself.

The main doors of the mansion opened with a soft hiss of sound at her master’s

approach and he was greeted at once by members of the household staff. He lifted a deferential hand to acknowledge their welcome and continued on into the mansion. Krista followed, no longer protesting against the unshakable grip on her arm.

She was fairly bedazzled by what she saw around her as she set foot within the mansion. The floors were made of intricately inlaid marble, which were enclosed by alabaster white walls. Vivid splashes of colorful silk and artwork adorned the walls and hung from the ceiling. In the main vestibule, a massive chandelier hung overhead and its candle light sparkled brilliantly off thousands of pieces of glass. She was speechless as she was led up a mahogany stained staircase to the second

floor of the mansion. They stopped outside a door which opened from within. Upon entering Krista saw that it was as ornately decorated as the rest of the house only with more of a feminine touch to it. It was a bedroom. There were several women in attendance. Their dress uniforms denoting them as servants or slaves. Alarm grew within Krista and she started to resist further movement into the room. Her master turned to face her as his back faced a large fireplace.

He confirmed her fears, when he said somewhat speculatively, “Let’s begin. Take those rags off her and let’s see what we have to work with.”

At his words, Krista twisted against the grip on her arm. Using the motion of her twist, she swung into him and

slammed her clenched up left fist directly into his groin. He gave a slight grunt of discomfort, but that was it, which shocked her.

That always worked! He should have been doubled over in pain, but he wasn't!

He quickly grabbed her fist before she could use it again and tightened his hold on her. Having no other recourse she lunged her head forward and sank her teeth into the strong forearm holding her right arm. Suddenly she felt intense pressure on the back of her neck in certain specific spots. Darkness began closing in fast and she half screamed and released her bite, trying to escape the pressure squeezing the back of her neck. The grip stayed on her neck and she felt herself going limp, even as she

desperately fought against it.

Krista's body slumped unconscious against her captor, who picked her up gently instead of allowing her to fall to the floor. He carried her body to a daybed and laid her down.

The man who had bought Krista came to stand next to his purchase.

"She has spirit."

"Perhaps too much," echoed his guardian reservedly.

"Nonsense Rugar! One needs all the spirit one can muster to make a go of it in this life. I only hope for her sake and ours that she has enough spirit for what will be required of her."

"Sir!" one of the servant girls exclaimed.

"Yes, what is it?"

The servant girls had taken off Krista's clothes and she lay there, bare as the day she had been born. The servant girl who had spoken had been behind Krista as they had taken off her clothes. She reached forward and gently pushed Krista over onto her stomach. The other servant women collectively sucked in their breaths at the sight before them. From the top of Krista's shoulders down to the cheeks of her bottom was a latticework of thin white scars interlacing back and forth across her back that stood out whiter than the already white caste of her skin. The group stared in collective shock for a moment, except for Rugar.

"Young firan cane sprout switches did this. I've seen it before. She must have been a field slave at some point,

which means she's a runaway. No slave ever leaves the cane fields for any other reason, other than death."

On the back of Krista's left shoulder blade was forever blazed the evidence of her status as a slave. The brand was crude and roughly done. It was in the shape of a nine, but had been branded slightly sideways instead of straight up and down. The edges of the brand were deep and disrupted the smooth skin of Krista's back.

"I was right then. She does have spirit to her. What can you do with this Rugar?" Krista's master asked, indicating the crude brand.

Rugar studied it for a moment and then replied confidently, "I can mask it sufficiently, but these other scars I can do nothing with."

"You won't need to, they'll accentuate the image of her I want people to see."

Turning to the servants Krista's master ordered, "Clean her up and then assist Rugar in his work."

They nodded their heads in unison and he left the room.

*****

Krista picked her head up off the pillow it had been laying on. She was stiff and completely disoriented. All of a sudden, like the rush of a wave crashing onto the seashore, everything came back to her.

She sat up abruptly and gasped. She had been lying on her stomach, and now, looking down at herself, her mouth fell open. She had practically nothing on! Nothing that could pass for clothes

anyway.

Her breasts were encased in a soft vibrant material that left a lot of her chest exposed, while her stomach and back were completely bare. The fabric was held in place by thin straps that went up over her shoulders and across her back.

The left strap had been left undone and the back of her shoulder burned and twitched painfully. She wanted to scratch it but wasn't sure what her fingers would find so she resisted the urge.

The room was lit dimly by candlelight, but she could still see the light reflecting off the gems that were set in a necklace around her neck. The necklace appeared to be made of solid gold! There were golden arm bands

around her upper arms as well.

She got up from the bed she had been laying on and walked over to a mirror she had noticed from the bed. Her lower half was incased in nothing but a short silky dress that went no farther than mid thigh and was of a similar pattern and material as what barely encased her breasts.

She was barefoot, but she could see anklets similar to her necklace adorning her ankles. Her hair was elaborately worked about her face and neck. Somehow, they had taken the unruly mass of curls and put them under a semblance of arranged order.

She touched the skin of her bare stomach and then held her fingers up to her nose. They had oiled her skin with some kind of fine lotion and the smell

was soothing with a hint of spice to it. She met her own eyes in the mirror and stared at herself in shock. Big tears slid their way down her face, which, feeling so tight and sensitive, felt as if it was made of new skin. Nothing her short skirt concealed felt as if it had been used, but her fate was as sure as the reflection of the strange erotic looking woman looking back at her from the mirror.

She would rather have died from the rigors of a life spent as a field slave as opposed to this gilded existence as a pretty bird of paradise locked away in a cage of gold and fine linens. She reached up to wipe the tears from her eyes, not wanting to display her moment of weakness to anyone.

Her action caused her pain from

behind her left shoulder blade again. Remembering the pained itchiness, she turned and stared over her shoulder, in shock at what she saw. The ugly symbol of her slave status was no more and yet it was. Someone had used the darkened edges of the lopsided nine and turned it into the base of a work of art.

Radiating out from the loop of the nine were the lush petals of a rare tropical hygana flower in full bloom. The tail of the nine was the stem of the flower. The petals were exquisite in detail and lacked nothing in comparison to their natural counterpart. The tattooed shading of the petals and their intricate markings completely masked the ugliness of her old slave scar, which had to be felt to be noticed at all.

What master would go to such great

lengths to hide the ugliness of a scar? Hers apparently! Looking around she saw that she was in the same room as she had been in earlier in the day. The door was open!

Cautiously she made her way over to it and peered out into the dimly lit corridor. It must be late at night for she heard not a sound except for the chirping of insects outside the mansion. No one was in the hallway, but, at the end of the hall, light streamed out of an open doorway.

Drawn like a moth to a flame, she slipped into the hallway and softly approached the light, diligent not to make any noise in her approach. Reaching the opened door, she peered in and beheld a room of a definitely more masculine reflection.

Sitting behind a big oaken desk to one side of the room sat the man who had bought her. He had piles of paper before him, with which he seemed very busy.

He was writing something down when he spoke, “Come in and have a seat.”

He pointed to a chair across from the desk without even looking up at her. Surprised, Krista jumped back from the doorway. How had he known she was there? She debated about running back down the hallway to her room, but what good would that do? She cautiously stepped into the room, feeling more exposed than she ever had in her whole life.

“Close the door behind you.”

Krista swallowed hard, but obeyed. She approached the desk and sat in the indicated chair as her master continued

watching her closely the entire time.

"You, my dear, are truly stunning," he said the words almost with a hint of regret she thought. "You must have some questions, well, what are they?" he asked, somewhat impatiently, as he sat back in his chair, his hands interlocked behind his head.

Krista's voice was soft as she tried to get over the awkwardness of being before a man while half clothed. "Am I to be your sex slave and if so, why all this?" she asked, indicating the expensive jewelry she wore.

He looked at her for a moment and then responded, "Yes, to your first question, but not in the traditional sense. As to the golden baubles, they are but the expected trappings needed to conjure the image I want others to believe about

you.”

Krista stared at him puzzled, not understanding at all what he meant by, ‘not in the traditional sense’.

As if reading her mind, he gave an explanation that left her blushing, “Sadly, I no longer possess the physical part of me that was made to find enjoyment in the created glory of a female body such as your lovely one, my dear.”

Feeling like she had turned ten shades of red, she stared at him raptly. Was he saying that he was a eunuch?

“Yes, I am saying precisely that.” He’d read her mind again!

“The line of work in which I engage, as well as the spheres of influence in which I mingle, require me to imitate a somewhat worldly persona. A worldly

persona that unfortunately I am no longer able to fulfill in the natural, hence the need for subterfuge with all the fine trimmings, which is where you come in, my dear, as my devoted companion slave. You will serve me in the public's eye as my devoted companion catering to my every wish, while in private you will aid me in the work that I do as a trusted assistant. What is your name?"

"Krista Denas," Krista managed to get out, even as she tried to comprehend the enormity of what he was saying.

"A fine name. It suites you well. Krista, the work I do is of a private nature. Were you to divulge my business to anyone I would have to have you killed. Do I make myself clear?"

Krista swallowed and nodded her head.

“In return for your devoted service, I will see that no harm comes to you. In the course of our work together I will need to place a lot of trust in you. As a friend would to another friend so to speak, which is how I will treat you out of the public’s eye. In the public’s eye you will appear, for all intents and purposes, as my sensual slave companion, maintaining the facade that I have carried on for quite some time. Are your duties clear to you, Krista?”

“Yes, master,” Krista replied quickly, unable to hold back a little of the joy she felt at his explanation of their relationship.

“Good, glad to see that you’re as sensible and smart as you are strong of spirit and beautiful of body. Please, call me Sebastian instead of master. You

make me feel rather tyrannical when you say that."

It had been later than she had thought, or rather earlier, because the early morning rays of sunlight had begun to stream into the room taking away the shadows of the night's darkness. "Rugar, now that our business relationship has been agreed upon, how about we seal it with a good breakfast before we get to work?"

Startled, Krista turned in her chair to see the man, who seemed to be always with Sebastian, step away from beside the door and enter the room. She had to have walked within inches of him when she had come into the room earlier.

"Rugar is my trusted companion. Anything you have need of, simply ask him and he will, within reason, perform

miracles to accomplish it. Speaking of miracles, mind if I look closer at your shoulder?"

Sebastian had gotten up and moved to the part of the room where the sun's light was brightest. It hadn't really been a request on his part and she got up, walked over to him and turned her back to him.

"Well done, Rugar! A work of art, if I don't say so myself."

Krista looked at the tall man, who's bruising hands had kept her from escaping, with new found respect. He was about to leave when Krista turned back to Sebastian, "If it would please you sirs, I will go and get your breakfast and serve you?"

Sebastian's eyes twinkled appreciably at the assured way she had assumed her

new role and nodded his head in affirmation of her request. Krista paused beside Rugar on her way out the door. She hesitated for a moment and then looked up and said, “Thank you.” She motioned briefly towards the back of her shoulder by way of explanation.

Rugar gave her a short decisive nod and she continued on out of the room in search of the kitchens. After she was gone, Rugar and Sebastian shared a meaningful look.

“Sebastian, she is far rarer than the hygana blossom I tattooed on her back.”

“Yes, she is. We will have to take good care of her,” Sebastian agreed thoughtfully.

*****

After breakfast, Rugar left the small study without explanation and Sebastian

seemed to need none. “Alright my dear, let’s get to work. The paperwork has been piling up as usual and must be dealt with. Here, read through these letters, find the ones with Zoarinian addresses and separate them out for me.”

Kristina felt a moment of panic seize her as he put the letters into her open hand.

Seeing her expression he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Krista, not able to meet his eyes, stared dejectedly at the floor, “I…. I can’t read. I only know a little about numbers and simple calculations.”

There was a silent moment, which Sebastian broke by taking the letters back. “A bit of a setback, but nothing that can’t be overcome my dear. Come with me.”

He led her over to a window seat and gestured for her to sit down. He sat down beside her and pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. “Since you don’t know how to read, I’ll teach you.”

He made a big symbol on the paper and pointed at it with the pen. “This is the letter A, as in alley cat. You say it.”

“A.”

“Very good.” He made another symbol, “B.”

Krista repeated the letters after him, scarcely able to believe how her fortunes had changed for the better. She had always yearned for the ability to read, which was something slaves were rarely ever taught to do. She hung on every word of instruction from Sebastian, as if it was one more key to a puzzle that unlocked a golden prize.

Chapter Thirteen

Bloodletting

Roric

I stood beside Flin in the cold early light of dawn. My hands were busy checking that the saddle was on right, while my mind was focused on the journey ahead.

It had been a week since my discussion with Thaddeus. I thought back over the discussion I'd had with him. I didn't like the task that I had before me. I

remembered what Thaddeus had told me in the hidden room and now, more than ever, I felt that the ancestral knowledge should be destroyed, but I wished that there was a better way.

He had given me instructions as to where to find the secret hiding place of the real ancestral artifacts, but there was one problem with that. I had never really traveled in the Attorgron forests much, especially not the area of the forest where he was sending me and I told him as much. Without a guide or a basic familiarity with the land, it would be very easy to get lost in the jungle like habitat of the forest.

He had told me, “Father John will be your guide. He knows the area well enough, having been born and raised there for part of his childhood. We’ll

keep your party small so as not to attract undue attention. I doubt you should run into any trouble, providing, of course, that you can avoid the natives."

Besides destroying the knowledge, Thaddeus had laid one more task onto my shoulders that he had said was almost as vital as destroying the knowledge. After destroying the knowledge was complete, he wanted me to travel down through the forest to Santarus and pick up information there from a trusted spy contact of his.

The information the spy had apparently contained details concerning the Zoarinian Empire's invasion plan, which was unlikely to be tainted with misinformation like the other spy's intelligence had been. At least that is what Thaddeus had said.

I didn't like the extra excursion, because it involved exposing ourselves to the enemy far more than the original smash and dash plan. Our extraction involved going through Zoarinian held territory, which I was not overly fond of either, but if the information helped us win the war it would be worth it. At least I hoped so.

Coming back to reality, I made sure that I had Thaddeus's letter to his spy contact. Letter was a small word for it, for all intents and purposes it appeared to be a two hundred year old book complete with musty stained pages.

Thaddeus got a bit too much into the whole spy/intrigue thing I thought to myself. But then he had managed to keep the family secrets safe during his watch over them. Now it was up to me to finish

it.

There were only going to be five of us on the expedition; Father John, Seth, two of my grandfather's trusted men at arms and myself. I would have preferred a party made up entirely of my men, but all of my men were busy improving the fighting abilities of the castle's fighting men and couldn't easily be spared from that task.

The only reason Seth was going was because he was useless as a teacher and he had insisted on going so repeatedly that I had finally agreed. Father John hadn't seemed overly excited one way or the other when I told him that he was to accompany us.

He was a hard man to read. I had detected that he and my grandfather were not too keen on each other, even though

my grandfather had raised him from boyhood as a son. Pulling myself up into the saddle, I headed for the side gate, followed by my four companions.

We left the castle quietly, not wanting to attract any attention, as we made our way through the early morning mists out into the wide valley beyond. I drew Flin up briefly to look back the way we had come. The castle was breath taking with the morning light cascading down upon it.

I had only been here a few weeks and yet it already felt like home to me. I hated to leave its calm assurance and beauty and go back into the world and the troubles I had left behind me there, but it had to be done. I pulled Flin back around and let Father John take the point as we started on our journey out of the

Valley Lands and towards the dark shadowed world of the Attorgron Forests.

*****

The low arching branches of a Patna tree spread its large leaved foliage over the jumble of boulders under which we lay concealed. Nestled in and amongst the boulders, we were all but invisible to the people in the clearing beyond. I wished we were invisible to the bugs too.

They swarmed around us in clouds of stinging annoyance. The insects were just one more item to add to the long list of things that I hated about this forest. I did have to admit though that my grandfather's hiding place for the knowledge of our ancestors had been ingenious if not downright brilliant. Of

all the places to hide something that countless people were turning over rocks left and right to find, this had to be the best and least expected option, as well as one of the more deadly. In this unlikely clearing in the midst of the forest lay several crude wooden hovels. At one end of the clearing was an uprising of stone from the forest floor. Its summit barely cleared the canopy of the surrounding forest. It was covered in vegetation, but it was obvious that the stony monument was of human construction and of a very old origin at that.

The peoples that had migrated to these forests long ago had been very skillful, as well as sophisticated. However, in the deep dark areas of the forest, the darkness and solitude of the forest

overcame them and ignorance took root, until all that was left was this smattering of crude wooden shelters that housed a people who preyed upon their own kind.

Cannibals. Within walking distance of the greatness of their ancestor's architectural accomplishments, the descendents lived out their lives in squalid barbaric conditions, a mere shadow of their former glory.

This northernmost area of the Attorgron Forest was avoided by all because of the savagery of the barbarian peoples who roamed through it. Though fierce and warlike as a people, their primary method of attack was by sneaking up on their victims and ambushing them.

Their primary weapon was the poison tipped darts they blew from long

ornamented blow guns, which seemed to be their one technological accomplishment as a society. They were completely devoid of mercy.

They had one weakness though, which I intended to exploit as my grandfather had. They were a superstitious people. We lay uncomfortably in the concealment of the boulders waiting for night to come, while being bit and gnawed upon by the millions of insects that infested this forest. Patience against the torment came somewhat easily, as the fear of being noticed by the savages could lead to something altogether worse than a bug bite and some itching.

Steadily the day wore on until dark shadows hung over the clearing. The darkness of the night soon followed.

Fires from the native village blazed forth, lighting up the night sky and echoing the need by even these heartless savages to keep the darkness partially at bay, at least superficially.

The natives had begun to dance and shuffle around the flickering fires, worshipfully chanting as they did so, to their latest superstitious thrall of the moment. Suddenly a whoosh of noise punctuated the chanting sounds the natives were making, which was underscored by corresponding showers of sparks breaking off into the air from the large ceremonial fires.

Soon puffs of smoke plumed up from their fires and their chants came to a sudden halt as the fires they were thronged around extinguished abruptly into grey clouds of smoke.

Fearful murmuring took over at the strangeness of the event. Suddenly a loud pop could be heard, followed by a bright streak of white light rising above the canopy of the forest, which exploded with a deafening crack like thunder above the clearing.

A thousand sparks tinged with blue and white burned briefly in the night sky. Some of the natives screamed out in fear, but most were held motionless in a speechless terror. In the dark stillness after the burst of sparks in the night sky, five hooded figures marched out in a phalanx formation from the surrounding forest.

Each figure was clothed in a shimmery blue robe with a silver mask over the face that resembled an eagle's face. In their right hand, each figure held

a torch that blazed forth with a green flickering flame.

The natives drew back in terror and fell to the ground in homage of the manlike eagle beings with the green flaming torches.

Passing through the camp, the eagle beings headed for the decaying stone structure at the edge of the clearing. The last two figures on the wings of the formation peeled off and turned to face the groveling natives.

The natives stared in mute terror from their prostrated positions on the ground as the remaining three figures walked through what appeared to be a solid rock wall. As they disappeared within the stone structure, the villagers howled in dread at the supernatural sight and commenced to moan fearfully as they lay

on the ground.

*****

I took my mask off, grateful that I was now able to scratch the bites on my neck once more. The scratching gave only a brief moment's respite from the itchiness. Turning to Seth, I laughed upon seeing him. Being the nut that he was, he had taken some feathers he had found from somewhere and stuck them in the creases of his elbows and was moving his arms in the imitation of a chicken, complete with the hopping.

I glanced at Father John and my laughter died as I noted his disapproving face. He hadn't been happy about the whole eagle costume superstition idea. Oh well, it had worked beautifully and was far preferable to being in a cannibal's cook pot.

Getting back to business I turned to survey the room. It was devoid of ornamentation and appeared to be a singularly boring square of stone walled room. I stepped into the middle of the room and pressed my thumb to the gem of a ring that Thaddeus had given me.

The walls disappeared like curtains falling to the ground and we were surrounded by a gallery filled to the ceiling with strange and amazing items of every imaginable invention. To say we were surprised by the foreign looking scene around us would have been putting it mildly. I had been under the impression that the repository of the ancestors was entirely made up of an extensive collection of books, not actual relics of the knowledge.

There were pathways through the

jumble of artifacts, through which we made our way. Mesmerized by the treasures around me, I was almost afraid to reach out and touch the strange inventions that littered the room from floor to ceiling.

Doubt began to rise in me that we were doing the right thing by destroying all of this. No doubt these inventions could be used to do great evil if they fell into the wrong hands, but think of the good that could come of using them. No doubt there existed in this room of wonders and inventions the key to all the problems with which our people were faced.

The gallery was lit by devices such as the one I had seen in the room at Thunder Ridge. I thought they seemed to be glowing brighter as we moved deeper

into the room. I could hear Seth excitedly exclaiming over the stuff around us and a quick glance showed that Father John was equally engrossed. I wanted to see where the brighter light led and so I separated from the others in pursuit of it.

Making my way around yet another pile of more priceless artifacts, I saw where the brighter lights led. Ahead of me was a circular area that was brightly lit up. It was not jumbled with artifacts like the rest of the gallery. Five pedestals stood alone in the space, with each pedestal displaying a book. The fifth pedestal was in the middle and its book was larger than the others.

I drew close and looked at the first book's title, Matthew. I went to the surrounding pedestals and read the

names, Mark, Luke and John. I had heard of the names. These were the four gospels authored by disciples of the Son of the Creator.

Excitement rose in my heart at the greatness of my discovery. What had Thaddeus said was wrong with these books? I carefully reached out and picked up the book nearest to me, which was the Book of John. Opening it, I began to read.

I came to a verse that I had memorized by heart from one of the walls of the chapel in Ta'arny and confusion rose within me as I read it. It was worded completely different than the scripture from the chapel, which made the meaning one gleaned from it different too. If this book was so badly off on the translation of just one verse, how much

else could it be off from the original manuscript?

I saw the wisdom of my grandfather's words and I closed the book and looked at the inside cover, seeking to ascertain its origin, which my grandfather had said originated with the Zoarinians. At the bottom of the page, in small black lettering that I almost missed it read, 'The fully revised version of St. John, as interpreted by The Enlightenment Authority Order'. Enlightenment Authority Order? Feeling like my fingers were burning I put the book back on its pedestal.

"Isn't it wonderful, Roric, to read the scriptures that speak of the tales of our Lord?"

Surprised, I looked up and saw that Father John was holding and reading

from the book entitled, Matthew.

"Is it wonderful?" I asked speculatively, watching him closely.

"Oh, yes Roric! How can you ask that when we're holding the complete story of our Lord's life on Earth? These books form the very essence of our belief!"

"Have you not noticed some inconsistencies in the text from that of the Holy Scriptures that we do still have?"

"Yes, I've noticed some but they are only minor ones. Such inconsistencies are within reason I believe. It's to be expected in the translation of any book, for the most part."

"The Holy Scripture isn't just any book, Father John! It's the Holy inerrant word of the Creator Himself, if it wasn't so our faith would be completely

baseless!”

John quickly agreed, “Of course, you’re right Roric. There are too many inconsistencies for these books to be trusted, I suppose.” He continued to scan through the book in his hands.

“What is the Enlightenment Authority Order?” I asked him.

Father John looked up, surprised at my question, “Why do you ask that question?”

“Look on the inside cover of the book.”

Father John did so and studied it for a moment and then looked back over at me. “They were a secret society during the early colonization of this world. They broke off to form their own faction but have since then disappeared from our world. Their stated primary purpose

was preserving the integrity of our ancestor's religious doctrine."

"You said they were a secret society. Why?"

"Oh, it was easier to get their work done that is all, but it doesn't matter now since they've long since become part of history," Father John said as he went back to reading the book in his hand.

I doubted it, though, as well as his explanation for the need of a secret society to accomplish something that sounded like a worthy ideal to have and that the Valley Landers had never been against.

I stepped forward to the central book. It was bigger than the rest. Eeriness coursed through me, causing an involuntary shiver down my spine as I read the title, "The Book of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil." Below the title was some smaller lettering which read, "An account of the creation of the world to its proposed end from the eyes of one who has been there and can attest to the truths written herein."

Father John came up beside me and read the title as I had done. "A very dangerous book indeed. I would like to study it to see if there is any wisdom worth gleaning from it."

"Father John, you do know who likely wrote this don't you?"

"But of course Roric, it would appear that Satan himself did, seeing as he is the only one that could make a statement like that other than the Great Creator."

"What worthwhile wisdom could you even hope to glean from such a source of heresy?"

"But of course you're right, Roric. It would be far more likely to lead to deception than any manner of hidden truth, which goes the same for these other works as well. They are inconsistent at best. Come, let us be about the destruction of all of this before we are enthralled by it any longer!"

With that said, Father John turned and strode away towards Seth, who, against orders, had been loading himself down with gadgets and pretty looking devices. Father John, despite Seth's protests, began to take the gadgets from Seth and throw them back onto the piles of artifacts littering the room.

Following Father John's example, I turned from the books and hurried to a lighted display I had seen on the wall at the far end of the room. Taking off my

ring, I placed it into a keyhole made to fit its exact shape. Another display came up on a shimmery looking crystal that showed a vertical row of colored lines. I moved the dashes that were on the lines in the blue areas, until they were all the way into the red areas with just the pressure of my finger on the screen before me as Thaddeus had instructed me to do.

I took the ring out of the keyhole and the display began to pulse on and off causing the lights in the room to flicker. Running back across the gallery towards where we had entered, I ran past the books on their pedestals and through the piles of artifacts, eager to get away from the confusions of this place and how it had threatened to overcome my better judgment.

Father John had already dragged Seth out to the entry point into the room and away from his spoils, about which he was none too happy.

“Roric, call this guy off before I’m forced to hit him!”

“Be quiet! You knew we came to destroy this place and all its contents. Nothing leaves this place Seth! Nothing!” I said roughly.

Somewhat sheepish looking, Seth nodded in response. We donned our disguises once again. I pressed the ring with my thumb and the wall before us became translucent and we walked through it into the welcoming coolness of the night.

The natives were still whimpering and wailing in fright on the ground and we exited the clearing the same way as we

had come into it. Just as we reached the end of the clearing and the beginning of the forest, the ground shook violently and a great explosion ripped through the night air behind us.

I turned and looked back briefly for a moment and saw that the dilapidated stone monument was literally being blown apart. Large chunks of rock were being hurled everywhere and flames reached high into the sky from the molten interior of the structure.

The fierce cannibalistic tribe of forest dwellers had taken off in every direction as fast as their legs could carry them to escape what must have looked to them like the opening of the pits of hell.

I turned back towards the forest and headed for where we had left the horses earlier in the day, eager to complete my

mission and be headed back to my home and away from this miserable forest.

*****

Two miserable days later found us soaked, hungry and tired, not to mention downright itchy. I was pretty sure we were lost as well. We had been traveling southward through the forest towards Santarus.

The forest had opened up some, but it was still rough going to get through the overgrown understory of the forest. Father John had the point and continually insisted that we were not lost, but I had my doubts.

He'd been but a little boy when he had lived here before and there were simply no landmarks to be seen other than the trees in front of us. Still, he seemed confident of our progress and I was

willing to trust his judgment for a little while longer before interceding. He hadn't said much in the past two days and I could tell that it still bothered him that we had destroyed everything as we had. It had been for the best though and I hoped that he came to see that as I now did.

He stopped and waited till I drew abreast of him, "Over that way the forest breaks up into some grassy parks, which will increase our speed since we won't have to fight through this understory."

"Lead on, John. I'm game for a chance to see the sky again."

"Me too!" echoed the others in the group, sounding like a chorus in their exuberance to be free of the forest, at least temporarily.

Father John hesitated for a moment

and then continued, “There is a village that way that we won’t be able to avoid. It’s run by women.”

Seth leaned forward in the saddle, “Go on priest. What about the women?”

Father John looked somewhat annoyed at Seth’s obvious interest but continued, “It’s a matriarchal society. Men are seen as less than women and do the work normally left to the women. But they are not hostile to outside men in general. They just think they are better. It’s perfectly safe to visit the village. We just have to be careful not to get them angry, as they can be rather forceful when angered.”

Seth was looking at me with pleading eyes, which I ignored. I was tired of fighting this jungle and it would be nice to have a roof over my head for a

change.

"If you say it's safe enough, that is, if we behave ourselves!" I said with emphasis, as I looked at Seth sternly. "And that it'll cut time off the journey, we'll go that way." Father John nodded and turned his horse in the direction he had indicated.

Soon, true to his word, the forest broke up into a series of grassy parks that appeared as if they were islands in the sea of trees around them.

Several hours later we could see smoke in the distance up ahead of us. That must be the village run by the women that John had spoken of. This, no doubt, was going to be a unique experience.

As we drew closer to the village, I

began to see just how unique an experience it was going to be. It was like seeing two villages instead of just one. John had told us that the men were forced to live in the lower village and take care of the children, while the women lived exclusively in the upper village and only occasionally invited the men there for purposes of procreation.

Not quite sure yet of what we were getting ourselves into, I followed John, already regretting my earlier decision to come this way. The lower village's living conditions were extremely poor at best.

The men who gathered around the hovels weren't much to speak of. They had the worn, broken look of slaves about them, which made me uneasy. There were girls running around in

bountiful supply, excited by what must be a strange occurrence for them, but I didn't see any boys. That was odd.

We were coming to the end of the village when one man caught my eye. He was staring at me intently. So intently that I felt awkward and thought I might have to look away. He pulled a young girl with raven black hair and skin the color of dark mahogany in front of him and made a gesture with his hands, a gesture I could see echoed in his eyes as well.

He wanted me to take the girl away from this place when I left. The whole scene had made me uncomfortable and I looked away, unsure of what was going on here other than that I didn't like it.

My attention was drawn to the second village higher up off the plain and more

encased in the shelter of the forest, which is when I saw the women. So had the others, if the mumbled, incoherent affectations that I heard rolling off the lips of Seth, who was directly behind me, indicated. I had never seen such women as these. Most of them were of a taller build, with some being shorter, but all of them were muscular and lithe of form. Some had long flowing hair, while others had their hair cut close to their heads, but one thing was universal, none of them were wearing practically anything.

They were decorated in all manner of beads and pretty trinkets, with elaborate tattoos that seemed to flow across the large expanses of bare skin in continuous patterns. Some had short skirts of leather, while others had breach clouts

that left a lot exposed. Most wore a bright strip of fabric that encased their breasts, while others were completely topless. I could hear Seth swearing under his breath now, but for a different reason other than a moral objection, as to the wanton appearance of these women.

Why had John, a priest at that, not told me of how extreme these women had taken their little society? We came to the center of the village and John dismounted, as did the rest of us.

It was one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life. My body had completely let me down. It had been manageable, while seated in the saddle, to remain objective looking and seemingly in control. But having to dismount and stand revealed an

embarrassingly hopeless reaction to how much visual stimulation I was receiving anywhere and everywhere my eyes went.

Not being in control of my body was quite humiliating, but worse than that was the feeling that I was somehow letting the Creator down by allowing myself to be affected by the bare and very beautiful female bodies on full display all around me.

Thankfully, John did all of the talking. Having come to an agreement that we wanted shelter for the night and that we would be moving on in the morning, they invited us to a feast in our honor that night, which he accepted on behalf of all of us.

Their spokeswoman was a tall voluptuous blond, whom Seth hadn't yet managed to take his eyes off. I began to

notice an increasingly sensual demeanor of the women towards us and I made a quick decision and turned Flin around. I led him away from the others and back towards the lower village.

I myself had been the subject of a lot of hungry looks, but I did not intend on satisfying any of them, much to my body's dismay. About the best thing I could do right now to avoid affronting their barbaric sense of hospitality was to remove myself from the situation as best as I could.

I made my way back towards the lower village, my face completely red, knowing how it must look to these exotic women and what my actions probably insinuated to them. It was not the favorable view that any red blooded male would want thought of him by

beautiful women, or anyone for that matter.

The carnal side of me wanted to stay and keep looking and, even more than that, it wanted to reach out and touch the forbidden, but something stronger than the carnal side of me was screaming out to just keep walking away.

I didn't see Seth and the other two men follow the women into the upper village, so intent was I on leaving the scene of my own moral crisis of conflict. Nor did I see what became of John. I knew what would be happening soon back there in the village, and the regret that flashed through my body at what I was missing, was a palpable feeling of loss.

Surely it didn't really matter in the big scope of things what happened in this

isolated village filled with barbaric, sensual eyed women who had nothing but a sensual promise of a good time in their eyes?

Somehow it did matter though and so I kept walking uncomfortably away from my passion's desire, while I called myself every kind of a fool in my head for doing so. I had never had sex before, which was a secret that I kept closely guarded and private. Everyone that had known me in my adult life would never have guessed it of me, given my years in the arena. As a reward in the arena for simply surviving or for giving a good show to the audience, fighters were gifted with better food and weapons with which to defend themselves.

Serving girls and slave girls alike were thrown into the cells of a select

few of the better fighters almost every night. I had been one of those better fighters for almost my entire duration within the arena.

One look at the frightened faces of the girls, or even the older women that were thrown into my cell at night, had always proven a greater deterrent to me than acting out on any of the manly desires that I had bottled up inside of me ever since I was an older boy. Instead of adding to the pain and misery of their lives for a few moments of pleasure on my part, I had instead talked to them and shared my food with them and let them spend the night in peace. I had become friends with quite a few of them over the years. Even now, since I was free of that world and didn't have the strictures of a cell around me and there were women

who openly expressed interest in me, it still felt wrong to indulge myself.

I had the sense that there was something better, something worth waiting for someday for me and so I held on to that dream and guarded it jealously, hoping that it would come sooner rather than later. I remembered my mother and what she and my father had together and knew that was what I wanted for myself.

It was worth holding out for and now, with my newfound faith altering the very threadwork of my life, it was simply the right thing to do. Looking up at the sky as I led Flin towards the lower village I said, "Lord, knowing the right thing to do sure doesn't make it any easier! Help me!"

*****

The voluptuous blond was leading Seth by the hand towards a hut while three other women pressed themselves close to him sensuously along the way. Seth could hardly contain himself over his good fortune.

Their progress was abruptly stopped by another woman, who reached out and stopped Seth's journey toward the hut with a firm grip on the front of his tunic shirt. The woman was tall and very beautiful. She had dark black hair and her skin was the color of dark chocolate.

Seth was busy drinking in her exotic beauty, when she asked authoritatively, "Your friend does not care for women? Does he prefer boys instead?"

Seth was puzzled by what she meant until, following her outstretched arm,

he saw that she was pointing at Roric's retreating form.

"Him! Oh no, I'm pretty sure he prefers women! He's just a little shy and too serious for his own good sometimes."

Seth disappeared into the hut with the other women. The blond leader paused, "Are you not coming Kana?"

"No, I want him!" Kana said, pointing after Roric's retreating form.

"Have it your way Kana, but you're missing out," The blond said before ducking into the tent.

*****

I entered the village of men subconsciously looking for the man who had caught my attention earlier. I had tried to ask a passing man for help, but the man had just hurried away from me

with fear written all over his face. Puzzled by their behavior, I decided to leave. I was almost out of the village when the man I had seen earlier motioned from behind a hut for me to follow him. Curious, but wary of a trap, I followed him at a distance.

He led me to a group of trees near a little brook on the edge of the forest. We were out of sight of both villages. He snapped his fingers and gave a come hither motion. The little girl he'd had with him before came out from some reeds she'd been hiding behind and stood in front of the man.

Putting his hands on the girl's shoulders, the man said haltingly, "You must leave now and take the girl with you!"

"Why? Am I in danger? Is she in

danger?"

"Yes!" The man said, nodding his head vehemently.

"In danger from whom?" I asked. The man shook his head violently, refusing to answer my question as I saw fear intensify in his eyes.

"With your permission, I'll have your horse saddled here with the young girl waiting for you tonight. Come before dark! You must go and take the girl with you!" With that said, the man hurried away from the hiding spot with the girl.

"Where are all the boys?" I asked to his retreating back, but he didn't answer me.

Spooky little man I thought. He didn't seem to be all there upstairs. One thing was for sure though, he loved that little girl. The girl couldn't be much older

than about six.

I started to leave the cove and then stopped myself. If there was some element of truth to what the man had said, it would be good to have Flin hid where I could get to him. I tied Flin to a stump and made my way back to the women's camp or at least the outskirts of it.

The little girl came out from behind some reeds after she saw that the big man had left. Flin turned his head and nickered softly at the girl. As she drew closer, Flin sidestepped away from her before she reached him.

The girl pulled a long carrot from her sleeve and held it out to him. Flin nickered again and, after a moment's hesitation, ambled up to the little girl.

He snuffled her head, blowing her hair everywhere, which caused the little girl to giggle.

Flin leaned down and took the carrot from her hand and ate it noisily. After Flin was finished, he looked down at her hopefully. She didn't disappoint, as with a little grin she pulled out another carrot.

I pulled away from the tree I had been peering around and, smiling, I continued on my way to the outskirts of the village. Flin was in good hands.

I looked around the perimeter of the village to see if anything could be learned of any possible danger to us that would validate the little man's fears for the girl's safety. I was about to give up and reenter the village when I saw John

slip out of the village. His actions were those of a man who wished to remain unseen.

He moved deeper into the forest and I followed after him from a distance. An hour later, to my shame, I had to admit to myself that he was more adept at alluding pursuit than I was at tracking him, which surprised me because I was pretty good at tracking.

I had lost him within five minutes of entering the forest. I was headed back to the village for the evening feast, when I heard a sound that stopped me in my tracks. After a moment of intense listening it became clear to me that what I heard was the sound of a horse browsing.

Following the direction of the noise, I soon found its source. John's horse

stood saddled in a hidden alcove of the forest. No one was around. Scouting the area, I found a grassy knoll that had a depression in the grass where someone had sat for a long period of time. John? Perhaps he had wanted to avoid the lusty afternoon back at the village as I had. Why else would he come out here? Did he sense danger too and, if so, why had he not informed me of it?

Probably thought I'd be busy whoring like the others were and past caring about such things. I got back to the village as the evening shadows began to grow dark, only to find that the feast was already in full swing. I made my way carefully past the bare female bodies to Seth's side and sat down.

The evening wasn't without its share of lusty entertainment either. Several

girls were moving sensuously to the rhythm of a savage beat being drummed out by several older women on old looking drums that appeared as if they had seen long service.

Seth and the other men were completely absorbed by the entertainment, as if they couldn't get enough of it to satisfy themselves to look away for even a moment. Seth did notice me as I sat down beside him.

He turned to me, putting an arm around my shoulder as he did so, "Tell me brother, why did you miss out on enjoying yourself this afternoon? It doesn't get any better than this!"

At my expression, Seth exploded optimistically forth with, "Don't worry there's still tonight. That one!" He indicated the blond leader. "You've got

to try her and that short brunette over there. You wouldn't believe what she can do with her…."

I stopped Seth mid sentence, "Seth, what you do is your business, but you should be on your guard around these women! Something isn't right around here! Don't you feel it?"

"You know me boss, I'm always on my guard," Seth grinned half jokingly, turning his attention back to the dancers, which were taking it up another notch in intensity.

I ate till I was full. Admittedly the food was very good and it helped to ease the miserable experience I was having overall.

Suddenly John got up and left the feast. He had sat quietly on the far side of the fire all during the feast without

saying anything. He hadn't seemed interested in the girls at all and strangely enough they hadn't been interested in him either.

More of the women joined the few twirling dancers and things were getting wilder and more out of control by the moment. Some sixth sense within me started sounding out an internal alarm bell. I slipped out from the fire's light as Seth, unable to restrain himself anymore, leaped to his feet to join in with the dancers.

Slipping past the last few women at the edge of the feasting area, I headed towards where John's horse was located, figuring that I would find John there. Several minutes later I heard a sound behind me. I had just crossed a moonlit clearing in the forest. Wheeling

around, ready to face one enemy or several, I instead saw one of the women from the camp. She was tall and of a darker skin color than most of the other women, and yet she was very beautiful. She moved towards me, her gaze direct and admiring.

"You are the man I wish to mate with. You will make me strong daughters."

Somewhat taken back by her statement, I was speechless as she approached with all the grace the feminine form can offer. She reached behind her and undid the fabric concealing and supporting her breasts. The fabric fell to the ground and I swallowed reflexively.

This was getting way out of control in a hurry! I stared at her, spellbound, as she glided toward me. As she reached

me, she turned and pressed back against me grabbing my hands as she did so and before I could think as to what she might be doing with them, she brought them up to cup her full breasts, even as she rubbed back against me with her bottom.

"You like Kana?"

Trying to figure out my course of action, let alone control my rampant senses, was hard to come by in this moment, but I tried. All that seemed to matter in this moment was fulfilling the pent up need I had been repressing for years.

You need to focus Roric! You need to be careful remember? Remember what? Why you're in the forest? John! It had been something about John hadn't it? The horse in the woods, his strange behavior and his horrifically bad choice

of coming to this village of tempting hedonistic women!

These women were dangerous! They had completely stolen my hard won sense of self control from me ever since I had gotten here and I was tired of it!

I thrust Kana away from me, although every carnal part of me wanted what she was offering. Stepping back from her, I fought to bring my breathing back under control. I could feel the blood pulsing through my veins, as if it was boiling inside them.

“I need to go! No offense meant, some other time maybe.”

I turned, wanting to get away from the scene I was creating before I embarrassed myself even further. My training as a warrior saved me.

I heard Kana say behind me, as if she

was spitting out venom, “The Vanah are not refused!”

Vanah?

I heard the noise of steel grating, as it would on a knife sheath as it was withdrawn from it, and I reacted. My hands flew to my waistband and the daggers stashed there.

I felt her breasts touch my back and her strong right arm came over my right shoulder as her hand grabbed my chin and pulled it back for the killing slice. I had my left hand going up with a knife and I was almost too late. Her left arm whipped over my shoulder, her hand holding a knife to slit my throat. As the blade slid across my throat, it met the steel of my knife blade instead of the soft flesh of my throat and before she realized what had happened, the dagger

in my right hand was buried to the hilt in her side.

She gasped aloud, reeling back from me, holding the mortal wound in her side. Disbelief marred her beautiful face as she fell to the ground, her remaining life pulsing out onto the forest floor.

"You are indeed a great man to not have allowed yourself to fall for the erotic wiles of the Vanah. I'll give you that much of a compliment at least, Roric."

I wheeled around toward the voice. Across the clearing sat John on his horse.

"What's going on here, John?"

John laughed, "I too am a great man, even though your grandfather chose to ignore it. This book that your grandfather and you would so casually have

destroyed if not for me, is the answer to our prayers! It holds the keys to eternal life!"

He held the big book up that he had somehow taken from the central pedestal without me noticing.

"Its author is probably Satan himself or someone mislead by him, you fool! What knowledge do you hope to glean from it that's worth your soul?"

"Spoken like a true believer of the Valley Lander version of faith. Your grandfather would be so proud of you! It's a pity that you're going to die here, so far from your new home. You should have enjoyed the pleasures presented by the women while they were offering them to you! Now they'll just take until there's nothing left to give! Farewell, I have a great commission before me and

masters to please. But let me say how grateful I am to already have been rewarded with the demise of the last cursed offspring of your grandfather's sanctimonious family."

He pulled his horse around and goaded it into a gallop towards the forest, but not before I had thrown my daggers. I knew that they had landed when I heard him cry out painfully, but he remained in the saddle and was gone from sight within moments.

I ran through the forest to get to Flin. I had to stop John and destroy that book! Reaching the hiding spot where I had left Flin, I found him saddled and ready along with the girl and her protector.

The man was completely frantic. "You are late! It has begun! They will come hunting for you!"

“What are you talking about man?” I yelled, as I reached out and shook him violently, trying to make sense of him. For a moment he was more afraid of me than anything else and he blurted out the truth.

“The she devils come and get you! They torture you and then drink your blood while you live!”

Iciness closed in around my heart at his words and as the full realization of John’s treachery came to light. I let the man go and fairly leaped onto Flin’s back, pulling him around towards the camp, but the man blocked me from continuing.

Tears in his eyes he held up the little girl in front of him, “Please! You are a good man! You take my Zarsha with you! So she not become a she devil too!”

I couldn't resist the plea in the man's eyes and I leaned down and grabbed the girl up into my arms and then ducked Flin around the man and galloped for the other camp.

I pulled up in the trees and left Flin tied to a tree in the dense thicket of the forest with a slip knot. I left the girl in the saddle. I pointed a stern finger up at her as I said, "You stay right there!"

Eyes wide with fear, she nodded vigorously and I regretted my harsh tone of voice immediately. I hadn't made it three steps towards the camp when I picked out the sounds of pain mixed in with the raucous celebration of the women's high pitched squeals and caterwauls.

I made it to the edge of the clearing without being spotted and stopped in my

tracks, unable to believe the savagery of the sight that met my eyes. My three companions were tied upright, spread eagled between tall poles I hadn't noticed before. They were completely naked and covered in blood from hundreds of nicks and cuts. Most appalling of all was the sight of the women and what they were doing to the men's bodies.

They were literally licking the blood from the wounds, moaning as they did so, all the while making fresh cuts with small knives they kept in their hands. When the blood flow slowed in a spot, they moved on. They were literally becoming drunk on the blood of the men!

I had never seen such a spirit of unholy debauchery before, not even in the arena. The two soldiers were

already slumped in near death, not even moaning anymore against the pain, as their very life was sucked from them. Seth was still conscious and somehow his eyes found mine and I saw his bloody lips mouth the words, “Forgive me!” and then more forcefully, “Run!”

The blond that he had taken a fancy to earlier, stood up before him. An inhuman look of insanity gripped her jubilant face as she grabbed his hair and pulled his head back and slit his throat wide open. She dropped the knife and thrust a goblet under his chin to catch the rest of his blood. Dropping his drained head, she drank from the cup, spilling its contents down her naked body. Finishing, she dropped the cup and with arms outstretched she screamed shouts of glee that were sickening to behold.

Unable to stop my body's reaction to what I had seen, I leaned against a tree and lost the contents of my stomach onto the ground as I vomited violently. Straightening again, I looked once more upon the scene. All three men were dead for sure now. I needed to get out of here! The savage need to stay and avenge my friend made it hard for me to leave though.

Just then a commotion broke loose among the women. Four women came hurrying in from the forest carrying Kana's lifeless body. I started to move back into the forest, but one of the women spotted me and screamed an alarm to the others as she pointed at me. I turned tail and ran.

They would cut me off before I could reach Flin and the girl, so I led them

away from them, hoping to be able to double back to them later. Running as stealthily as I could through the dense thicket, I still must have sounded like a marsh buffalo crashing through the heavy underbrush to their trained ears.

They were everywhere with their flashing torches. I started to double back and managed to duck out of the way of several of them. I thought I was clear of them, until I heard the snap of a twig breaking behind me. I wheeled around to face the danger, and my quickness of movement saved me. The blond who had killed Seth stood not twenty feet away with a blow gun to her mouth.

I felt the dart whiz past me, nicking the top of my shoulder as it raced by. I drew my sword to charge her and cut her down before she could fire another dart

at me, but instead I felt myself pitch forward onto my knees clumsily after just a few steps. Things got dizzy and I felt my back hit the ground hard as the blond shoved me over backward with a foot to my shoulder. The hard hit helped me to refocus my scattered thoughts.

The blond, confident of her supremacy, placed one bare foot on my chest and craned her blood stained face back to give a jubilant whoop, as she had done with Seth. Anger pulsing through my sluggish senses spurred me to awareness and I reached up and grabbed a handful of the poison darts she had hung in a waist belt around her hips and rammed them into her muscular stomach.

Her whoop of victory came out more of a strangled gurgle as she looked down

at her stomach and then at me, with a look of both horror and abject hatred. She fell onto her side on the ground as her body went into convulsions and then went still.

I felt like I could breathe easier and I managed to get to my knees. I tried to get to my feet but that wasn't happening. My head felt like it was separate from my body and my body responded to my head's commands as if from a long way away. I crashed through the underbrush, half crawling half stumbling, knowing only that I needed to get away as fast as I could so that I could recover from the poison rioting through my system. It was good to stay awake and moving. Must keep moving!

I felt wetness against my hands and arms. Was I bleeding? Was I in a trough

of my own blood? No, that couldn't be, and from some recess of my still functioning brain came the answer. Water. I was in a swamp. That was good, they couldn't track me here. There was a lot of water. It was so tempting to lay my head down into the warm folds of the water and go to sleep. I was so tired. I'd rest for a moment. Just a moment though, I thought sleepily to myself.

Rain pounded down on the swampy part of the forest into which I had crawled. My head was propped up against a tree trunk above the stagnate green slime of the water. I didn't hear the horse approach or feel it tug me with its teeth as it gripped my tunic firmly at the shoulder and began to drag me further into the swamp.

Pain threatened to steal the warm rest

I had garnered for myself. ‘Go away pain, I’m busy,’ was my last thought before darkness overwhelmed me.

For over two hours, Flin kept pulling Roric along through the swamp by keeping hold of his tunic at the shoulder with his teeth. There was an upraised grassy knoll in the swamp, which was dominated by a large shade tree and it was to this that Flin dragged Roric.

Flin pulled his master under the shelter of the tree, away from the pounding rain and let go. The little rider on his back slipped down off the saddle and in the process fell the last several feet to the ground. Flin reached around to snuffle her head once, as if to see if she was hurt, but she was alright.

Little hands went to work and soon there was a small fire going despite the rain. The little hands found the cut on Roric's shoulder and paused there for a moment. She left the fire and ventured out into the storm. She came back minutes later with a toad and a couple of leaves from a Catafy bush. Mercilessly smashing the toad and leaves together with a rock on top of a bigger rock, the girl added tree moss to the concoction.

Then she placed the concoction over the fire on a piece of bark. Pulling the bark off the fire before it was consumed in flame, she quickly stirred the gooey paste with a small stick. Taking the stick, she placed a bunch of the slimy green gunk onto the furrow mark across Roric's shoulder. As the potion

came in contact with his skin, Roric came half alert out of pain, but the little girl put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back down as best she could. The girl waited for a while and then leaned down to listen to Roric's chest. Seeming satisfied, the girl got up and approached the big black stallion. The object of her fascination was the saddle bags and the blanket roll, which were high up and out of her reach on the stallion's back. The big black horse looked down at her and seemed to understand her intent. He laboriously got down onto his knees and then rolled onto his side. The little girl quickly got the blanket roll from behind the saddle and the saddle bags and then stood back as the big stallion rolled back up to his feet. The girl

reached into her pocket, pulled out a familiar treat and handed it up towards the big head, with no fear in her actions as Flin accepted the carrot from her. Leaving Flin, she came back to Roric. Sweat was beading up on his brow, which she wiped away. She unfolded the blanket over Roric and then ducked under it too. The girl laid her head on the big muscled chest of her new guardian hoping that the strong beat of his heart wouldn't stop.

*****

I came awake to the feeling of being completely drained of any ability to do absolutely anything. I managed to turn my head slightly to the right and I caught sight of a slight movement in that direction. My eyes focused and met the beady sinister eyes of a swamp viper

about to strike me.

So help me, I couldn't so much as muster a whimper to call out for help, let alone move away from the snake. The snake was poised to strike when a large hoof came out of nowhere and repeatedly came down upon the snake, crushing it into the ground.

I looked up to see Flin towering over me, blowing through his nostrils loudly. Managing a rough whisper I said, "Thanks buddy, I appreciate that! I've more than had my share of poison lately."

Just then the girl came from somewhere with a cup of water in her hand. Her eyes widened when she saw the trampled snake, but she didn't hesitate in bringing the cup to my parched lips.

She helped me raise my head and I drank the water slowly. After it was empty I let my head fall back down to the ground.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

The little girl who sat down beside me on her knees replied, "Zarsha."

"That's a very pretty name for such a pretty little girl." I said.

Zarsha beamed at the praise I had given her and I reached out my hand and covered her little one, "Thank you for saving my life Zarsha. When I'm better, I'll take good care of you like you've already done for me. I promise."

*****

The next day I pulled myself into the saddle. I paused a moment while the stars faded from my eyes and then I reached my hand down for Zarsha to

grasp. I pulled her up in front of me and we were off.

I needed more rest, but I wanted to get away from this place before its accursed residents found us and I wanted to just get free of this forest in general. I had to find the book and destroy it at all costs.

I thought it was a safe guess that John wouldn't head back towards the Valley Lands, which is why I headed that way, suspecting that would be John's way of trying to elude me.

This wasn't the first time I had hunted someone and my gut instinct said that this was the most likely strategy for success.

We stopped as the shadows grew darker in the forest and I let Zarsha to the ground first and then I half fell down to the ground beside her. I sat down on a

rock for a long moment as my head was pounding like somebody was trying to get out of it with a very large hammer.

I needed to set up camp. I raised my head and prepared to get up, when I saw that it was already being taken care of. Zarsha was already blowing some simmering embers into a lively little fire, to which she added steadily sticks until she had a nice fire going. I watched in open admiration of the little girl's skills, the pain in my head easing a little as I watched her.

"Who taught you all of this?" I asked, gesturing to the fire and my shoulder wound.

"My mother," she said simply, without looking up.

I asked my next question very carefully, already sensing what her

answer would be, “Where is she now?”

She was quiet for a moment and then answered softly, “She’s dead.” She looked over at me and added, “You killed her.”

I nodded as my hunch was confirmed. It had been Zarsha’s dark colored skin and grace, even as a girl, that had reminded me of the woman called Kana that I had killed.

“I’m sorry Zarsha! I’m sorry that I’ve caused you pain, but I had to do what I did. Do you understand that?”

She nodded and said, “She taught me much, but she was bad. She caused much suffering and she was a she devil. Manta says you are a good man and I think so too. I will serve you now.”

My heart cringed at the realization that a precious little girl could have such a

grown up perspective concerning her own mother. I didn't ask about her father as he was likely only one more of a long line of victims her mother had incurred.

"Zarsha, I don't need any more servants, but I would like, actually like isn't a strong enough word, I would love to take over the role of a parent and guardian for you and raise you as my own. What do you think about that?"

She looked up at me with her big brown eyes, which I saw were wet from unshed tears, and gave me a tremulous smile, "I would like that very much!"

And then her little body slammed into me as she hugged me fiercely. I held her tenderly to me as she broke down and sobbed her heart out against my chest. Not how I had planned on becoming a parent, but anything that felt this right

was the right thing to do.

"God help me protect and care for this little girl like a father should!" I whispered softly against her hair, hoping that I was man enough for the task ahead of me, of raising this little girl right and replacing what she had lost or had never had, as best as I could.

Chapter Fourteen

Out of the Past

It was Zarsha, who saw the horse first. I followed her outstretched finger and then I saw it for myself. It was John's horse. We were in an area of the forest where two rivers converged, which had caused a swampy clearing of sorts.

Dismounting, I left Zarsha on Flin's back as I pulled out my long sword from its saddle sheath. I approached the horse we had seen on foot, using the tall swamp grasses in the clearing for cover.

It was tied to an old log beside the river and from the looks of it the horse had been tied there for some time.

The horse had eaten all of the vegetation it could reach and it looked hungry for more. Further down the stream bank I saw a leg protruding out from behind a clump of swamp grass. I approached with my sword in hand, ready to strike.

Rounding the grass clump, I saw that it was John. He was dead, his eyes cold and lifelessly open as he lay on the sand. It appeared he had been reaching out for something with his right hand.

There was a message scrawled out in the wet sand. It was hard to read. “They took it. You were right. God forgive me.”

He’d arrived at the answer too late, I

thought to myself in private sorrow, as I imagined his last bitter moments of regret. Getting back up from my knees, I followed the jumble of tracks leading to the shore. The roughed up area on a small tree and the tracks trailing into the water told me one thing, there had been a boat moored here.

I looked bitterly down the small river. They could move faster with a boat than I ever could on horseback through the dense forest. On top of that, there was no way I could track them. They could have taken any one of a dozen tributaries that fed into larger rivers. They had at least a day and a half journey's start on me too. Pursuit was pointless.

I turned from the river’s edge with a sick spirit of failure weighing heavily upon me. What now? There was only

one thing left to do. Press on, and do the best I could at holding whatever dark revelations that the book may contain at bay, until it could be found and destroyed at a later date. With a heavy heart, I headed back to Flin and Zarsha, after I released the priest's horse.

*****

We were careful to avoid the large Attorgron towns. Once we had broken through the densest parts of the forest and into the more civilized tracks of habitation, travel went much faster.

Five days later saw us at the outskirts of Santarus. I followed the directions that Thaddeus had given me as to where to go and what to do next. The Attorgron city of Santarus wasn't as sophisticated in its appearance as the Zoarinian cities I had seen, but it certainly was as busy.

The city was broken into sections and was class restricted. There were poor slave class sections, middle class sections and wealthy class sections. The poorest sections were near the river front and industry centers. The middle class sections lay situated around the shops and places of entertainment, while the wealthiest sections were usually separate from the city entirely, in their own communities.

After stopping to ask directions several times, we found our way to the inn called Brassna House. I tied Flin to the railing and entered the main door of the inn with Zarsha by my side. We both wore traveling cloaks with hoods that helped obscure us from the probing looks we encountered from within the inn.

The occurrence of a man and child traveling together was a somewhat odd appearance in these lands and we received quite a few pointed looks of interest. I directed Zarsha toward the dining area of the inn as I scanned the room looking for what Thaddeus had mentioned.

I found it at the far end of the room in a darkened corner. Thaddeus had said to look for a mural of a Sarthan tree in full bloom. The room was full of murals, but the one I wanted was clearly distinguishable from the rest and we sat down at that table.

A serving girl approached, “Can I be of any help to you?” Looking up at her, I said the words I had been instructed.

“Whatever is readily available besides the oat crest.”

I watched her for any visible sign of interest, but couldn't find any on her pretty face as she answered. "I'll be getting you the house special then. Would you be wanting it to go or be delivered?"

"Delivered," I replied.

She nodded deferentially and left us.

She had answered in code, unless her words had been a complete coincidence, which I didn't rule out as a possibility. The denizens of the place had for the most part given up their study of us and I started to relax slightly. Then I noticed that the tables in front of us were filled suddenly, too suddenly for my taste. Just then the back wall of the booth swung open and I was startled to see the same serving girl beckoning to us from a darkened doorway that had been

revealed.

I scooted down the booth, bringing Zarsha with me as I did so. A man and young boy, both wearing traveling cloaks like ours, scooted into our places at the table as the people seated at the surrounding tables were getting up or causing a general stir of activity that diverted attention from us to them.

The wall closed behind us and a lamp flared up immediately, lighting the dark corridor ahead of us. The serving girl motioned for us to follow her. Coming to the end of the corridor, she pushed a block on the wall in front of us and once more the wall moved. I stepped through the opening, holding onto Zarsha's hand as I did so.

We were in a livery stable. There was a fancy carriage ready and waiting for

us. I did a double take at the horses pulling it. Two big black horses, only one of them was Flin and he wasn't looking too happy about being in the traces. I went to the carriage and opened the door. It was empty. I picked Zarsha up and placed her in a seat and then I climbed up to sit beside her.

Zarsha's eyes were wide open with excitement and a little fear at seeing so much more of the world around her than she had never experienced before. She clutched my hand with a death grip as the carriage started to move. I put my arm around her and pulled her closer to me.

We left the inn behind and started to enter a neighborhood filled with more elegant houses. The carriage took us through a maze of streets until we came

to the end of one of them where yet another elegant looking mansion sat off by itself. The carriage stopped and the door was opened shortly thereafter. Hands were offered up to lift Zarsha down to the ground and I let her go. I exited the coach and studied the man who had helped Zarsha down.

The carriage moved away and the man motioned for us to continue towards the house. There was no way I was letting the capable looking man walk behind me. I motioned him ahead with one hand, while my other hand rested on my sword. He gave a deferential nod and headed up the pathway to the house as we followed behind him.

The rich mahogany doors opened and we were ushered into an elegant foyer. Zarsha gave a gasp of amazement at her

surroundings and clutched my hand tighter. I had seen such elegance before, and was more used to it. Yet, I too, was impressed with the tastefulness and richness of the house's furnishings.

We followed the man from the carriage up a flight of mahogany stained stairs and down a long hallway. The man stopped at an open doorway and motioned us inside. He then turned and proceeded down the hall several feet and sat in a chair situated in an alcove off the main hallway. He was giving me space and my respect for him grew.

I stepped into the room followed by Zarsha, who stayed close to me. The room was well lit and had enough books in it to be classified as a library, even though it appeared to be a bedroom. Books were everywhere.

A large desk, dominating the center of the room, caught my attention as did the man behind it. The desk was an exact replica to the one in my grandfathers' study! Inside I relaxed a little at the sight of it. We must be in the right place.

The man stood, walked around the desk and approached me. His distinguished features where enigmatic as he asked, "Have you seen such a desk before? If so, I would be most interested in its whereabouts so that I might purchase it."

"Its owner would not part with it I'm afraid, but he would perhaps part with a book."

I reached into a large pocket of my cloak and drew out the book Thaddeus had given me and handed it to the man. He took the book with eagerness and

opened it to the table of contents.

What he saw there I do not know, but as he read he would flip to random pages throughout the book and then return to the table of contents. Finally, he closed the book and laid it on the shelf behind the desk. He reached out a hand towards me and I took it with my own, somehow already liking the man.

"It is good to shake hands once again with one of my own blood."

At my puzzled look he smiled, "Your great grandfather was somewhat of a ladies' man, even late into life, of which I am living proof. You see Roric, I am your great uncle and the younger illegitimate, as it were, half brother of your grandfather. It is good to see that our blood line has not perished after all. Roric, you are a man of surprises. The

greatest of which is this enchanting young lady, who stands so gracefully before me."

He leaned down and looked into Zarsha's eyes kindly and reached out a hand. "Tell me, dear lady, of whom do I have the honor of meeting?"

Zarsha looked up at me and I nodded back at her. She looked at the man and said, "Zarsha."

"My, that is a pretty name! Just right for a pretty girl like you." Gallantly, he took her hand and kissed it.

"It is an honor to meet such a worthy companion of my nephew's. Zarsha, I'm sure you must be hungry and tired from your long journey, would you mind if I talked with your guardian while your needs are met?"

She nodded hesitantly and then

released my hand, which I missed almost instantly.

"You may call me Sebastian, little princess. Let me summon someone who will take good care of you." Sebastian rose and pulled a cord on a nearby wall. Within moments, I heard the door open and the swishing of silky garments.

"Yes Sebastian, how may I help you?"

The feminine voice made me turn to see its owner, and I received the shock of a lifetime when I did. There, not ten feet from me, stood a part of my past, only she was all grown up now. I had thought of her on several occasions, but I had figured that she would be dead by now after being worked to death and then thrown into a wayside ditch somewhere to rot among the weeds. But she wasn't dead! She was standing here

before me looking more alive and beautiful than I could have ever imagined a woman could.

Krista was somewhat taken aback by the intense stare of the man in the study with Sebastian. She was used to being stared at, but this was different. He wasn't giving her the visual go over that said he was imagining her with her clothes off, but instead his intense gaze on her seemed to be grounded out of some deeper meaning.

Many of the people Sebastian dealt with were unsavory, but maybe this one was more decent than some. In the safety of her master's study his silent gaze upon her was unsettling, as was the woodsy masculine smell of him.

Trying not to show how unnerving

the stranger's stare was, she met Sebastian's eyes and silently asked what was going on. Sebastian looked surprised by the stranger's reaction to her, but he masked it well.

"Krista, this is my nephew, Roric, but knowledge of that doesn't leave this room. This beautiful young lady is Zarsha. Could you take care of her and see that she gets plenty to eat?"

Krista noticed the little girl by the tall man's side for the first time. She held out her hand and smiled genuinely down at the girl.

"It's late, but I happen to know that the cook is baking doughnuts for tomorrow's breakfast. Want to see if any of them are done?" Krista asked leadingly.

Zarsha looked up at her guardian

hopefully, her tummy rumbling loudly.

"Go ahead little monkey, but don't eat all of them."

Krista watched the interchange between the man and the girl and relaxed inwardly. There were all kinds of sick depravity in bountiful supply in the world, but the relationship she witnessed was that of the innocence between a father and his daughter. Zarsha took her hand and Krista turned and left the room with the little girl by her side, as she grappled with the fact that the unnerving stranger was a close relation of Sebastian's.

*****

I swallowed, as the vision from the past turned and left the room with Zarsha. I turned back to Sebastian, wondering what he must be thinking

about my ogling what was obviously his slave or, at best, a servant.

His face showed no reaction at all, at least on the surface. My face colored at the thought of what he might be thinking of me. Maybe he had missed it all, but I doubted it.

"Now then Roric, fill me in on your journey."

I told him everything, leaving nothing out. A servant brought refreshments during my recital of the recent events. Throughout my telling of the events, Sebastian sat back in his chair listening, appearing to be in deep thought with his hands folded in front of him. He hadn't interrupted me with questions throughout my whole recital. When I finished, I sat back in my chair, waiting for him to comment on what I had said.

There was a long pause and then he broke the silence, “The book getting out and seeing the light of day is a regrettable occurrence, but life is often filled with such unavoidable circumstances that one simply has to deal with. Don’t feel bad about it Roric. It’s my experience that problems of the moment can often prove useful later on in the completion of a greater purpose. The key is to adapt with the situation and remain fluid.”

“What does that mean in this situation, Sir?” I asked, not sure what he meant by being fluid.

Sebastian smiled and perched his fingers together again. “I don’t know yet. You see that’s the challenge. I’m afraid the consequences, whatever they may be, that will come as a result of the release

of the book, will have to be overlooked for now as we have more pressing concerns. Roric, it's good that you came. The threat to the Valley Lands from this proposed invasion is greater than we had at first imagined. You see Roric, there's something else they want that's more valuable than the knowledge that you destroyed, something that they're willing to sacrifice everything for and now it's within their grasp."

"What is it?" I asked, wondering what secrets Thaddeus had yet neglected to tell me.

"Ships," Sebastian responded quietly.

"Ships?" What could be so important about ships?

Seeming to read my mind Sebastian said, "They're not just ordinary ships Roric. They're ships that can travel

between worlds and now the Zoarinians know where they're located. How they arrived at that knowledge I do not know. Worse than that, they now have the military ability to smash through the great wall at Kingdom Pass anytime they wish. This long buildup on their part has only been a precaution. They want to be sure that they have enough trained forces to completely take and level every fortification and settlement that exists in the Valley Lands. They mean to claim the ships for themselves and utterly destroy us, so that we will never give them a moment's trouble again."

"What can we do then?" I asked.

Sebastian gazed sadly out one of the windows of the study bedroom, "There's not much that we can do, except to avoid doing one thing. The Valley Lands, for

hundreds of years, have relied on the wall at Kingdom Pass to keep them safe and they will do so again, which is exactly what they cannot do! If our forces commit to holding Kingdom Pass at all costs, it will become a Valley Lander bloodbath of epic proportions. A strategy that involves a different set of rules than simply relying on an outdated defense is critically needed or I fear all will be lost. You must convince them of this, Roric! The siege engines they have created will level Kingdom Pass to the ground within hours, but what's worse than that is that they have found several of the passes over the mountains and have entered into a secret military alliance with the Attorgrons. Kingdom Pass will be attacked from two sides, something it was never designed to be

able to withstand. The situation is grim and the correct plan of action unclear, but at least we know what not to do and we must act on that accordingly and hope for the best; that what follows will go in our favor. It is up to you to convey that to the Valley Lander high council."

"Why can't you come and instruct them as to what is best to be done? Surely they would listen to you before they would to me!"

"Not necessarily, Roric. While I may come from a respected blood line and have been quite useful over the years to my country, I am and always will be viewed as the illegitimate son of a greater man than I could ever hope to be. In the eyes of many, I'm fit for nothing better to do for my country than be a spy. You, however, have what they want.

You have the respect that your family name gives you, the honorable actions of a hero to your credit, and the physical abilities and presence of character that say you're likely to win any fight in which you find yourself. They'll love you and you'll be surprised at how eagerly they convey all the responsibility that they can onto your shoulders to get free of it themselves. You'll see what I mean. Very few people, when it comes down to life and death situations that correlate to every decision that is to be made, are actually willing to step up to the task and do what is needed, when it is needed."

I shook my head slowly in denial, "I don't think I'm the man for the job, Sebastian. You're asking for a lot more than I think I'm capable of."

Sebastian smiled, “Which is precisely why you probably are the best man for the job. The Creator loves a humble heart, Roric, and if our people are to continue on, it will take an act of the Creator to do so and people who know that they don’t have all the answers and that instead look to the Creator for their help in time of need rather than themselves. You’ll do just fine. Now, back to the matter at hand. I have one more intelligence report to gather before you’re off on your way back to the Valley Lands.”

“You’re staying? Surely there’s no reason for you to stay here any longer! Why don’t you come with me?”

Sebastian looked reflective, “Two reasons; one is that I would slow you down, for you will need to move quickly

if you are to escape. I also fear that the enemy may have become aware of my involvement in spying on them and I do not wish to pose a risk to your escape because of my notoriety."

"Why do you think that you have been found out?"

Sebastian quickly corrected, "Might have been, I'm not sure yet. A courier that we bribed, in order to gain access to the letters he carried, was replaced unexpectedly with another courier. We cannot find any clues as to the whereabouts of the old courier and his replacement seemed to cave in too easily to our attempts to bribe him. We had arranged to meet at a certain location, but I withdrew from the meeting place before it was time for us to meet, some sixth sense of mine I

suppose. I sent a third party in my place that knew nothing of my involvement and the courier himself had never actually seen me either so he did not know that he was not meeting with me."

"It was a trap?"

"Yes, it was. Most disturbingly was who was involved in the deception. The Zoarinians have a secretive sect in their higher ranks of hierarchy that oversee the most intimate affairs of the empire, including the actions and private lives of the governors themselves. They are very cunning and, I have been told, quite evil."

Interrupting him I said, "I think I know who you're talking about. Are there many of them?"

"Nobody knows, but whenever they are involved it's serious business. I have

kept a low profile throughout most of my spying career, ever careful to never reveal too much at any one time as to my involvement in the spying community. But of late I've had to take some risks, which men of their cunning could possibly piece together given enough time."

"It would then seem to me a good idea for you to get out before they do find you out!" I said, not understanding his reticence against leaving.

Sebastian looked up at me, "Better that I stay and deflect the attention from you. I don't mind sacrificing myself for my country or I would never have come here in the first place and as it is I don't have long anyway."

"You're dying? That's your real reason for staying, isn't it?"

“Yes, I suppose, but I would appreciate it if you kept it to yourself.”

I nodded and asked, “You mentioned that you still have some information to gather yet before I can leave?”

“Yes, I’m having a get together tomorrow night. The exchange will be made then and you will depart shortly thereafter with it, while I will remain here. Now, I’ve kept you long enough from your much needed rest. Rugar, show my nephew to his quarters, would you?”

The man from the carriage separated away from the wall behind me at his master’s request. It didn’t surprise me that he had slipped unnoticed into the room sometime throughout the course of our conversation. The man was skilled. I followed Rugar down the hallway to a

room he indicated.

"Rugar, my horse, has he been..?"

Rugar held up his hand forestalling my question, "I saw to it myself, master Roric. He is a very fine animal, a fit mount to carry any warrior into battle, but I pray he never knows any master other than you to grace his back."

I looked at him, appreciating his comment. What would he do when the master he had served so faithfully through the years was no longer around to serve? That would be a sad day.

Chapter Fifteen

The Dark Ones

Krista lay awake in her bed wondering over the events of the evening. The poor little girl had only managed a couple mouthfuls of fresh doughnut and a cup of milk before she had slumped over in her chair, fast asleep. She lay beside her in the bed now, sleeping peacefully.

Krista's thoughts kept drifting back to the girl's protector and the odd unspoken sense of connection she felt with him. What was it about him that

was somehow familiar? A blush rose to her cheeks as she acknowledged that he hadn't been the only one looking. Usually she didn't pay attention to men any longer than it took for her to judge how much of a threat to her they were and what their weaknesses were. After she knew those things, it was much easier to handle them and keep them at arm's length, but with him it had been different.

With him, her thoughts had been of what it would be like to be within arm's length. He was strong and yet he handled Zarsha with tenderness, as the evening Zacka bird does her young. Would he be like that with a woman or would he turn into the groping monster so many men seemed to be, when they thought no one was looking. He liked

the way she looked, she was sure of that, but then she hadn't met any men who hadn't liked the way she looked either. But it was different with him somehow. She wanted him to see her as beautiful.

What was wrong with her? She needed to get her head on straight. She was a slave even though Sebastian treated her more like a granddaughter. To be seen as beautiful in her world was only to have more of oneself taken advantage of. Sebastian had been good to her and she was lucky to have it as good as she did now. Everything could have been a lot worse without him.

She closed her eyes and finally drifted off to sleep. The big, serious eyed warrior from the north would just have to stay in her dreams and be

nothing more, because she already had it as good as a slave could hope to and she would be content with that.

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I sipped punch from the cup in my hand as I watched the couples go by on the dance floor. Well, that wasn't exactly the whole truth. I watched her and no one else.

They called her Sebastian's Passion Flower. It was her owner Sebastian with whom she now glided in the moves of the dance. Sebastian's idea of a gathering and mine were two different things.

This extravaganza was a fully fledged ball. Several women had come up to me, seeking my hand in the next dance. I had let them down as gracefully as I could. The simple truth was, I couldn't dance

and in this setting it was an embarrassing thing to have to admit. In the arena I had danced, but that had been a dance of death with the goal of staying two steps ahead of it and hopefully finding another step after those two were gone. Here in this glittering world of manners and decorum, I was completely lost.

There was no end of beautiful women present, but the only one I had eyes for was the girl in Sebastian's arms. The rest of the women present at the ball could have been turned to pretty flowers adorning the wallpaper for all I cared, but her, she was amazing!

She had changed so much and yet she was the same. In a way, I thought to myself, it was easier to relate to her than any of the finely dressed, higher born people around me. What was so amazing

about her? What consumed me with a passion to know everything about her and to spend every moment of my time with her? She was beautiful, but so were the other women, only they didn't make me want to lose control like looking at her did.

It was alarming and I made myself look away and focus on the seriousness of the event instead of the growing infatuation I had for Sebastian's slave girl. The dance was over. The noise of the crowd grew with the chatter of conversations and I turned back to the refreshment table to get some more punch.

I had the dipper half raised to refill my glass when another glass came into my field of view. I looked at the hand holding the glass and followed it up to

its owner's eyes. She was even more breathtaking up close. She had an impish look on her face as she stared across the punch bowl at me.

"Master Roric."

"Yes?"

"You're spilling the punch on your shirt," she said, as a smile crept out at the corners of her mouth.

Somewhat dazed, I looked down at the punch bowl and my shirt. Sure enough I had spilled some of the bright red punch on the white shirt that I wore. I mopped it up with some nearby hand towels, which only spread the red stain further across the shirt. My face was tinged red with embarrassment and I avoided meeting her eyes as I filled her glass with punch.

"Thank you," she said softly, a tinge

of humor still in her tone as she turned to leave.

I asked her quickly before she went back into the chattering throng where I felt like a foreigner, “What’s your name?”

She half turned and looked back at me speculatively and then answered, “Krista Denas.”

She walked away from me then. The exotic tattoo on the back of her left shoulder pulled my eyes up and away from the swaying of her hips, as she glided away from me. I went still inside at the sight of it.

My back suddenly itched all along the lengths of the burn marks of my own brand of slavery. I knew what the exquisitely tattooed flower so artfully covered up. The symbol of our shared

shame, as being viewed as less by others, lay beneath the artful application of ink.

Suddenly, as I watched her leave, I saw her whole back tense up into a tight knot and she stopped abruptly. She was staring at the far end of the room as if the devil himself had just walked in. Following her gaze, I saw that an aging portly man with silver tipped hair had entered the room with a much younger blond haired companion on his arm. He had the appearance of haughty influence about him and the dead eyes of a cold hearted backstabber.

Krista started walking again. She set her cup of punch down on a table and with a speed of hand that impressed me, she slipped a table knife from the table beside her, unnoticed by the table's

occupants. She continued walking slowly and purposefully towards the man, with the knife's blade held up the back of her wrist out of view.

The huntress's approach hadn't gone unnoticed by everyone. My alarmed eyes met Sebastian's from across the room and we shared an unspoken communication. I quickly caught up with Krista. My left hand closed over her right hand, forcefully immobilizing the knife it held in place.

She gave a surprised jump as my hand closed over hers and glanced quickly at me. She made as if to struggle, but Sebastian had arrived at her other side and she completely stopped the attempt to struggle. She didn't resist as we moved her off from the main room in which the ball was taking place towards

the inner chambers of the mansion.

Sebastian opened a door and we all entered. This must be her room. It was tastefully decorated with bright silks and tapestries and feminine knickknacks. The wooden floors had colorful area rugs spread across them.

The room served as yet another insight into the life of this enchanting woman. Sebastian led Krista to a sofa and had her sit down and then he sat down beside her.

Taking one of her hands in his he asked, with evident concern in his tone of voice, “What is the meaning of this behavior, Krista? Who is that man to you and why were you going to kill him?”

Krista’s head was hanging down and her countenance was downcast as she responded softly, “I’m sorry Sebastian! I

didn't mean to cause a scene and lose control like that. It won't happen again Sebastian, I promise!"

"I know it won't, but you still haven't answered my question. Who is that man to you?"

There was a moment of silence and I saw big tears coursing down her cheeks as she answered, "His name is Count Sarn Nivaron. He is an important magistrate under the governor of Capeacal. When I was very young he saw my mother in the marketplace and desired her for his own. He tried to buy her from my father, but my father refused. So he had my father killed and brought me and my mother to live on his estate as slaves. We were there for a couple of years. My mother was one of his many whores. When he got tired of

her, he sold us at the slave market."

"I see, my dear," Sebastian said, patting her hand gently.

"I'll take care of the problem, but this changes our relationship I'm afraid."

Krista looked up at him and said, "I'm sorry!"

Sebastian leaned forward and kissed her on the brow as a father would. "It was going to have to change anyway soon enough."

Sebastian stood up stiffly. "I need to get back to the ball."

Sebastian turned to look at me for a long moment and I wondered what he was thinking. I knew what I was thinking. I'd like to take the confiscated knife in my hand and go back to the ball and shove it in between the ribs of the Count, where a heart should have been

located, and then snap it off at the hilt.

"Roric, I've noticed that you've shown a marked interest in my companion slave. I assure you, this is not a common request on my part, but I need her occupied for the duration of the night and, as I am needed elsewhere, I give her to you to enjoy however you may wish."

Krista gasped loudly and cried out, "Sebastian!" in an outraged voice. I was just as shocked and stared mutely at Sebastian, as he walked past me out the door and closed it.

Standing dumbfounded, looking at the closed door, I was rudely interrupted by a hard knock to the back of my head. "What.…?"

Half turning, I reached back to feel the back of my head as I saw an apple

rolling away along the floor. Looking up towards Krista, I had only enough time to duck as a glass container holding some jelly like substance smashed against the door post where I had been only moments before. The room was chokingly wreathed in the perfumed fragrance of the substance now oozing down the doorpost.

Sebastian heard the clatter of glass breaking against the door and a brief smile touched his lips. Melancholy soon returned, however, when he stepped back into the bright world of the ballroom, which was still in full swing. He quickly located his contact messenger and closed in on her. Once more back into the fray, perhaps for the last time.

The familiar thrill of danger once more coursed through his old tired bones and Sebastian welcomed it. This might be his last battle, but it would be his greatest achievement yet, for God and country.

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I managed to keep ducking most of the objects being thrown at me as I tried to work my way through the litter of fallen projectiles to Krista. A knife whizzed past my nose by mere inches. That was it! I lunged for her.

A potted plant smashed off my shoulder en route. In my angered rush I didn't even consider the pain of its impact. I ducked around a roundhouse punch aimed at my head and stepped behind her wrapping an arm around to restrain her arms. She struggled

violently in my hold and sank her teeth into my forearm. I jerked my arm away and in the process spun her around. I quickly grabbed and yanked both her arms behind her back and held them in one hand, tightly secure.

She seemed even more incensed at her new found aptiveity and lunged for my throat with her bared pearly white teeth. My right hand shot out and buried itself in the fiery tangle of the curls of her hair. I stopped her head's advance towards my throat as my grip on her hair tightened. She gave a frustrated grunt when her head was brought up short from its intended target.

I found myself mesmerized by the ferocity of her defiance, which is why I didn't see the knee headed for my groin. Thankfully, her knee was slightly off

target, but it was still painful none the less. I grunted painfully and almost lost control of her hands, which would have probably been fatal for me. I gritted my teeth and pulled her close with my left arm until her stomach was pressed tight to me and she had no room to squirm, much less, knee me in the groin again.

I held her head back with my right hand in her hair. The heel of her foot came smashing down on my foot and I tightened my grip on her hair and arms, which caused her to gasp painfully and stop most of her struggling.

"That is enough! I don't want to hurt you, but so help me, if you bite or hit me again, I will put you over my knee and spank the living daylights out of you!

The threat worked because she abruptly stopped struggling. I hadn't

really been going to do that, but she didn't need to know that. We were both breathing hard from the struggle and I grappled with what to do. Did I release her? I might not have a face left or have the ability to father children if I did!

Curls of her hair had broken free from their elaborate containment on top of her head and draped over the sides of her face getting in her eyes. One of the stray curls lay down alongside her nose, and she tossed her head as much as she could in order to move it away. She was so breathtakingly beautiful!

I released my tight grip of her hair and combed the offending strays over to the side of her face. I lost myself in the stormy depths of her sea blue eyes. The radiating lines of her facial scars stood out in sharp white relief against the

flushed red of her face, as she stared back at me.

Her lips were full from the passion and struggle of the moment and my head was descending towards them without any conscious thought of my own. Her expressive eyes flashed concern but she didn't move away.

I had always wondered why people kissed and now I knew why. I wanted to do it again and again. The feel of her soft lips against mine was amazingly intoxicating. The feel of her soft body pressed up against mine was even more intoxicating. I could do this forever.

That thought died though when I opened my eyes. Tears were leaking out the sides of her eyes and down her cheeks. I took my face away from hers

and she quickly looked down at my chest. She had the look of one who had suffered a bitter defeat and was now helpless against what came next, which wasn't what I wanted to see from her at all!

I remembered the feeling I saw expressed in her body language well enough. The feeling of having no control over one's own fate was the lot of a slave. Bile rose in my throat as I writhed inwardly in self disgust.

One of the reasons I had fought so hard in the arena was so that I might never have the look that she now had. This beautiful woman must think I was no better than the men who frequented the whore houses that I had by my own actions saved her from as a girl.

I let go of her wrists and stepped back

abruptly. She looked up at me, surprised and wary of my next move all at the same time. I let my hands fall to my sides and I moved further back.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to lose control like that! I'm sorry if I hurt you!"

Shocked, she stared at me while rubbing her wrists. I gestured towards a sofa, "Will you have a seat please?"

Krista looked at the sofa and then at me, not sure what to think of the change in my demeanor towards her. She moved over to the sofa, never turning her back on me, and sat in a corner of it, drawing her knees up under her protectively. I pulled a chair out across from her and sat down. Sweat was beaded all over my face and I searched for something to say in the awkward silence of the room as she watched me closely.

“Do you need anything? Are you hungry?”

Somewhat hoarsely she said softly, “I am a little hungry. I don’t eat much during the day leading up to these events. The clothes are tight enough without having a full belly too.”

My eyes drifted down and I saw what she meant. Huskily I asked, my eyes still clinging to the well defined womanly curves, “Why does Sebastian have you dress so provocatively? He doesn’t strike me as the kind of man to show off something he values to others? I know he values you very highly.”

She paused hesitantly and then looked up at me somewhat shyly, “Sebastian and I…..we don’t…..we aren’t intimate together. I’m for show, to make others think of Sebastian as a vigorous man for

lack of a better way of putting it."

She looked embarrassed before she continued, "I help Sebastian in his work. Men will often let information slip that they wouldn't otherwise around a…… around a."

"Beautiful woman," I finished for her.

She blushed a little and nodded her head. She didn't know how much it meant to me to have her tell me what the extent of her relationship with Sebastian was. I had felt a big sigh of relief inside of me at the divulging of that information.

"Don't tell anyone please. I only told you because I know that you're of Sebastian's family and that you know of the work that he does."

"Your secret is safe with me."

I heard her sigh of relief. "Krista,

nothing is going to happen tonight that you don't want to happen. If you would like to, you could change out of those clothes into something more comfortable while I get us some food."

I could tell that the idea of taking her clothes off wasn't something she wanted to do with me around. "It's okay, you can trust me. If you changed it might relax the atmosphere in here some. I'm admittedly male and, well, everything about that outfit screams that you're female with a message of come and get me."

"Ohh!" She got up quickly and I got up too.

"I'll change while you're gone," she said quickly.

Nodding awkwardly in response I headed for the door but her voice

stopped me.

"Could you help me with something before you go?"

I turned back to find Krista's back turned to me and her hair pulled out of the way, exposing a row of tiny buttons in the middle of her back. "Could you undo these please?" she asked softly.

I swallowed hard and walked up behind her looking at the tiny buttons. My big fingers fumbled trying to unhook the impossibly tiny buttons and eventually they all came undone and the fabric pulled apart revealing the skin of her back, along with the faint white scars she bore, as evidence of time spent in the firan cane fields. Her back may be scarred, but it looked soft too.

"There you go," I said thickly. I stepped back towards the door, trying to

blindly find the handle with my hands, as I continued to gaze at the soft skin I had exposed.

She looked over one shoulder at me and softly said, “Thank you.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to frame words.

My hands found the handle and I quickly stepped outside the room and closed the door, resting my head against it for a moment to collect my rampaging thoughts before I headed for the kitchen to steal some food for us.

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I knocked on the door briefly and heard a muffled reply to enter. Not only had she changed, but she had done a quick cleanup of the room and was now sitting curled up on the sofa again.

Oh, darn it all! She looked so

desirably cute in the shapeless oversized robe she was wrapped up in. It didn't matter what she wore, she was simply irresistibly attractive to me. It was going to be a long night to say the least.

I sat the food trays down in front of her and watched her descend on them with a healthy appetite, while I sat back and let my eyes feast on her instead. Glancing up she saw my gaze on her and her eating slowed down to a halt.

Wiping her mouth free of crumbs she cleared her throat slightly before asking, "Why did you stop? Sebastian was serious when he said you had his permission to enjoy me however you wished. I know that you want me."

She was still so beautiful even in her shapeless frock, it hurt to look at her and do nothing. Pausing as I tried to collect

my impassioned thoughts and find the words that I needed to I said, “I’ve been a slave. I know what it’s like to be held against your will and taken advantage of. I promised myself I would never treat anyone like that, least of all you.”

Krista grappled with the shocking admission that he had been a slave. He was nothing like any slave man she had ever encountered. He had nothing of a subservient nature about him at all.

It must have been hard for him to be a slave. Remembering his emphasis on her in the last part of his statement she asked, “Why me in particular?”

He was looking back at her steadily out of strong brown eyes, when he said the words that brought memories of the past streaming back into her

consciousness.

"I was the one who gave you those," he said, indicating the scar lines on her cheek.

Her breathing froze as she stared at her childhood rescuer from years ago. Speechless, she stared at the boy who had become a man. So that was what the familiarity had been with this man. She had known he was different from the other men somehow and now she knew why. She relaxed inwardly and dropped her eyes from his.

"What is it like to be free?"

Thinking about it for a moment I responded, "In some ways it's great and in others it feels overwhelming. Would you like to hear my story, seeing as we have some time to kill?"

She gazed back up at me and smiled a little, “I would like that.”

“Okay, then let’s see… I was born.”

Krista smiled outright at the silly beginning to my story and I was glad to see her fully relaxed. It was easy to talk to her as she keenly listened and showed interest in her face throughout the telling of my story. I talked on and on, giving her a synopsis of my life.

I talked of my parents, my days in the arena, my newfound faith and the Valley Lands. I noticed after a while that her eyes were getting heavy and her posture had slumped slightly into the sofa. I kept my tone modulated and even and before long I watched her eyes close all the way shut. I stopped talking and simply watched her sleep. She was so beautiful that all I wanted to do was reach out and

touch her to see if she was real or not, but I knew that wouldn't be a good idea.

I got up and grabbed a blanket from the bed and carefully laid it over her. She stirred slightly but then went back to sleep, clutching the blanket to her chin. I smiled at the childish gesture. Going back to the chair I sat down. I slouched down in the chair and tried to get somewhat comfortable, which just wasn't going to happen no matter how I tried.

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Krista woke up, momentarily startled, and looked around. She was on her sofa and someone had covered her up with a blanket. It all came back to her now, Sebastian's surprise announcement, Roric's rough embrace

and then his startling gentleness and announcement of his involvement in her past.

How had her ordered and disciplined life here at Sebastian's suddenly been turned upside down? Change was the story of her life it seemed. Morning light was streaming in through the windows. She didn't see Roric anywhere in the room. Judging from the rumpled condition of the chair across from her, she surmised that must have been where Roric had spent the night.

She smiled softly. Yet another facet had been revealed in the strange warrior who had stormed into her life and thoughts. He was a gentleman and he was kind. She remembered the gentle way he had treated her after his

passionate embrace and shivered at the combination of both the memory of his passion, coupled with his gentleness of spirit. What a rare combination of elements to find in a man. He affected her like no man ever had.

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I ambled down the hallway, coming back from the kitchen where I had just finished breakfast. Sebastian's study door was open and I paused outside of it, not sure whether or not to go in.

"Come in Roric."

How did he know it was I standing there and not someone else? The man must have the senses of a cat. I stepped into the room and Sebastian looked up at me and studied me as I came over to his desk and sat down.

"Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

he asked knowingly.

My face flushed a little at his question, “Somewhat.”

Sebastian smiled warmly, “You didn’t bed her, did you?”

“No, I did not and neither have you.”

Sebastian chuckled, “How very astute of you. No, you’re quite right. I have not and to my knowledge no one else has either.”

“Why did you offer her to me?”

Sebastian looked reflective for a moment and then answered, “The two of you seem to have a connection, is that not true?”

I nodded and told him the story of our childhood experience at the slave market.

Sebastian nodded and said, “I suspected something like that. I have

come to care for her a lot. I thought I could trust you to treat her right and I'm glad to see I was correct in my judgment of your character. It is no longer safe for her to stay here. And, as I see that not only do you desire her, but that you also care for her deeply, I'm giving her to you."

He leaned forward and handed me some papers. I took them hesitantly, still dazed by his statement. He was giving me Krista! I swallowed, hardly able to believe that this was happening.

"Now, on a more serious note, here is the compilation of all the information I have gathered." He held out a book to me. I took it and glanced at it, "Applied Math and Economics."

Sebastian and my grandfather shared a common trait for cryptic behavior. "You

need to leave by sundown. Three horses will be at the inn where you contacted my operatives."

"My horse! I'm not leaving without him!" I said, speaking up.

"Already taken care of. He is at a corral on the south end of the city. You can pick him up on your way out of town. Krista and Rugar will meet you there at the inn. Now, I'm sure you must have much to do to prepare for your departure so I will bid you farewell and may the Creator see you safely on your journey back to our homeland."

I took the dismissal for what it was and rose from my chair with Krista's papers and the book in my hand. I turned to go, knowing that this was likely the last time I would see this man who had just casually given me everything I could

have ever wished for.

"Roric."

I looked back at Sebastian.

"Take good care of my girl."

"I will sir."

"May the Creator smile warmly down upon both of you and our nation."

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Krista stood looking out the long glass window of her room. Silently she said goodbye to everything she had liked and found of comfort here in Santarus. Her entire world now consisted of the stuffed saddlebags at her feet.

Her world was once again in an upheaval of change. She hadn't really been surprised that Sebastian gave her to the tall warrior from the north. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She had

kept her bargain with Sebastian to the letter. She knew in her heart that what he had done was what he had thought was best for her, but she couldn't help the anger that rose up in her. Her old master had callously traded her like an expensive porcelain vase. Roric would treat her well and be a kind master to her, that she didn't doubt, but their relationship would be much different than the one she'd had with Sebastian.

It would be a far more intimate one and when he grew tired of her she would be shipped on to the next man and the next, until she was too old to be of interest to anyone and then she would be used to clean floors or some other low task until she finally found peace in death.

"Krista, it's time to go."

She turned, nodded at Rugar and stooped down to pick up the bags, but he beat her to it.

"Thank you, Rugar. Thank you for everything you've always done to care for me."

His hard to read steely eyes were unusually clouded as he stared at her for a moment and then he offered his arm like a man of high society would to a lady and she took it as a high born lady would.

Later in the twilight of the evening, Krista and Rugar stood waiting in a darkened alleyway near the inn where they were to meet up with Roric and Zarsha. Krista heard the clatter of a carriage draw near and then she saw it stop at the inn. She moved to step

forward, but Rugar suddenly barred her way with one of his powerful arms. She looked at him questioningly, noting the tenseness of his body in response to some unseen danger in the darkness. He met her eyes and sharply shook his head. Krista looked back at the carriage before the inn.

Roric and Zarsha had gotten out of it and the carriage continued down the street. There seemed to be no one around when suddenly shadowy figures seemed to materialize from everywhere and surrounded Roric and Zarsha.

Krista gasped and turned to Rugar, "We need to warn Sebastian!"

"No, it's too late."

"How do you know that?"

Just then there was the rumble of an explosion and a flash of light that lit up

the evening's gloom.

Rugar finalized, "It's too late. Come, we must leave this place at once before the dark ones find us."

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Sebastian had watched his grandnephew and the sweet little girl leave in the carriage and then he had seen his passion flower for the last time, as she had left with Rugar. Then he had seen them, the dark ones. They had found him after all.

They came closer towards his home, like wary dogs finding their way through an unknown lair. Let them come, Sebastian thought to himself. His work here was finished. He had served his God, country and family well. Now he would go out equally well.

He could hear doors being opened as

they made their way into the house and began to search through it. None of his servants were home because he had sent them all away. He had been expecting the dark ones to pay him a visit. Sebastian turned away from the window and moved back to his desk. He sat down in his timeworn seat to wait. He didn't have to wait long.

The door of the study opened with a soft click and they slipped inside the room like the harbingers of darkness that they were.

"Where are the servants?" one of the cloaked figures asked.

"I didn't think I'd have to spell out the obvious to you minions of darkness, but as you can plainly see they are gone."

"We will find them and find out all

that they know of you and your traitorous activities. They will die slowly and painfully just as you will. They will tell us every….”

Sebastian held up his hand, cutting the speaker off midsentence, “Yes, yes, I know. You guys really are long winded on the whole pain and suffering aspect of life. Could your fixation on pain and misery be related to some eternal fate of yours, I wonder. As for telling you anything, all I have to say is, ‘Go to hell!’”

Sebastian flared a match with one hand and moved a statue of a rearing stallion on the corner of his desk a quarter of a turn with the other hand. There was a loud whooshing noise and then the room and its contents exploded into a fireball of flame, which engulfed

the room and soon the entire house.

Chapter Sixteen

Breath of Life

I tested the manacles that held my hands above my head in the darkened cell of the city's dungeon. I wasn't getting out of them that much was clear. There was a noise in the darkness that was more of a feeling than an audible noise and I knew that I was not alone. The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up and I prayed for courage against the unknown presence in the dungeon. A normal sounding voice spoke up smoothly into the stillness of

the room.

"Roric, son of Lorn, heir to a long line of proud men, if it was permitted us you would be dead now."

A hideously scarred and burned face was suddenly within inches of my own. Part of me wanted to quiver upon seeing the unholy fire in the man's eyes, but I was a child of the Creator and He was greater than this dark aberration that had once been a man.

"It must burn to have limitations placed on you. You would think that would tell you something," I nonchalantly taunted.

The man creature growled and struck me across the face hard, but then quickly drew back from me as if he had seen something I hadn't in the cell behind me worthy of causing fear.

“You won’t be so insolent tomorrow. We may not be directly allowed to end your miserable life, but there are other ways to stamp out an ant. I promise you that we will make your end as slow and painful as possible. You and your family have been a hindrance to our plans for a long time, but that will end with you, tomorrow. Your grandfather will be all alone then and he has grown old and feeble, as is the way of man.”

The figure turned away to melt into the shadows and I spoke out, “Whatever happened to that Marfoul fellow? He had the same idea concerning my extinction as you do, but it didn’t work out so well for him last time I checked.”

“He has been dealt with for his failure. It will not happen again.”

The last words were said in a half

snarl and then it was gone and I was alone again. They weren't allowed to kill me outright? I looked up, thinking that must be where the Creator was when you wanted to talk to Him, and then I realized my mistake. The Creator was everywhere, even here with me in this dark damp cell.

"If You're not allowing them to kill me outright, how about loosing these manacles so I can get out of here and rescue Zarsha?"

Silence followed my suggestion to the Almighty. I waited and still nothing happened. I rattled the chains holding my arms above my head. They were still securely fastened. Either I didn't have enough faith to get the job done or the heavenly answer was 'no' to my request.

My optimistic mood fell hard. I

thought about it all, since I had plenty of spare time. Faith was a hard thing to understand. I knew the Creator could simply free me if He so chose. So why didn't He? I believed He could and yet why didn't He then reward my faith and just release me?

No answer came to ease my quandary of spirit. I was at least alive and unharmed. That was something; actually that was a lot more than could have been expected otherwise. I guess the Creator had other plans, which was disappointing to say the least.

I had liked my plan better than…well this stinking cell. The great unknown of what tomorrow would bring was not something I looked forward to either. I fought to quell the negative thoughts that poured into me at the thought of the evil

tomorrow could bring. If the Creator was the God of today, then He was also the God of tomorrow and if He was preserving my life today, then perhaps He would preserve my life tomorrow as well. My resolve strengthened some, but I still felt like it would crumble at any moment.

My voice echoed slightly in the empty room, "Thy will be done, but I do ask this of You. Please help me rescue Zarsha and escape with her, Krista, and my uncle's information to the Valley Lands. If your plans for me are different, then help me obey and fulfill them, even if it means losing my life. My life is yours to do with as You wish, but ....." I stumbled to say the last part, "I don't want to die yet. Especially when everything seems like it's turning out for

the better."

My last words seemed to be a betrayal of my faith somehow. It was clear that I still did not trust the Creator with everything and the knowledge of that tormented me even more than the thought of what tomorrow would bring. There was little peace to be found in the wake of my empty words that lacked faith. No voice from heaven echoed in the cell informing me of how, or if, deliverance would come.

I sighed and hoped that there would be an answer tomorrow. The important thing though was that, despite my lack of faith, the Creator would not forsake me, but that was no guarantee that I wouldn't die to this life in order to take part in the next. Would that be so bad anyway?

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I could hear the crowd crying out in a pitched fervor of excitement before I even saw them. It was a sound I hated and had never wanted to hear again and yet like a bad toothache it was back with throbbing intensity.

Before I emerged out of the tunnel into the arena, I whispered out to the Creator, suddenly overcome with the fear of what would happen to Zarsha if I failed to survive whatever test they had lined up for me in the arena this time, "Are you with me Lord?" I felt nothing in terms of an answer.

My spirit felt heavy within me as I continued to trudge towards the arena. I couldn't believe how my last experience in the arena, where the mouths of tigers had been stopped supernaturally, seemed to have been completely forgotten. I was

such a terrible follower of the Creator to doubt His abilities to save me given what He had already done for me!

I didn't have any more time to think about my sudden and complete lack of faith as I was thrust out into a scene from hell. The arena was large and as grand in appearance as any of those in the five cities of Zoar.

The crowd was cheering, but it wasn't me they were cheering. It was him! A face from the past that I had hoped to never see again. The unholy creature of a man with dead eyes and a hollow laugh, next to whom I had been celled in the arena so many years before. His demented sounding laugh could be heard above the din of the crowd and I knew I was in for the fight of my life.

What made everything worse was the

sight of Zarsha strapped to a pole in the center of the arena. My trepidation over my opponent vanished upon sight of Zarsha. I had to win at all costs as I could already guess what lay in store for Zarsha if I failed to protect her.

I felt the old, uncaring anger rise up inside of me and I embraced the hateful quality of it as it coursed through my veins and settled over me like a well worn cloak that I hadn't worn in a very long time. Every fiber of my being was alive and tensed for the struggle to stay alive as I strode purposefully toward my opponent, locked on his every move.

The crowd noise dimmed to a hushed calm, like the calm that precedes a storm, as they caught sight of my purposeful approach across the sands of the arena floor. My opponent had never

been beaten, but neither had I.

I was a fighter, who had made many Zoarinians wealthy from the bets placed on my head, but I doubted that I would acquire many backers today against this opponent. Sensing my approach, the wild man turned to face me.

"So we meet again for the last time! In an hour's time from now, I will feast upon your still beating heart!"

Throwing his head back, the same inhuman laugh I had heard from years before echoed out and it had lost nothing in its bone chilling intensity. He was completely insane and loved being so. It didn't matter, I was going to win the fight, because I had to.

"This is going to be the way of it, little storm man. The girl, she is precious to you or so I have been told. If

you want to save her, you have to defend her from me. I promise, I'll make her suffering last and leave you alive just long enough so you can watch her scream as she dies painfully."

He threw his head back once again as a maniacal laugh of sheer darkness issued forth. The crowd, gathered in the bleachers to watch the spectacle, chanted praises to their champion. It was a sick acknowledgement of the loss of their morality and the intrinsic value of love from their souls.

Suddenly the wild man grabbed a javelin stuck in the sand before him and threw it straight at Zarsha. Zarsha only had enough time to gasp as she saw her death fast approaching.

The javelin thudded heavily into the small round shield with which I was

equipped. It twisted my arm painfully to the side on impact, but at least it had not found its intended target. The shield had shattered from the impact of the javelin and was now useless. I threw it to the side, retaining the javelin for myself. Breathing heavy from the exertion of moving to intercept the javelin, I faced the wild man.

"Not bad, little storm man, but what about this?"

With a crazed roar he charged, waving a large sword overhead. I threw the javelin hard and, unbelievably, he picked it out of mid air and threw it right back at me.

I barely batted the javelin to the side with my sword before he was upon me. Steel rang out loudly against steel in a furious series of clangs. I was driven

backward by his bullish advance of raw power.

It took every ounce of skill I had to evade his wild powerful sword swings. When our swords clanged loudly together, it was all I could do to withstand the crushing force behind his blade. The strength behind his blows threatened to jar my sword right out of my hands. The empty glaring eyes and slavering open jaws of my opponent befitted a crazed beast more than they did the visage of a man.

We were getting dangerously close to Zarsha and I feared what might happen if he was to get too close to her. I asked my heart for more and I increased my effort to hold him back and I managed to stop his approach. Never had I fought against such strength. There seemed to

be no dimming of the unbridled strength he possessed. My breathing sounded like the bellows of a blacksmith's and I could feel the rapid beat of my heart pounding in my chest even as it echoed loudly in my ears.

Sweat streamed off me and burned as it got into my eyes. I half lost my footing for a moment and seizing the advantage the wild man grabbed me at the shoulder and heaved me away to the side. I fell head over heels and continued on over to land back onto my feet. I quickly turned to face him, but he wasn't there! Where was he?

Horror stricken, my searching eyes found him standing beside Zarsha. A smirk of pure evil creased his wild face as he casually drew his blade tip down the length of one of Zarsha' arms. A thin

red line of blood appeared in the wake of the blade's passage. Zarsha made not a sound, but continued to stare at me steadfastly, looking to me for protection, as big tears rolled down her face.

Suddenly I saw my father's death again in my mind's eye. I had been helpless to do anything as he had been killed by lesser men under the cover of ambush. I wasn't that same helpless boy any longer. I had seen the impossible done before and Eliak's words from the cliff became mine, "God give me strength!"

The wild man heard my plea to the Creator and laughed out loud at it. "God? Who's He? Does it look like He's helping you? If this is helping you, I'd hate to think about what Him not helping you looks like. Maybe it looks

something like this!”

He turned and stabbed Zarsha in the shoulder with his sword. She screamed and I came unhinged. He wheeled to face my charge, but I batted his sword away and with a roar of pure fury, I grabbed hold of him and threw him bodily away from Zarsha.

He landed some fifteen feet away and got to his feet quickly. In my right hand I held my sword and in my left hand I clutched the pointed end of the broken javelin that I had picked up off the sand. I had never felt so much unreasoning anger before in my life, and I couldn’t have cared less about whatever creature of wrath that it was making me into in this moment of anguish.

The image of him stabbing Zarsha replayed in my mind again and again,

causing me to feel so white hot that I feared I might catch on fire and that would have been okay, as long as I consumed this man and took him with me. This unholy menace of an individual had to be destroyed!

He charged with a roar, as he had done once before and I met him with an intensity that threatened to supersede his. I held him with a resounding clash of steel and then I began to back him up across the arena. The crowd was beside itself in its jubilance over the one of a kind spectacle playing out before them. No one had ever offered up such a challenge to the wild man before.

I lost track of time and space. I knew only the next motion; I planned nothing, but fought and reacted instinctively. I was inflicting damage as a result of both

my skillful fighting experience and the brute strength I was employing against my hated foe.

I hadn't inflicted any serious wounds, but the broken off javelin point in my left hand had left a half dozen jagged wounds in my opponent that were bleeding freely. I had not escaped injury however. I was nicked up almost everywhere and there was a deep cut across my left thigh that hurt when I moved.

I didn't care; instead I used the pain to spur me on to greater effort. I was winning! Suddenly, something changed in the air around me and I found myself knocked backward through it. I skidded off the sandy arena floor several times before slamming hard into the arena wall. What had that been?

I lifted myself up off the sand fighting for air, not understanding what had just happened. The wild man was upon me before I knew it and it was all I could do to deflect his sword while I tried to catch my breath.

Suddenly he swiped my sword aside and sliced my left arm badly. I dropped the javelin point and fell backwards, trying to escape the next deadly swipe of his blade. I got to my feet shakily and continued to back up as I did so. My left arm was useless and hung by my side with blood running freely from it into the thirsty sands of the arena.

I prepared for the next assault as best as I could but it didn't come. He just stood there watching me. The cocky smirk was gone replaced now by a look of cold calculation. I noticed the javelin

point I had dropped earlier in his free hand. He motioned towards Zarsha with his head and I glanced at her. She didn't look well.

She had lost a lot of blood from her shoulder wound and looked visibly weakened. He drew back his arm and I screamed, vainly reaching out toward him, "NO!"

He threw the javelin point as one would a knife. I watched it thud sickenly into Zarsha's stomach. The little girl screamed out in pain. I half stumbled, half crawled my way over to her. Pulling myself up in front of her I lifted my blood stained fingers to her face.

"I'm so sorry! I failed you! I promised to protect you! I'm so sorry!"

The little girl, who had worked her way so easily into my heart and spoke so

rarely, spoke now with an elegance far beyond her years.

"You did your best, father. Thank you for rescuing me from the forest and showing me love! I love you!"

I heard her last slurred words and watched as her head fell forward in death. My world had crumbled and I was left alone once again. Roaring, I surged to my feet and turned to face the monster who had murdered my wonderful little girl. I came face to face with his triumphantly smiling face and I felt his sword slice through my middle and out my back. In frustrated fury I shoved him back from me. He fell sprawling at my feet and I yanked the sword out from my stomach with a heave even as my life's blood drained out with it. He scrambled backwards out of reach

and I took his sword and lifting my knee I broke it over it and then I threw the pieces of it at him.

I pointed at him and then at the silent audience that was as quiet as the grave all around us and said, “I curse you this day! For your actions reveal you worthy to receive full judgment by the living God instead of His mercy! It would have been better that you had never been born for the guilt you bear in letting this precious little girl die at the hands of a monster! The innocent life that you have taken here this day,” I pointed at Zarsha, “is upon your heads and I pray that my God brings His wrath down upon you like never before for you have no love in your hearts, your actions are utterly wicked, and you even yet have no shame for your actions but instead your thirst

for evil grows with every passing moment! I pity you for my God's wrath will be swift and sure, and He will judge you for the blood you have spilled this day beyond any measure that you could ever count out!"

I looked at their hollow faces a moment longer and then I felt the ground hit me as I fell and the world became dizzy and out of focus. The sand of the arena touched my face and I watched my bloody fingers move in the sand in front of me.

Had it really come down to this?

Had I escaped the arena for a brief season, only to die in it at the end? Soon all the pain would be over and I would be free to go through that door with the streaming light like the Kurt's had done. I was grateful for my season away from

the arena anyway. I had learned much and I knew what the next step would be and it was okay, better than okay it was more than I could ever have deserved or hoped for. My eyes were drifting shut and I felt my breathing still.

"Roric."

My eyes opened and drifted upward. A figure of a man knelt beside me, the man from the cliff top who had given me my commission. I smiled; He had come to take me home. Suddenly I frowned.

"I'm sorry I failed you! I lacked faith. Please forgive me!"

A scarred hand reached out and wiped the regret from my face. "Level no such blame against yourself as I do not. As My Father has written, 'In the weakness of man God's strength is made manifest.'"

"I don't understand?" I mumbled out.

"Your time here is not yet complete Roric. You have much to do and experience before you enter the Kingdom and the resting place that I have prepared for such as you until all things are remade in newness."

He rose up from me and left as if He had never been there, but I felt His presence strong inside of me as if He had never left.

The presence of His Holy Spirit moved within me and my lips moved and said words that weren't mine, *"From the dust of the ground I made you. From the breath of My nostrils I gave you life. I am the great I AM and there is none other before Me. Rise now, son of my creation, and stand forth as an example that I Am a God who restores*

and gives life where there was none before!"

I started to obey even though I knew I must surely be dead by now. My bloody hand in the sand in front of me caught my eye. Grains of sand from the arena floor were trailing up my hand in wispy tendrils. As the traveling rivulets of sand encountered a wound they flowed into me.

It was an odd feeling, like being remade all over again. The sand went in one wound and came out another in search of the next one. The wounds I was covered in disappeared before my eyes.

I held my hand up. There wasn't even a scar! This couldn't be a dream, could it? I got to my knees and watched as sand poured out of the mortal wound

through my middle, the flesh closing up after the sands exited the wound. I got to my feet as the rest of my wounds disappeared. As long as I lived I would not forget this!

"How awesome! You are my God! There is none other like You! Well does your word say that You have power over all things, for You have made me whole again!"

The crowd had been going wild in adulation of the wild man's victory, but now they were calling out to him frantically, pointing at me behind him. He had gone to fetch a sword, no doubt to cut out my heart, when he stopped as he registered the crowd's shouted exclamations of surprise and alarm in place of their former jubilance. Turning, he saw me standing there and he rushed

for the sword laying a few feet away from him, but the sands of the arena opened up and swallowed it.

The crowd murmured in hushed fright at the sight of the unexplained disappearance of the sword. I strode towards the wild man without a weapon in my hand. He wasn't so cocky anymore and it was clear to me now that he had been helped out in the fight against me by the darkness he let reign in him.

Nothing else could explain how he had thrown me across the entire arena when it looked as if I was about to overpower him. Innate hatred and fury poured out of his eyes at me. His eyes were deep pools of darkness ringed with fire.

"You are still but a man! We will destroy you now!"

The figure of the wild man burst into flames and a deeper voice of darkness broke forth fouling the air with its utterance.

"We will devour you now! Nothing can stop us!"

I continued to stride purposefully toward the demon horde now manifested in the burning aberration of what had once been a man, who had chosen poorly.

"You're wrong, foul and crooked spirits! By the Lord's authority and majesty, He whom you lift yourself up against unworthily, I cast you down!"

Inhuman screams sounded out that would have chilled even the stoutest of souls, but I kept walking, sure of my Creator's authority even as I felt His living imprint within me.

The burning wreckage of a man flung fire upon me as I neared, but it separated out around me and sputtered out. My Creator's words were true. My Creator was my shield, strength and hope in time of need.

I reached the burning figure and I grabbed it by the throat, "Enough! You have enthralled these people long enough with your sorceries! Be gone now in the Son of the Creator's Name!"

The burning man that I grasped by the throat exploded into a thousand light particles and was no more, along with the aberrations of darkness that had possessed him. The arena was still and silent except for the weeping and moaning of all those gathered to watch the spectacle that had turned into something much more spectacular.

“All of what you have seen is what my God can do. What of yours? What can they do? Are they anything at all in glory and might as my God is?”

No one answered.

“The truth is before you. Repent from your wickedness or in the end your fate will be as these creatures were which you will share for all eternity.”

I turned from them and picked up a shard of the sword I had broken earlier and walked towards Zarsha. I cut her free from the pole and held her tenderly in my arms and cried like I never had before in my life.

A little hand touched my face, “Why are you crying?”

Startled, I opened my eyes. Zarsha smiled up at me and brushed the hair back from my forehead. “You were

dead!" I exclaimed.

"No I wasn't. I was sleeping. I had this wonderful dream that a man held my hand and talked to me. His words were warm and He was nice like you are. I wanted to know everything about Him, but He simply smiled and said that you would teach me about Him and that it was time to wake up."

"That's all you remember?"

"Yes, is there something more I should know?"

"No! Praise God, no! Here, let's get out of here and I promise I'll tell you everything I know and we'll learn the rest together. How does that sound?"

I got to my feet cradling the living miracle in my arms, reflecting as I did so that I could now fully appreciate how wonderful and consuming a father's love

could be both personally and outwardly.

The arena doors swung open ahead of me and I marveled again at the Creator's constant provision. Krista was pushing past the doors with two horses in tow behind her. One of them was Flin.

My steps quickened as I headed for Krista and the horses. I saw Rugar off to the side holding open one of the doors, the bodies of several guards littered about his feet. As I got closer to Krista the crowd started to break out of the trance in which they had been locked.

One of the high officials of the city stood up and gestured madly at us. "Stop them! Stop them! They cannot be allowed to escape!" he screamed as he jumped up and down excitedly.

Dazed looking guards who had been posted all around the sides of the arena

rushed in towards us. They only managed to take several strides towards us when they stopped in horrified wonder and then screamed out of abject fear, as they watched and felt their bodies turn into sand, which fell trickling to the arena floor as they melted into indistinguishable piles of sand. Their clothing, weapons and armor disappeared into the sand, as if it was a quicksand mire.

The crowd erupted into shrieks of terror at the sight of the disappearing men. Some of them even fainted, so great was their horror at what they had just seen. Their terror knew new heights when slowly the entire arena began to crack and grumble as it started to slide down into the sand.

The people broke and fled for their

lives. Unhinged by the day's recent events, they trampled over each other in their eagerness to flee from the hungry sands of the arena.

I met Krista and the horses, still carrying Zarsha in my arms. Krista was as white as a sheet, and she held onto the horse's reins with a death grip. I reached Flin and placed Zarsha on him and then I turned back to Krista.

She was staring at me as if I wasn't quite human and looked even more eager than I was to be free of the sinking arena. I reached out a hand towards her and she jumped away reflexively.

"It's okay Krista. I know you're scared, but it is really me, I promise."

"What's happening? What happened? Is your God going to kill me too? Why

aren't we sinking? You were both dead! I saw you! And now you're alive! How is that possible?"

"I will answer all of your questions later. In the meantime, let's get out of here before we do sink into the sand."

I reached out and she let me pull her towards her horse without further resistance. I helped her up onto her horse, relishing the feel of touching her and having her close to me again. I settled into my saddle and Zarsha's arms closed around me like a vise. I directed Flin towards the still open and upright doorway of the arena and passed through it. As Krista passed through, she looked down at Rugar still standing there holding the door open as the rest of the arena was now disappearing rapidly into the sand.

“Come with us Rugar,” she urged.

“No, I must see what has happened to my master, just as you must be faithful to your new master. Go and may the Creator continue to smile down upon you and give you favor, little flower!”

I thought I saw a tear in her eye as she turned her mount away from Rugar, who had let the door go and was now striding quickly towards the city.

I let Flin into a full gallop as we exited the suburbs and the cultivated fields of the city. The city was in an uproar over what had happened and we weren’t noticed. We rode into the dense growth of the forest until it got too dark to make our way.

We made camp without any fire that night. We barely had a makeshift camp put together the next night when the

heavens opened up and poured rain down upon us. It was a miserable night and none of us got any rest. When the rain was over in the early hours of the morning, we had a hasty cold meal and then we were back in the saddle. I was pushing the endurance of both Zarsha and Krista more than I should be, but it was vital that we get to the seacoast and the boat waiting there for us.

Seven long weary days later found us near enough to the sea that we could smell the salt in the air and even hear the crashing of the waves against the rocks of the beach. Stiffly, I got down from Flin. It was well after nightfall. Zarsha was asleep and I lifted her down, careful not to wake her. I pulled the blanket roll off Flin and spread it on the ground near where I was going to make a fire. I laid

Zarsha down onto the blanket and covered her up with it. I looked at her for a long moment as she slept peacefully. I was so grateful to have her in my life.

"Why did you take on the responsibility of that little girl?"

I turned towards Krista who still stood by her horse. "I don't know. I just did and I don't regret it for even a moment. She's added so much to my life already that it's hard to remember what it was like without her just a few weeks ago. "

Krista was silent for a moment. "You're a rare man Roric. You don't mind me calling you that, do you? You don't think it's forward of me, being your slave, to address you by your given name?"

I hated that she had to ask such a question. I got to my feet and walked over towards her. I watched the apprehension rise in her face as I approached, but she remained where she was. I reached my right hand out and cupped the bottom left half of her face with it.

"No Krista, I don't mind."

My hand lying easy on her face, I leaned down towards her, watching her eyes as I did so. Her eyes showed apprehension at what was coming, but not fear. My lips found hers gently. I held her in no other way except for the gentle pressure of my hand on her face. Her eyes closed and she leaned into me whether knowingly or not.

I let my left hand close around her and rest gently on the small of her back. I felt

her hands rise up between us, until they rested against my chest, and I expected her to push away from me, but she didn't. Her eyes were still closed, which I took as an open invitation and I deepened the kiss.

Her hands slid up around my neck and tightened as she started kissing me back. Wow! This was amazing! The woman of my dreams in my arms, fully mine and she was kissing me back with a passion that matched my own. I leaned into her more, relishing our shared passion for each other.

Slap!

I reeled backward from her. My movement away wasn't because of the force of the blow, but because I was completely startled by its occurrence. She was standing, faced away from me,

breathing hard and holding herself tightly with her arms. Why had she done that?

I was about to grab her, turn her around and demand why, but I stopped myself. I stormed away and started making a fire. The fire made, I sat down staring into its flames. The voracious flames were a match for the turbulent emotions swirling around in me. Why did I hold myself back from what I wanted? She was mine to do with as I pleased. I deserved to have something amazing like her happen after the rough life I'd had, but then hadn't she had pretty much the same rough life I'd had? Wasn't she even now still living it? A life of serfdom that I could say I was free of, at least for the time being. My anger dissipated slowly as I admitted to myself the real reason for my

aggravation. Not only did I hunger to hold her in my arms and make her mine in the most elemental of ways, but I hungered almost as much to simply see her smile at me.

I wanted to see her laugh and have her tell me her fears and dreams. I wanted her to like me and want to spend time with me. I wanted her to be in love with me. I stared at the flames morosely; wondering if that could ever be possible.

I wasn't sure yet….oh heck, who was I fooling. I loved her. So what did I do now? What was important was to treat her with gentleness and respect and deny the passion I felt for her, at least a little while longer, as I gave her the time she needed to get to know me.

Krista stared out into the darkness of

the night. Her breathing was back to normal, but her heart was still doing somersaults within her chest. What had she been thinking? Why had she kissed him back like that?

She didn't look far inside herself for the answer, afraid of what it might be. It was entirely his fault anyway! If he hadn't been so gentle and undemanding with his kiss, she wouldn't have responded like she had.

So what if she was attracted to him, after all that was only natural. He was, she had to admit, one of the most captivating men she had ever met. She had seen many men who may have been more handsome by societal standards, but Roric was all man with nothing left to question, which she found to be more attractive than just another pretty face

with a buff body.

Her face flushed again at the admission of her attraction to him. Not only was he a strong force of nature, but he could also be gentle and kind. He was unlike any man she had ever known before, except for Sebastian. Any other man, after the invitation she had given, followed by being slapped by a slave, would have beaten her and likely raped her on the spot. But he hadn't.

It wasn't the first time he had stopped himself from accomplishing his desires either. What was maybe the most alarming thing about him was how he treated her, as if she was something of great value. He acted like he cared for more than just what her body had to offer him. He wanted

something more from her. He wanted her heart too.

She shivered reflexively at the truth that she had just stumbled upon. If she let him have her heart, any chance she had at freedom would be gone for good. She would be a slave forever. She stared bitterly out into the night sky. Why did everything have to be so complex? Was this the safe future Sansa had promised her?

She would no doubt be the safest she had ever been in her life, when she lay within his arms. She remembered the fight in the arena and what had happened afterward and shivered. Never had she seen such skilled fighting and raw ability as Roric had exhibited. He was perhaps the greatest warrior in the whole world, but as

strong as he was she had to admit his greatest strength was his humbleness and belief in his Creator. His faith was his real strength, just as it had been for Sebastian and Sansa.

She no longer doubted if there was a God or not and she especially did not doubt whether or not He cared about people. The Creator loved Roric, that she was sure of. But did the Creator love her? If He did, then why was she still a slave?

The chill of the night closed in on her. Was this the future Sansa had spoken of? Was she supposed to surrender her heart and dreams to the big scarred warrior, who inflamed her with passion? Was that what the Creator wanted from her before He would do anything to help her? She

looked back at Roric, who was staring into the flames of the fire, and thought of the security and, yes, even happiness that his arms could offer her.

Should she continue to hold out for the freedom she had craved ever since she had learned what it meant to be a slave? To be able to do as she pleased, to go where she wanted, when she wanted to and be whatever she wanted to be without anyone saying otherwise. Pick her own mate and have children; that would be as free as she wanted to be.

That's exactly what she wanted and that realization made up her mind as to what she would do, but it wasn't as easy a decision as she would have thought it would have been.

"Krista."

She turned towards the fire and the man beside it.

“You need to come get warm and get some sleep.”

She came back to the fire, wondering what he would do next. He rose and came over to cover her shoulders with a blanket.

“Get some rest while I keep watch. In a couple of hours I’ll wake you and you can stand watch the rest of the night while I get some rest. That sound okay to you?”

Krista nodded. She lay down next to the fire and stared at it for a while.

"Roric?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I slapped you. That wasn’t right of me.”

“I forgive you.”

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The sounds of a song bird twilling out its morning lullaby protruded its lovely notes into my consciousness. I became aware of the warmth of the sun on my face.

The sun!!!

I bolted upright, throwing the blanket covering me half across the camp. The fire was long dead and even though it wasn't late morning yet, it was far later than I had wanted to remain in camp.

Why hadn't Krista wakened me when I had told her to? Where was Krista and, for that matter, where was the other horse?

Flin was cropping off grass by himself in the area where I had picketed both horses last night. I leaped to my feet, my hand going for my sword. I looked

around for any hidden danger but found none. Zarsha sat up sleepily from her bed of blankets having been awakened by my commotion.

"Where's Krista?" I asked.

From her blank expression I could tell she knew nothing. I walked over to where Krista had slept, hoping to find some trace of her disappearance. Her blankets were gone too, but there was a piece of white paper weighted under a rock lying on the ground where she had lain.

I sheathed my sword and with a sinking feeling I reached down and picked the paper up and read it. *"Dear Roric, I hope you understand why I have left. You, of all people, must know what the desire for freedom is like. And as you fought to claim yours, so must I.*

I want you to know that I harbor no ill will against you. I know that as a slave I could have wished for no better a master than you. Sebastian was wise to give me to you and I know I have disappointed both of you by my actions, but I must pursue my dream of being free, whatever the risk may be. I feel that I will die inside if I give up on my dream now. I wish to thank you, Sebastian and the dear woman who raised me for several years, for showing me that there is a God in heaven. As I seek my freedom so will I seek a greater understanding of the Creator in my life, I promise you this. Please don't worry about me. I know how to handle myself in a fight. I took one of your daggers and I have money that Sebastian gave me. I hope you will

remain the good man that you are and care well for the dear little girl you protect. I wish you well as I would hope that you would wish the same for me. Goodbye and may the Creator go with you and be with me too. Krista."

As I finished the letter, my hands crumbled the paper into a ball in my fist. I was so mad I could hardly see straight. How could she just leave like that? She was mine!

How did she hope to protect herself from all the dangers of being an escaped slave and a beautiful one at that, all by herself? I threw my saddle onto Flin and within minutes we were riding out of the camp in hot pursuit, following the tracks of Krista's horse which were leading away from the sea.

I reached the top of a knoll and stopped Flin abruptly. I thought we had lost all possibility of any pursuers on our trail, but I had been wrong. Less than half a mile away a party of forty or more Zoarinian cavalry men were steadily moving in our direction. I knew the bitterness of defeat in that moment like I had never known it before.

The girl of my dreams had just been here with me and now she was probably gone forever. I had to get the information Sebastian had acquired to where it would do the most good and there was Zarsha's welfare to consider as well. I vented my anger at the cruel turn of my life in a roar

of frustrated fury at my helplessness to get what I had wanted so deeply.

The enemy cavalry had spotted us and

were charging across the sand dunes toward us. I turned Flin towards the sea and let him run all out. As we neared the beach, I could see a sail out in the small enclosure of the natural harbor that formed along this stretch of the sea coast.

There was no time to wait for a boat to come pick us up. I ran Flin through the pounding surf into the deeper waters of the breakers. It was a new experience for both me and Flin. He took to it gamely enough as I had no choice. As he started to swim powerfully against the onrushing current of the waves, I slipped from the saddle to lighten the load on him, but it was unnerving to know the vast depths of water that were opening up beneath us.

Swimming was something I had never

mastered and I had never regretted that more than right now. Zarsha clung to the saddle horn in sheer terror as the sea water lapped against her legs and splashed her in the face. I tried to not let her terror consume me too. Drowning was a horrible fate to consider and it seemed altogether a real possibility at the moment.

It seemed like we had been struggling against the current of the sea forever when abruptly our rate of progress dramatically increased. After a while I managed to look up from the churned up water around us and saw that the small sailing boat was practically on top of us. Men were moving quickly all along its decks and in the rigging overhead.

A rope splashed down near me in the water and I grabbed onto it desperately

and held on as our forward progress was directed toward the sailing vessel. Netting had been thrown over the side and sailors eagerly lifted us out of the heavy water that dragged at our clothing.

As we reached the deck I bellowed out hoarsely, “We must get the horse aboard immediately!”

I had seen the fin of what must be some sea monster as I had been lifted onboard and I wasn’t about to have Flin become his late morning snack.

“We can’t bring the horse on board! It’s too heavy and we’re not equipped to handle such cargo!” screamed a little man, who seemed to be in charge of the group of sailors near me.

My right hand shot out and I grasped him by his shirt front beneath his chin and lifted him completely off the deck

until we were eye to eye, “The horse comes!”

“But of course he will, Master Roric. If you would now please unhand my second mate there, we will make preparations immediately.”

My head swiveled to view the person who had calmly issued the commanding words. A slim but finely muscled man in the uniform of what must be the captain strode onto the scene. I released the second mate, who gasped in relief upon his release, and I watched as the captain began issuing orders in the same calm, but authoritative manner in which he had addressed me. In no time a crude but effective looking compilation of rigging and tackling blocks had been swung over the side of the vessel.

I yelled out encouragements to Flin,

trying to keep him calm, but it wasn't having a lot of effect, because he too had sensed the danger swishing in the waters below. Bravely a team of sailors dove over the side of the ship with ropes and netting. How they did it with Flin moving around I'm not sure, but they managed to attach a piece of netting under his belly and secured it by ropes to the crude winch lever system that had been constructed above the deck. As the order was given to pull, I lent my own strength to the line of sailors throwing themselves on the ropes as the captain continued to orchestrate order into the mass confusion of the scene.

Before long Flin began to appear up over the side of the ship, eyes wide in fright, at the unorthodox situation in which he found himself. We eased Flin

down until his hooves connected with the deck of the ship. The sailors broke out into a cheer at their accomplishment, while other sailors leaned over the side of the ship and issued jeers at the unsatisfied group of sea monsters that had congregated in hopes of an easy exotic meal.

As the netting and ropes were released from Flin, he gave a mighty series of shakes that drenched everyone in the vicinity. Laughing, the crew that had worked as one to bring the ungainly cargo on board wiped the spewed seawater from their eyes and faces.

The captain turned to me and said, “Sir, you have your horse and may I say that it is with great pride that I welcome you, your delightful young lady and your horse on board the Fair Damson.”

I reached out to shake the young captain's hand, impressed with his handling of getting Flin on board, "The honor is mine, thank you for saving us!"

I glanced at Flin and added, "All of us thank you!"

The sailors cheered again and then the process of making way with the ship began. Finding a quiet moment after Flin was stowed securely away in a small cargo area on the tiny ship, I went to the rail and looked out at the fast disappearing shore.

I could still see the brightly colored dots of the cavalry men drawn up in the sand as they watched us disappear over the horizon. I gripped the railing hard wishing that I wasn't standing by the ship's railing alone. I missed her. The thought that I might never see her again

was especially hard to come to peace with.

Why had she left after the kiss we had shared last night? In my heart I knew why. She had wanted her freedom more than she had wanted me. And while that left me with a bitter feeling inside, it was still a reason for leaving that I could respect.

"God, I pray that she's safe! Please keep her and help her find her freedom and happiness, even if it isn't with me."

Chapter Seventeen

The Plan

We made good progress over the next several days. We didn't encounter any ships at all, which I felt was due in large part to the skillful navigation of Captain Jansa. Soon we would be put ashore near Yorktown in the Southern Settlements.

It was far too risky to continue traveling further up the coastline, because that was where the bulk of the Zoarinian navy was stationed. The Zoarinians kept the much smaller, but

still formidable fleet of the Tranquil Islanders, bottlenecked up within the harbors and inlets of their islands to keep them from coming to the Valley Landers aid.

Captain Jansa stepped up to the ship's railing beside me and shared my view of the shoreline that we were approaching under cover of darkness. "I wish we could be of more service to you, but I'm afraid this is all that we can manage for now. I know it is but little, given the graveness of the situation faced by our two peoples."

"Captain Jansa, during my brief time in the Valley Lands I detected no blame being leveled against your people for any lack of military support on your people's part. You have to protect your lands just as we do ours."

“Yes, this is true. But if our long time allies perish, then who do you think will be next to fall? It is better that we stay together and if need be, die together. I can assure you that I will continue to preach just that to my superiors until they have no cause but to see it my way as many of us already do!” Captain Jansa finished passionately.

I offered my hand to the young captain, “I wish you luck in your endeavor as we could certainly use the help, but there is no shame if you don’t come.”

Captain Jansa left me and returned to the bridge to directly oversee the pulling of the ship close to the shore line in the darkness. When we were far closer to the shoreline than I would have thought safe, Captain Jansa gave the orders to cut the sails and come about.

A long, hastily constructed wooden ramp was hauled out over the side and secured with rigging. Zarsha and I mounted Flin and, with the click of his hooves sounding loud and hollow in the night air, I directed him down the swaying ramp. I lifted a hand in a silent farewell to the sailors who had risked their lives to come pick us up and now to offload us. Flin buck jumped off the end of the ramp into the cold waters of the surf.

The water came up to the saddle horn but no further and within minutes we pulled clear of the water altogether and headed up over the wet sands of the beach toward the cover of the dunes beyond. It would take us almost a week to reach Kingdom Pass, which was more than it should have taken because we

would travel by night as it would be too dangerous to travel by day.

Five days later saw us at the foothills of the mountains. We had crossed the Litian River without incident in the night, but now the first rays of sunlight were peaking into the morning sky. I kept riding, hoping that we were far enough that we wouldn't fall prey to any Zoarinian patrols this close to the Valley Lands.

It was late morning of the next day when we entered the beginning of the long narrow pass that would lead us to the great wall at the head of the pass. I let Flin into a full gallop, eager to be on the other side of that massive wall at the head of the pass. I heard an arrow whizz past my ear where I had been just moments before and smash off a rock to

the other side of me.

Several arrows came from the opposite direction of the first arrow, but they weren't aimed at us but rather at the source of the first arrow. Several riders, with bows at the ready and arrows held notched with one hand for a quick delivery, came riding out of the rocks toward us. Their faces were sharp with concentration, as they scanned the upper slopes around us. They drew abreast of us and offered us an escort up the narrow pass.

It was good to be among friends again and the rest of the ride passed without incident. Later in the day the great walls came into view and I could see a flurry of activity occurring all over them.

New mortar shone brightly from the joints of the giant cut stone blocks where

it had eroded away over the years. Whoever had been put in charge of the wall repairs had even gone so far as to add new cut stone blocks in places where the rock had become overly porous.

The tops of the walls bristled with a forest's worth of wood in the forms of siege equipment and extra bulwarking. The Valley Lands were preparing for war. Once again they were relying heavily on what had always brought them victory in the past, which was the great wall of their ancestor's creation.

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I inspected the people standing around the small chart table in the governor's mansion at Kingdom Pass. Most of those gathered were staring at the map and talking in low muted tones in groups of

two or three. Three generals, all seven council members, Thaddeus and I were in attendance in the small private room.

Romnan brought the council of war to attendance by clapping his hands together briefly, "Let us get this council of war underway as none of us can doubt that that is exactly what we have become embroiled in, despite our best efforts to the contrary. The many concessions that we have made to the enemy may have prolonged the peace for a while, but war has come to us anyway and we are ill prepared for it. Roric, as you know, has just returned from a council sanctioned mission to acquire information from one of our most valuable spy contacts ever."

I kept my eyes glued to the table before us as I thought of the man that I had met but briefly, but had liked almost

instantly and now missed deeply. Everyone I had ever known of my family was either dead or presumed dead, with the exception of my grandfather. It was a lack of longevity I would like to see broken in my lifetime. I thought briefly of Romnan's words, 'council sanctioned mission,' if they only knew everything that the mission had entailed.

"Ladies and gentlemen I feel it only right to inform you that gathering this information came at the cost of several lives including our spy's and considerable risk to Roric's as well. This information has been bought and paid for in Valley Lander blood, so my advice is to heed it well and scoff at it only to your own shame! Roric would you do us the honor of presenting what we know of the enemy's intentions

toward us?”

I nodded and looked up, having the attention of all those gathered in the room. “There can be no doubt that we are within a state of war with the Zoarinian Empire. While there have been many wars between our two nations in the past, the motives for this one is different than the previous ones. That motive is one rooted in our distant past. I speak of when we came to this world on ships of an advanced technology such as we do not have with us anymore or so most of us were led to believe.”

I finished by staring pointedly at Thaddeus, who didn’t so much as bat an eye at the accusatory tone I directed at him.

“Two of those ships are still in

existence within the Shrine of Remembrance, where our ancestors first stepped onto these shores."

Exclamations broke out from around the room at my statement. "Why were we not told of the existence of such technology? Technology that we could have used to fight the enemy!" one of the generals asked excitedly.

Romnan spoke up, "It was thought best by those in leadership at the time of the discovery that as few people as possible should know of the existence of the ships. The secret has remained safe for over five centuries. Only the head councilman and members of the Ta'lont barony have known of the existence of these ships, or so we thought. Please continue Roric."

"The Zoarinians have learned of the

location and existence of these ships. How they learned of them we do not know. As we all know, the Zoarinians have never been happy with being contained to this world and their long time wish has been to return to the first world and to explore and settle others. Our ancestors saw that as an unwise aspiration to have and they hid from them the technological ability to return or to travel between worlds, which was in large part what sparked the first wars between our two families. The Zoarinian governors have used this old hate, as well as the faith we continue to have in our Creator, as grounds for going to war with us once again. But their ultimate goal, once we are out of the way, is to claim these ships for themselves and to live out the desires of the past, which

could prove disastrous for our world as we do not know what is transpiring beyond our world and are perhaps better off for that. That's their base reason for this war. Now on to how they plan to remove us from their path to glory. They have prepared for this war more intensely than any war of the past and have amassed an army of approximately eight hundred thousand men that is fully provisioned and should be ready to march within the month."

Several of the council members gasped at hearing the enemy's numbers.

"Roughly five hundred thousand of that number consists of their own men. Another hundred thousand of them are hired mercenaries from the south and the border towns of the plains. The remaining part of the enemy force,

numbering two hundred thousand strong, has been supplied by the Attorgrons."

"The Attorgrons have betrayed us and thrown in with them?" General Sanjo asked, as a sick expression briefly flickered across his face before his usual mask of control fell back into place.

"I'm afraid so General, but it's worse than that. The Attorgrons have disclosed to the Zoarinians the other passes through the mountains by which travel through is possible. All of those passes, except for one, are currently open. The main force of six hundred thousand will march upon the walls of Kingdom Pass and set up a siege against it. They are prepared to lose upwards of two hundred thousand troops to take the city, but their attack is only a diversion from the real attack. The Attorgrons will use

their knowledge of the mountain passes and come down behind our lines and attack Kingdom Pass from the rear. I don't need to tell anyone here that this city was never designed to be attacked from two sides. Our army will be trapped in between two armies greater than our own and we will be summarily destroyed. Kingdom Pass will fall and the rest of the Valley Lands soon thereafter. Our great wall cannot protect us in this scenario."

Councilman Oswald broke into the moment that formed at the conclusion of my words, "It seems obvious to me what our most probable strategy should be!"

I looked back at him steadily, "Oh, and what would that be councilman?"

Turning to General Santaran, Councilman Oswald asked, "How many

men can we field General?"

The General looked morosely at the table for a moment and then said, "We'll be lucky to find a hundred and twenty thousand experienced troops and perhaps another fifty thousand boys and older men that are capable of holding a sword and mounting a fight. I would say that would be an accurate assessment of the force that we can hope to raise."

Oswald continued on, practically not waiting for the General to finish talking, "This is what I think would be our best strategy. We defend Kingdom Pass temporarily with just forty thousand of our most battle ready troops and we send the remaining eighty thousand warriors or so to wait for the Attorgrons and cut them down in the passes. After they cut the traitors down in the passes

they can return to Kingdom Pass and ensure its continued security against the siege of the Zoarinians. Our wall will hold just as it has in the past."

General Nadero looked like he was about to object to the strategy, when I caught his eye and shook my head imperceptibly. He noticed it and stopped what he had been about to say as did the other two generals.

Head councilman Romnan interjected his way into the conversation, "Obviously that is the only strategy that has a chance at working given the superior numbers of our foe and the fact that we cannot allow ourselves to be surrounded here and hope to survive. Now, I believe it's time to let the generals formulate the necessary battle orders accordingly. Let's leave them to

their work, shall we? Fellow council members, Thaddeus Ta'lont has something to show you in the council chamber that I believe will be of interest to you concerning the two ships housed within the shrine along the northern shore."

The other council members in the room excitedly left, following after Thaddeus, to see what would be revealed. Romnan paused in the room until the others had left the room and the door had closed.

General Sanjo spoke up, "Romnan, you can't possibly think that what Councilman Oswald is proposing is a sound battle plan given the direness of the situation?"

"Of course not, but that is what we are going to let him believe is going to

happen. Councilman Oswald is a traitor; of this we are positive. He was the one who leaked knowledge of the ships after he found reference to them in some old misplaced documents. He was also the one that put Lent forward as our agent to be sent to meet with Roric as well."

"Why has he been allowed to live?" General Santaran exclaimed.

"He is more useful to us this way, at least for now, but that may soon change. Gentlemen, I leave you with Roric. He will share with you the battle plan that I, Thaddeus and Roric have put together. It is also my wish that you would view Roric as your superior commander for the entire campaign."

My jaw dropped open at the councilman's statement. The generals didn't seem overly surprised by the

order and only nodded their heads in acceptance of his wish. After the head councilman was gone I met the focused gazes of the three generals.

General Nadero had a slight smile on his face as he said, “A great responsibility has been placed on your strong young shoulders, one that is fully merited in my opinion!”

The other two generals nodded in agreement. I accepted their vote of confidence, while inside I was still in shock at the honor and responsibility that had just been placed on me.

“Generals, let me show you the plan. It all starts here.”

I pointed to Kingdom Pass and they leaned over the table, all seriousness again. “What is the greatest weakness that a strong fortress faces?” I asked.

“The belief that it cannot fail,” rejoined General Sanjo.

“Exactly! They have found our great fortress's weakness. It cannot be defended from both sides. Fighting the Attorgrons in the mountains would be a foolish loss of our soldiers. We would likely win, but the cost of victory would be high and we can’t afford to lose too many of our troops too early. Besides, the Attorgron army is not what it seems. Of its two hundred thousand men only fifty thousand of them are regular soldiers. The remaining hundred and fifty thousand are slave warriors composed mainly of spearmen and archers. The Attorgrons did not want to be involved in this war, but they have been pressured into joining it. They know that, after we have been

eliminated, they are likely the next candidate for extinction, after the Tranquil Islanders. They have kept the bulk of their most loyal and experienced troops at home. The fifty thousand regular troops are all cavalry. They are little better than paid actors dressed to play the part of soldiers. The slave warriors offer us our greatest chance for final victory. My great uncle entered into secret talks with the slave commanders. They reached an agreement of sorts. If the slave warriors see that by throwing in with us victory can be obtained over the Zoarinian Empire in a final decisive battle they will do so. In return, they ask for their freedom and the right to live in the Valley Lands among us with their families, whom we will pressure the Attorgrons to release to us after the

war."

Looks of renewed hope replaced the grave looks of despair on the generals' faces.

"How do we set up this decisive battle?" General Santaran asked.

"We set it up in how quickly we allow Kingdom Pass to fall to the enemy," I said somberly.

The generals stared back at me blankly. The concept of allowing Kingdom Pass to fall quickly was obviously a strategy that they had never even given thought to before.

"Even without the Attorgron invasion from the rear, it is doubtful whether Kingdom Pass could withstand the bombardment by the advanced siege weapons that the Zoarinians have created. They will be able to pick our

wall and defensive installations apart at a distance that is out of the range of any of our weapons. The whole success of the battle for Kingdom Pass will hinge on three things, surprise, angered pride, and carelessness on the part of their inexperienced field commanders. They expect us to stay behind our wall, just as we have done for centuries as we let them come to us. They will be content to engage us only lightly and pick apart our walls at a distance, while they wait for the Attorgrons to get into position behind us. They will then attack us from both sides with the utter destruction of our army being the end result. We will surprise them by meeting them in force in front of our wall instead of standing behind it as we have always done. The front half of their army is comprised of

mercenaries, with inexperienced field commanders. Their untrained commanders will rush at the chance of whittling down our forces in what will appear to be a bad mistake on our part. They will rush foreword, heedless of the potential cost they will encounter against our best troops and whatever traps and snares we can arrange outside the walls in the little time left to us. Once the onslaught begins, confusion will reign on their part as we chew up their forward brigades. When they realize the cost being taken, they will retire from the fight and I hope to have attained a small decisive victory that will bolster our troops and demoralize their less experienced troops. The Zoarinian people are a proud people and our actions and the needless loss of their

troops will incense the Zoarinian generals into doing something impulsive. In an effort to regain momentum and revenge for the fallen, they will commit themselves fully before the Attorgrons have had a chance to move into position behind the city. It will become a matter of honor to be the first in defeating us. They will bring their advanced siege weapons to the front and begin pounding holes in our wall."

I fell silent and General Naldero spoke up, "What then?"

Studying each of the generals I said, "We will retreat from the walls and let them have the city."

"That's it? That's your plan? To just give them our ancient city?" General Sanjo stormed out angrily.

I shook my head, "No General Sanjo,

losing the city is an inevitable fact we can't change. However, the way in which we let them have the city and what follows after, well you see gentlemen that is entirely within our ability to control. This is what I propose and it is for your ears only."

I then explained our retreat from the city to them and they listened in rapt attention, not even asking a question, as I laid out the plan before them. When I had finished they stared at me in silence and then glanced meaningfully at each other for a moment.

General Sanjo's hard old eyes rose to mine, "In my long years as a soldier I have learned more than I care to acknowledge about the ways of war and the endless killing it involves. I do not question the legitimacy of your plan, as

crazy as it may be. It illustrates to me that you know what war is all about and that, quite simply, is winning at all costs."

He then looked down at the map and added, "Even if it makes monsters of us all. We must preserve the innocent even at the loss of our own human decency and honor. My troops are at your command Roric, as am I. All will be done even as you have said."

Both General Nadero and General Santaran echoed General Sanjo's pledge of soldiers and allegiance and after grasping their sword handles in a warrior's salute, they left the room and I was left alone with the responsibility and ownership of my own thoughts.

It's easy to dream up a battle plan, but knowing what the cost in lives could

be…..would be, well it was the worst self awareness moment that I had ever encountered.

The cold calculated precision of the plan bore evidence of the hardness of my own soul. My plan could be my people's saving grace in their gravest hour of need, but did that justify its methods?

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One Month and three days later

It was raining softly. The pitter-patter of the rain drops splintering off the armor of the men standing silently in rank behind and around me made its own pleasant music as we waited. Then, like the obtrusive sound of a crow shattering the melody of a songbird in full trill, came the sounds of heavy drums from further down the pass.

The drums announced the menacing presence of the enemy close at hand. The drums grew louder and louder until they reached a fever pitch of intensity. It was a performance of sound meant to instill fear in the hearts of my warriors. I saw the enemy for the first time as they rounded a bend further down the pass.

Their column was as wide as the pass and it bristled with the shiny teeth of war, even as the dull finishes of their shields and armor seemed to drag down what little light there was on this overcast day. I could see that they were surprised to find soldiers in massed file waiting for them before the massive ancestral wall of this land they were set to invade.

I stood at the head of five thousand handpicked warriors. The wall's central

fortifications lay behind us. We were flanked on either side by separate contingents of fifteen thousand warriors each. They too were handpicked for this battle before the great wall of Kingdom Pass.

The enemy columns spilled into the wide expanse of ground before the great wall. I could see hurried consultations occurring among their field commanders, which showed their evident surprise at our unlikely and unexpected appearance before our great wall. Their drums had fallen silent in the sudden confusion that our presence outside of the wall had elicited within their chain of command.

I didn't let them discuss it any further, but instead I lifted my shield high. Within seconds, countless trumpets blew as one in a direct hard challenge that

buried whatever perceived threat the sound of the enemy's drums had tried to instill within our hearts. As one we started to move forward, stamping our feet heavier than necessary to create the sound of a moving army committed to the action before them, even arrogantly so. Both flanking columns of fifteen thousand warriors each followed our central group of five thousand, only they stayed close to the sides of the pass and kept slightly behind in pace from our central column of warriors.

The blaring of the horns ceased and all that pervaded the stillness of the peace that followed was the sound of our marching. My group of warriors slowly mounted a slight promontory rise in the relatively flat terrain, which had been created by sediment buildup from

the two great rivers that used to flow through the pass. We stopped as one, in complete unison, across all three companies of warriors. In unison, shields were slammed into the ground, even as spears were poked out through narrow gaps in the shields in the direction of the enemy. As one, we roared out a military grunt of aggression as old to mankind and the history of fighting as two buck deer slamming their heads together in provoked aggression.

Silence followed our shout and the enemy continued to swell into the wider expanse of the pass as they formed a hasty and somewhat disorganized battle line. Behind us the walls bristled with the poised arrows of thousands of archers, many of which were women.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke out

from the ranks of the other archers gathered there. She was singing. The words of the song she sang echoed clearly into the crispness of the morning air and every warrior's heart gathered before the wall.

Her song was older than the wall she stood on and was quickly picked up by both men and women up and down the wall, who repeated the chorus to her lead.

Across the waters so far have we come,
In search of a land of milk and honey,
At last we have found our home,
Where we will grow strong,
We will grow strong,
Loss of our homes we have

known,

But in our valley rest is to be found,

Come and see our valley so fair,

Mountains so high they reach the sky,

No better a home could one ask,

We have found our rest,

Our rest we have found at last,

Proclaim to one and all this our journey's end,

Move on as strangers no more shall we,

We will fight for our home,

May it forever be.

Throughout the song the enemy soldiers rushed to form a battle line that

they had expected to have had hours to accomplish in an orderly fashion, but instead were down to only minutes. The song ended and so did the enemy's rush to reach formation.

The enemy formation abruptly opened up across the battle line to form gaps, which mounted cavalry poured through in endless streams. They were lancers just like the ones who had killed my family. They fanned out the width of the pass over ten rows in depth as they surged heedlessly forward toward us, intent on breaking us with the power of their charge. Ground soldiers rushed to keep up with them in order to support them if need be.

"Get ready men! For our families and our country! Hold the line!" I yelled out, my words similarly repeated by other

warrior commanders around me.

The horses of the unbroken line of cavalry were completely stretched out in a full gallop, when suddenly it appeared as if the ground opened up and swallowed them. They were but forty feet in front of us when it happened. As the first row of lancers pitched unexpectedly into the camouflaged chasm before them, they were closely followed by the next several rows that had been pressed close behind the front line of cavalry. As both horses and riders somersaulted into the ditch from the force of their momentum alone, they were impaled on the sharpened stakes which lined the steep sides of the deep trough into which they had careened.

The remaining cavalry floundered to avoid a similar fate and streamed

through the narrow gaps between our three companies, where there were no spike laden ditches. We had broken the force of their charge, but they had regrouped behind us and were preparing to charge from the rear, when a literal shower of arrows reigned down unexpectedly upon them from those gathered along the great wall behind them. Within moments, the once proud lancer cavalry brigade was reduced to but a few scattered survivors, who either faked death on the battlefield or were trapped underneath the heavy bulk of their dead mounts.

The onrushing soldiers, following close behind the ill fated cavalry charge, attempted to climb across the ditches, trampling on the fallen and wounded bodies of their own fellow soldiers and

their mounts. It was a grisly scene of hell reserved for only the bloodiest of battles.

The ditches filled full with the bodies of the fallen. As they met our tight line they were thrust through by our spears, as we stood tightly packed together in our wall of shields. They parted around the strength of our shield wall, as the cavalry had, in search of a weak spot in our shield line and because they were being pushed on by the onrushing mass of soldiers behind them, still eager to claim their part of the victory over us.

The strength of our shield wall and the deadly thrust of our spears helped send them sheeting through the gaps between our three columns in search of an easier target than the one we presented. As they poured out and around our company's

rear, they too became victims of the same scathing rainstorm of iron tipped death shafts as their cavalry had been before them.

We held our shields tight against the desperate jerks that came from the enemy in their vane efforts to break our shield wall. The ditch before us was now full with the bodies of the slain and the dying. It was time to move on.

“Lift shields and circle turn!” I bellowed out, trying to be heard over the loud din of the battle all around us.

Those nearest me echoed my words and soon all were in awareness of the command. The center column, of five thousand warriors, split seamlessly into ten circular shield formations of roughly five hundred each, which moved independently of each other and began to

march in spiraling trajectories, pressing deeper into the enemy line.

Each of the ten formations lengthened the distance between them and the other groups. Some moving slower, while others moved faster, in beat with a choreographed plan they had been practicing for weeks. The enemy ranks gladly parted allowing the circularly spinning and tightly pressed formations to go deeper and become more isolated, away from the two larger warrior groups that still remained pressed against the steep sides of the pass in an elongated formation.

Warriors fell to the ground within the hot press of the formation, either the victims of blind sword thrusts through the shield wall or because they had been brutally hauled out into the encircling

mob and hacked to pieces. Gaps in the shield wall were filled as quickly as possible, but it was hard to keep up with the rapidly appearing vacancies in the outer rim of the formation.

I narrowly side stepped a sudden sword swipe at my ankles from beneath my shield even as the warrior beside me was pulled out into the mob. We wouldn't hold up to much more of this kind of pressure. I had no idea if the other formations had even reached position yet, but I hoped they had because I had caught a glimpse of the white paint on the ground just up ahead of us.

The command to fire would be given when our formation reached its target goal, regardless of whether or not the other groups had reached theirs yet.

“Twenty more feet men! Twenty more feet and we have it!” I screamed out in encouragement as I struggled to hold onto my shield and maintain a forward circular motion.

There was the huff of renewed struggle as warriors all around me also saw the white arcing lines of paint on the bloodstained ground. It seemed like an hour went by, instead of probably just the few minutes it took us to center overtop the scuffed white paint circle on the ground. We slammed our shields down and stopped even as warriors behind the outer rim raised shields overhead to form a canopy of dented steel over top of us.

Other warriors moved within the canopied formation to brace and hold on to those of us on the outer rim, who were

struggling to keep from being ripped from the safety of our huddle of shields into the certain death of the enemy's voracious hacking blades.

It felt like we were inside a bell that was ringing loudly, as the enemy beat on our shields unmercifully. I barely heard the sound of our horns on the ramparts sound out again. There was a questioning breakup of the intensity of the assault upon us as the enemy soldiers also heard the sound of the horns.

Panicked shouts rang out, but it was too late, as a massive, perfectly timed barrage of stone rained down upon the enemy ranks in a perfectly calibrated pattern of crushing force. Stones pelted down all around us, with one stray stone taking out several of our number, but that was the extent of our losses to the

barrage. We waited, our breathing tight within our chests, as within minutes of the first barrage another came as coordinated as the first, only this time it wasn't stone but fire that fell instead.

The fiery bombs hit the ground and exploded into engulfing walls of explosive flame that spread out along the ground with a vengeance. Flames licked around the edges of the tightly pressed together shields and I was grateful for the leather grips by which I held onto the shield, as the shield heated up from exposure to the flames of the fire bombs.

We were gasping for breath within moments as all the air seemed to have disappeared and we were left with only smoke to breathe. The strength of the fire died down after several minutes of intense burning.

Coughing hard, I gave the order to drop shields and it was with relief that we dropped the heavy burdens we had fought so hard to hold onto. It was a relief as real as drinking cold water on a hot day to feel and breathe the cooler air that rushed in around us when we dropped our shields as well.

There were still fires here and there across the breadth of the battlefield, but the smoke had cleared enough to clearly see the depth of the carnage we had caused. Thousands upon thousands of the enemy lay dead and scorched all around us. Counting out in my head, I could see that six of the ten formations had made it through as we had and while I mourned the four who hadn't, I was also glad to see how many had made it.

The enemy line was drawn all the way

back to the bend in the pass, where they gazed in shock at the grizzly fate of their brethren before them. A dark hooded figure on top of a black stallion was riding up and down the disorganized line of the shocked enemy. He appeared to be screaming at them and then I saw him lean out of the saddle and lop the head off what looked to have been a field commander.

I knew who the black robed figure was and I quickly shouted out as loud as I could, banking heavily on Marfoul's obsessive arrogance and hatred of me to instigate further rashness on the enemy's part.

"Who's given us the victory?" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

My voice carried well up and down the pass, as it echoed off the steep rocky

sides.

Without any apparent hesitation those around me and in the other six groups belted out, “The Lord God Jehovah!”

I drew my sword out and clanged the flat side of it repeatedly off the shield at my feet in a regular cadence of ringing metal that was quickly picked up by the rest of the warriors.

“Who created all the lands and the seas?” I yelled.

“Our God!” came the resounding cry of the warriors on the field.

“Who created the heavens and the stars?”

“Our God!”

The black robed figure had ceased from berating the cowed soldiers in front of him and had wheeled his stallion around to stare in my direction.

“Are there any before the Creator in glory or majesty of power?”

“No! Father God we adore Thee and we will serve none besides The Ancient of Days!” came the responding shout.

Stabbing the air above my head with my sword I yelled, “Our God!”

The warriors on the field and even those on the distant ramparts behind us on the wall chorused back, “He reigns!”

“Our God!”

“He reigns!”

Then with the greatest shout I could muster I yelled out,

“Forever!”

“Forever!” came the thunderous ovation of the Valley Landers up and down the pass.

There was then a sudden silence and in it I made an elaborate show of

sheathing my sword, as if to say 'I was done here' and turning my back, I started to walk towards the wall as my actions were replicated by the rest of the warriors of the six surviving groups.

I had only taken but a few steps when I heard Marfoul's echoing voice ring out in the distance in a guttural outpouring of rage, "Ten thousand golden tarsas to the man who brings me back his head!"

Wow! That was a lot of money for just one man's head. Glancing back over one shoulder, I saw that quite a lot of the enemy felt the same way about the amount of money being offered for my head. I quickened my pace some to a fast walk, but no faster than that. It was hard to not quicken the pace further though. The greedy envy of so many men in regards to one's own head can have that

affect on a man.

The warriors of the two supporting groups, gathered along either side of the pass, peeled off as we passed by joining us in triangular formation, which pointed back to Kingdom Pass, of which I was at the head of the point of the v formation.

Emboldened by our lack of response to their charge, the enemy horde's onrush quickened, as they rightly surmised that they were too close to our spread out line for another barrage of stone or fire to take place from high up on the fortifications of the wall for fear of hitting our own troops. I was the target of their avaricious greed and their onrush took the shape of a triangle as well as they singularly headed for me even trampling over each other in the process.

We were far enough advanced and I stopped and turned, drawing both of my curved sabers from behind my back as I did so. I held one low and one high in a classical double sword fighting technique. As I had stopped and turned, the entire v formation rippled in a duplicate rhythm of movement. Their double blades were held as mine, poised to slice into the onrushing enemy.

We had no shield other than the flashing movements of our second sword. As the enemy caught sight of the line of raised sabers flashing in the late morning sunlight, they gave up their sole chase of me in favor of the next clash between our two forces, with taking revenge for their fallen brethren foremost on their minds. The great horns of the wall behind us bellowed out once

more. The sound was deafening.

The onrush of the enemy stumbled somewhat at the sounding of the horns in fear of what new terror they might be heralding. The side walls of the pass abruptly came alive and it was with terror that the packed onrushing enemy soldiers watched as heavily armored warhorses and their riders tore through a partition of artfully painted blankets that had been stiffened with glue and painted to resemble the rocky sides of the pass.

It had been these fragile partitions that the two elongated formations had been protecting while stationed along the sides of the pass. Warhorse stallions neighed loudly in their savage desire to fight, even as their masters drove them headlong into the packed ranks of the enemy.

The big steeds surged forward with a will, as their masters swung side to side with heavy axes and maces to add their intensity to the crushing power of their mounts, who surged through the ranks of packed soldiers like unstoppable juggernauts committed to destruction.

The heavy cavalry charged into the enemy in an angled trajectory heading down the pass. They cut off a solid diamond shaped mass of the enemy from the main body of the army that numbered into the thousands and, like sharks diving into a bait pool, the long flashing line of saber wielding warriors advanced quickly in a flurry of slashing blades that felled the stunned and cut off enemy troops as if they were a field of wheat being harvested by an unbroken line of sickle wielding reapers. As the two

bodies of heavy cavalry converged to form the second point of the diamond, they wheeled to head down the pass, charging straight into the very heart of the enemy army in a phalanx formation.

None could stand before the intensity of their onrushing force. The troops before them broke and fled down the pass in a vain effort to escape the crushing hooves and brutal axe strikes that followed close behind. Seeing the army flee from before the heavy cavalry, and with it their only chance of a managed retreat, the morale of the men within the diamond formation of our forces broke as well and they turned to run.

We charged after them, cutting them down mercilessly the length of the pass, that had turned into a gory landscape that

reflected the true horrors of war. Near the bend of the pass, the cavalry gave up their pursuit of the enemy and circled back toward the wall. They cut down those they had missed on the first charge and then smashed into the larger body of fleeing soldiers that my warriors were busy slicing down from behind.

It was full on blood bath melee as the retreating soldiers' escape was cut off by the milling heavy cavalry in their way. They had no choice but to fight, but the heart to fight was gone from them and they fell away quickly before our blades.

There was the echoing sound of the beat of horse’s hooves and from down the pass a solid wall of cavalry, numbering in the thousands, appeared at a full gallop. Their haste was such that they ran wholesale over their own

fleeing troops in an effort to join the battle and snatch victory out of a skirmish that could only be labeled as the most shameful of defeats on their part.

The wall of cavalry turned the bend in the pass and as they came abreast of the narrowest distance between the pass walls, where the two ancient rivers that had once flown through the pass had converged into one. Murky colored fluid sprayed down upon them from sluice ways that had been carefully built into and hidden in the steep sides of the pass to either side of the narrowest point. The murky colored fluid drained out in great volume from massive underground vats that had been opened further up the steep sides of the passes.

The direct fall of gravity down the

pass sides, and a reduction in sluice size, aided the higher pressure of the fluid as it shot out into the pass forming interlacing arcs of fluid across it over thirty feet into the air. Torches were thrown by men, who had lain in concealment for days in carved out niches on the pass sides. The fountains of fluid arcing out and over the pass ignited instantly to reveal itself as a light flammable oil.

The forward rows of cavalry, already doused with the oil, burst into flame and went crazy in their desperation to be free of the fire engulfing them, both man and horse alike. The thundering column behind them drew up to a shuddering halt even as the new frontrunners of the column were pushed from behind by the momentum of the charge into the liquid

rain of fire that poured down like a sheet across the pass.

The great horns of the wall sounded out once more, which was the call for our retreat from the field of battle. Not one of the enemy remained standing within our controlled area of the pass. Quickly we searched through the littered remains of the battlefield for our own dead and wounded.

The twin gates of Kingdom Pass creaked open and wagons, pulled by teams of horses, rushed out to help convey both the dead and the wounded, as well as those who were simply too spent to walk back to the city, having used up all their energy in the battle. The flames would only last for perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, and then they would be out and we would be exposed

to the enemy once more without any more tricks to play on them.

The retrieval of the dead and wounded went quickly. I stumbled slightly after having heaved a dead warrior onto one of the last departing wagons. The burning oil was almost at an end. It was time to get back to the relative safety of the wall. That I was tired was putting it mildly. The circular shield formation strategy had taken all the energy I had. I stumbled over the bodies of the slain making my way back towards the wall. I made my way across the ditch now filled high with the bodies of horses and men, where we had made our first stand. I sensed that I was being watched and I looked around more closely. I found a pair of eyes in the shadowed darkness of a deeper, less

filled section of the ditch, that I was crossing over. I moved slightly toward them and I saw that it was one of our own that had fallen into this deeper section of the ditch. The smell of death was high as I made my way down to him over the bodies lying there.

He was a young, blond haired warrior that I remembered seeing briefly. He had been a part of one of the formations that hadn't made it.

Weakly he tried to wave me off, "No sir! They'll be coming soon! I'm not worth your life!"

This young man, just out of boyhood, had been planning to lie here in this dark hole waiting for the end to come and not call out to me for fear of risking another life. Talk about a special brand of courage. I wondered if I would ever

possess such courage as that.

"Nonsense! Your life, and what you choose to do with it, is every bit as important as my own! Come on, we're getting out of here."

I quickly undid some of my armor to lighten the load.

"What's your name warrior?" I asked as I picked him up.

"Tannis Rologan, Sir," he responded painfully.

The movement of picking him up hurt him I could tell. "Well Tannis, after you mend up from this you're going to be assigned to my private retinue. I need more warriors like you around."

It was tough going on the uneven squishy terrain. Tannis's face was ashen white. "Do you have a special girl somewhere, Tannis?"

“Not really, Sir. There’s one I wish was mine, but she doesn’t see me like that, if you know what I mean, Sir.”

“If she knew what I know about you Tannis, she’d be begging to be your girl!”

He smiled wanly and then gave a little gasp of pain and grunted out, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I’ll be able to serve with you, Sir. I would have liked that more than anything.”

Tannis died then in my arms, going completely limp. I sunk to my knees, holding him to me. So young! He had deserved to live on merit alone. He didn’t deserve to die like this before the fulfillment of his days in this squalid dark hole of death! He was dead and I had helped kill him. It was my plan, my strategy that had put his life at risk and

put an end to it. Bitter tears streaked down my face as I closed his wide blue eyed stare forever.

"May you be at peace in the arms of your maker, Tannis Rologan. I am unworthy of your sacrifice."

I laid him down gently and stumbled the rest of the way up out of the ditch, not looking back. Suddenly Rolf was by my side tugging me along and I let him, too numb inside to much care about anything at the moment. At some point, consciousness of my surroundings returned and I glanced back. The battle field was empty except for the bodies of the slain enemy and one who should have gotten a better deal in life than he had.

No more enemy troops had advanced into the pass even though the burning oil

had stopped. The sounds of the drums had intensified however. Hopefully that meant that they were bringing their heavy siege equipment to the front on the double. It was an odd battle plan that called for the destruction of one's best defensive fortification to be accomplished as fast as possible, but that was the plan. It had worked so far, maybe our success would continue, but at what cost?

How many more Tannis's would have to die to achieve victory? The corresponding thought came that answered that question. If we lost this war all the Tannis's would die, of that I was sure, which was why we had to fight and keep dying so that perhaps some would live. I was one of the last to enter the city. As I came out of the

darkness of the tunnel passageway and back into the light and the city of Kingdom Pass, I saw massed ranks of warriors gathered to either side of the road and as one they shook their fists into the air repeatedly, shouting a timeworn military cheer of glory to a warrior they deemed fit of the honor of receiving it.

I didn't deserve this! It seemed as if every warrior of the army had gathered and was shouting my praise. I was overcome with the feeling of wanting to throw up.

"Don't you dare!" Rolf said harshly to me.

"I don't deserve this praise, Rolf. Why are they cheering me, when I lost so many of them today? I'm worthy of scorn more than I am praise!"

Rolf continued tugging me along, “They cheer because you have given them hope. They cheer because as warriors they have the honor of being led by the greatest of warriors and that warrior is you! Master, you have never sought your own glory and yet it has been given to you abundantly by the Creator we both serve. Let them see the man that you are inside! Let them see the man they believe can lead them to victory, even if you do not believe it of yourself! Reward their faith and let them have peace, whether it is to the grave we go or to stand triumphantly over the graves of our enemies!”

I didn’t feel like doing it, but I recognized the wisdom of Rolf’s words and so I lifted my fist into the air and excepted their praise, even though I was

less than worthy of receiving it. I would have preferred to slink into a dark corner and lick my wounds and have some time to heal before I again had to face the light of day and the gazes of men's faces that stared sightlessly out into the void of space and time, because I had led them to their death.

I stopped where the central stairs started up to the wall ramparts high above and motioned for silence. Reluctantly the impassioned warriors grew silent one by one, with still a few giving scattered cheers in the background.

"Brothers and sisters, hear me please. You have not only pledged your swords and arrows to me, but now I see that you have pledged your hearts also. I am unworthy of the honor you bestow upon

me. I am but a man as you are with the same weaknesses that you struggle with, the same problems. But I am also a man that has faith! I believe in the Valley Lander way of life. The right to serve our Creator as we please! The right to protect our families and our lands from those who would take them from us! The right to live free and accountable to no man, other than those we appoint over us and the sovereignty of our Creator, who reigns over all creation! The enemy beyond those walls wants to take all of that away from us! As I have been elected as your leader in war, I swear that as breath and the strength remains within me to lift my sword, I will fight to preserve all that we hold sacred. I will fight to preserve our freedom and not only ours, but our children's children as

well. This is my promise to you and may the Creator judge me ever so severely, if I fail in anything I have promised you!"

The applause that erupted was deafening, but again I made the gesture to be silent. When I had it I said, less heatedly than before, "You have given me your hearts, but I tell you that is not enough. I must have your trust also! Orders will be given that you will not understand and will certainly question, but yet I ask you to obey every one of them, as I believe that the route we must take is the only one that can lead us to victory. Sacrifices will have to be made, even as they already have been, and more will be asked of you than ever should be and hopefully never will be again. I do not risk any one of you needlessly and yet I have risked all of

you and our entire people to attain total and complete victory over the enemy. What say you? Are you with me no matter the path taken?"

There was a ground swelling roar that culminated in one word being repeated over and over; 'Lata!' which simply put, means master or commander.

I saw Romnan make his way through the crowd flanked by generals Sanjo, Nadero, and Santaran. They stopped before me and the crowd of warriors grew silent.

Romnan spoke loudly in order to be heard by all, "We Valley Landers have always been a race of warriors! We have had many proud warriors to call our own over the course of our history. Such a warrior stands before you now in the form of Roric Ta'lont. Well is it

said, if one wants to know how the progress of a battle is fairing, look around to see if a Ta'lont is still fighting. If so, then there's reason to hope yet that the battle might be won."

There was a general chuckle throughout the crowd at that statement, which apparently was only new to me as I had never heard it before now.

"You, the warriors of our people, are faced with making the greatest sacrifice that one can in this life and it is because of this that you speak for all of the Valley Lands. As you have accepted this man, who humbly comes before you as one of you and not one better than you, I ask that you will not only appoint him as leader of our people in this present struggle, but also in the peace to follow!"

There was a deafening roar of approval and all I could do was stare in shock at Romnan. What was he doing? Why was he unseating the long held power of the council and transferring all the power to me? Again silence was called for and Romnan stepped forward toward me and answered my unspoken question.

“These are uncertain times that we face as a nation. A time when firm leadership is needed, as well as the act of will to commit to what needs done. Our nation has had such a moment before. Roric, it was your great ancestor, Tadias Ta’lont, when he first came to these shores, who took the reins of control and steered a fledgling nation out of the path of certain destruction by greater forces than we, at that time,

could muster the will to withstand. It has become quite evident to me and all those gathered here that the blood of the greatest of our ancestors still runs strong within your veins and the humility by which you govern the actions of your heart. Your walk in faithful obedience to the Creator makes you worthy of the responsibility that has been given to you freely by those who speak most for the people; the warriors that stand gathered in this place. May the Creator help you and bless you more abundantly than any honor a man can give and may we as a nation prosper under your leadership now and, I pray, well into the future."

More applause erupted, louder than ever before, and abstractly I wondered what the Zoarinians must be thinking about all of what they surely had to be

hearing. General Sanjo stepped forward. I hadn't noticed it before, but he was carrying something in his arms that lay on a purple velvet cloth. Flanked by both of the other two generals, he approached me and all three kneeled down before me.

It was a sword, an unimaginable sword. It was more beautiful than any other sword I had ever seen, but there was something more to it than just beauty. I couldn't define what it was about it that made me think so. It was almost, in some way, familiar to me, but I had never laid eyes on it before.

General Sanjo extended it up to me, "As the councilman has said, these are desperate times in which we find ourselves. As we have elected you as our leader, as once the great patriarch of

your family was during the long years of his lifetime, it is only fitting that the oldest of the relics that have been passed down to us from our much storied past should go to you. Behold the sword of Tadias Ta'lont! May you wield it as nobly as he did and may it serve you well all your days as it did him. To God be given the glory this day that the warriors of the Valley Lands have a leader once again to lead us into battle against our enemies!"

His words seemed to fade from my consciousness as my hand reached out toward the sword, as if inexplicably drawn to it. My fingers touched the cool steel of the handle and immediately I noticed a warm pulsing sensation as my fingers closed about the handle. It was as if the sword itself had closed about

my hand. Tendrils of colored vapor peeled off the blade to dissipate into the surrounding air.

There were many colors and the sword would pulse indiscriminately with multiple combinations of colors at a time. What kind of a sword was this? I glanced at councilman Romnan, the clear question of what I had just thought in my eyes. He, like everyone else, was mesmerized by the shifting colors of the blade I held in my hand.

He shrugged, at a complete loss for words, “I don’t know. There is no record of such an occurrence, but little is known of that long ago time. To my knowledge it has not done this for anyone else over the years.”

Not only did it emit the curious waves of colored light, but curious symbols

would briefly flash and then be gone up and down the entire length of the blade. I sheathed the sword and hung it on my waist and it abruptly stopped glowing, but I distinctly felt the presence of it by my side.

There was much to be discovered about the curious family heirloom, but not right now. I directed my attention back to my three generals, who gazed at me expectantly.

"You have your orders, see to them."

They nodded curtly and disappeared into the crowd which soon began to disperse as the attention was redirected back to the very present and menacing army that was gathering in force beyond our great wall.

Chapter Eighteen

Crumbling

The rest of the day had passed rather uneventfully, except for the busy preparation of the city, which had gone according to plan. I sat with my back propped up against a quiet area of the wall, keenly grateful to be away from the pressure of the public's eye, if for only a few moments.

The sword I had been given lay across my lap and I examined it with interest, especially the little symbols that would flash up and then be gone. When they

flashed again they were in different orientations and numbers than the previous set. I was pretty certain that the symbols represented a language. Whose language and what was it saying?

Something else was of curious interest to me as well, the sword had changed ever so slightly in its shape and size. At first I had thought I was seeing things, but not now. It was slightly longer by at least three inches. The double blade was not as wide and, while it was still double edged, it had taken a slight saber curve to it along one cutting edge.

The handle was also longer and some of the inset gems had completely changed in color. It was as if the sword was personalizing itself to me. I liked all the changes, it was more me somehow. It no longer flashed and glowed in a

myriad of different colors, but rather only a select few. Colors that I found appealing, even soothing, as I sat there in the dark against the wall.

Some technology of the past was clearly at play here, I was sure of it. Tadias, from what I had heard, had no place for enchantments or dark magic, which relaxed me as to the source of the sword's uniqueness, but it still didn't answer the questions that it posed. Was it right for me to have such a sword as this?

Could it do more to win a fight than just parry a blow or deliver a killing strike? Was it just a pretty sword or did it have a bigger purpose? So many questions and no one to answer them.

"Perhaps I can be of some help?" came a voice from a short distance away

in a section of darker shadows near the wall ramparts.

I leaped to my feet, the sword gripped in my hand, startled at hearing a voice so near to me, as I had heard no one approach. A robed figure separated out from the shadows.

“Peace Roric, I mean you no harm.”

Still holding the blade of the sword outward, ready to strike, I asked somewhat belligerently, “Who are you and where did you come from?” I asked my question harshly to cover up how unsettled I felt at the robed figure's sudden appearance out of nowhere.

“I am a messenger. I have been sent from the presence of the Great I Am.”

The sword clattered to the pavement on the top of the wall. If it hadn’t been for the supportive structure of the wall

behind me, I may have fallen over backwards to the ground far below. The figure in robes stepped forward, stooped down and picked up the sword and held it for a moment. I recognized him as being one of the angels of the storm that day when I had watched the Kurt family walk into heaven.

"This is a very good sword. It is right that you should have it. Take it back now."

The messenger extended the handle out to me and I took hold of it tentatively, in a sweaty loose fingered grasp.

"Why have you come? Have I done something wrong?" I managed to choke out.

The messenger shook his head, "The I AM has sent me on no such mission, and

if He had, no sword ever created could keep me from completing my divinely inspired directive."

I didn't doubt that and I felt only a slight relief at knowing that was not why this messenger had come.

"I have been sent with some words of instruction and to convey a blessing to a beloved servant in his grave hour of need."

There was a short period of silence in which I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything, more out of fear of saying the wrong thing than anything.

"Tell me Roric, do you want to win this battle?"

The answer seemed to be obvious, but I hesitated, afraid I had missed something.

"Yes," I responded hesitantly, not sure

where this was headed.

"Have you asked the Creator for victory?"

This I was sure of, "Yes!" I said firmly.

"Then do you also believe that He will do for you even as you have asked, if you have asked what you have in accordance with His will?"

I looked down as the question weighed down upon me and I warred within myself as to what to say in return. I looked up and responded, "I know the answer should be yes, but honestly I'm not sure."

I waited to be struck down dead, because I had basically said that I didn't trust the Creator to do as He had said, that He would never forsake me.

"Do you not see the problem with

such faulty reasoning?" The messenger asked, not unkindly.

I nodded solemnly and he continued, "In your heart you believe that God is who He says He is. He knows this as He weighs the thoughts of the hearts of men, but instead of acting in that faith, you let doubt cloud your mind and hinder your actions, keeping you ultimately from becoming the kind of man you were created to be."

"How do I stop doing that?" I asked honestly, admitting to my own weakness.

"As it is written in the Holy Scriptures, 'Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us…'"

The messenger looked reflective for a moment and then added, “The more you experience the Creator at work in your life, the more you will come to trust Him. The more you trust Him with more of yourself, the more He is able to accomplish great things through you to not only benefit your life, but a multitude of others also. When the work that has been started in you is done, it will bring back glory to whom all glory and honor are due, the Lord God Almighty. It is God that will accomplish the work Roric. It is for you to agree to do His will and thus unlock the purpose He has for you in the plan of His making that He has set down since before time began. You worry now Roric, but you will be stronger tomorrow than you are today if you put your confidence in the Lord, for

He is righteous and able to save. Your hopeful faith will grow as you see that He is always true to His word and never changes or diverts from it."

There was moment of reflective contemplation then, which I broke by saying, "Even as I believe what I do now, when tomorrow comes I can expect to believe no less than I already believe now as truth; and as God is able, I will see and do more tomorrow than I can today, because I believe that He can do the necessary work within me today in order to change what happens tomorrow."

The messenger nodded his head and smiled.

After a moment he asked, "Is there anything else you wish to know? Perhaps the writing on the sword that you have

seen and wondered about?"

"Yes!" I responded quickly.

"This sword, and others like it, were forged long ago by righteous men, who read the words of the Creator into their making, which are the words you see briefly flash. They are written in a more ancient tongue than is known on your world today. The sword is very powerful as a weapon, but not in any spiritual context. The Word of God is the ultimate two edged sword and it can divide the soul from the spirit. This sword will serve you well, for it has many unique properties crafted into its design that will be unveiled to you the more you use and possess it. But a word of warning on this matter: Beware the danger of becoming possessed by people, places or things, as all will lead

to your destruction if you replace the love of God for something that was made by Him, instead of a relationship with Him. Now the time has come to part with you, but one last thing remains to be done, which is to impart the blessing that I was sent to bestow upon you. Roric, if you will humble yourself before your Creator and always be faithful to the accomplishment of His will above all else, then know this: The Lord will guard and watch over you jealously, as you are a rare treasure. He will establish your rule and no enemy will be able to stand before you for the Lord your God is mighty and He will fight your battles for you. Do not worry for the precious ruby you have thought lost from you forever. She will return and become a crown of honor upon your

head all the long days of your life and she will be called Blessed by her children. The Creator will bless you both with His loving kindnesses and you will have many children. If you are faithful, a long life will be yours too and you will see your children's children and perhaps beyond. If you remain faithful, your children too shall be blessed. You have ruled a castle and an army, but they will rule nations and many armies. All this will come to pass if you keep your eyes upon the Lord and stay on the path that is straight and narrow and that has been laid out before you to walk. Always do what is right in the Creator's eyes and abhor doing that which is evil and remember to love and it will go well with you. I will leave you for now, but I will return in the future."

The messenger was gone just like that. He didn't even walk away. He just disappeared. I sank down to the pavement on the top of the wall. I looked down at the sword in my hands and prayed. Prayed that it would all work out as the angel had said, because I wanted to please the Creator and I certainly wanted His gifts and blessings too.

As much as I wanted to just sit and think through it all, I had the distinct feeling that it was time that I rejoined the preparations and leadership of the army. Reluctantly I got to my feet and started down the wall, heading away from the eastern tower.

A minute later I heard the snap of what sounded like a mighty tree being broken in half from the direction of the

enemy encampment at the far bend of the pass. Moments later I was knocked off my feet as some unseen projectile slammed into the eastern tower, pulverizing its top into rubble that rained down onto the wall top. Coughing and hacking because of the dust enshrouded air, I pushed myself up and looked back.

The place where I had been only moments before was completely buried in rubble. I remembered the urging I had experienced to leave the spot. I got the point being made here. Getting to my feet, I ran over the twisted jumble of debris towards the central tower complex. Several more cracks sounded from the enemy encampment and I subconsciously stopped to duck down.

Several projectiles slammed into the lower base of the central tower and

rocks and men went flying everywhere. Slowly, as if resisting the inevitable, the central tower started to sink and crumble downward, as most of its base had been shot away leaving it with very little support to remain standing. The upper stonework of the tower cracked hard and went in a fast slide over the city side of the wall in a stone waterfall that rained down on the pavement far below and anybody unlucky enough to have been standing there.

Hoarsely I called out around me, “Get off the wall! Now! Take the wounded and get down!”

I ran to where the central tower had once been and started helping those still living get out of the rubble. I saw General Sanjo picking himself out of the rubble several feet away and I rushed to

him.

He clutched onto my shirt front and I pulled him up the rest of the way, “You were right! Our wall is no match for these new weapons. The wall will fall and so will our cities and castles!” He finished, somewhat hysterical, as the implication of what was possible now fully dawned upon him.

I shook him slightly, “Remember the plan, General!”

“Yes, Yes, I remember! Forgive me, Sir! I’ll see to the evacuation of the wall!” he said as he quickly recovered from the shock he had been under.

“Already in process General, I need you to go ahead and set up our troops in the city. I think they’re going to break through faster than we thought. I can’t lose you right now General! Get to the

city!”

He nodded and pushed past me and down the stairs to his assignment, abandoning the wall that he had thought could never fall behind him.

Towers and fortifications all along the top of the wall were being blown apart. I pulled a warrior with a broken leg out of the rubble and passed him off to two others who were headed down the stairs. I grabbed up an unconscious archer, only taking the time to check for a pulse, before I slung her over one shoulder and started making my own way down from the wall.

It was a miracle that this many of us survived. I watched the shock play across the faces of the warriors, who were huddled a safe distance away from the wall, as they watched the great wall

shudder and groan while the wall top was systematically destroyed as if by a great unseen hand. I wondered if I had lost them and then one noticed me and stood to attention followed by the rest of them.

“It’s alright to be afraid. It’s alright to be shaken by what you thought wasn't possible. But it is not alright, when faced with this new reality, to think that you cannot yet rise above it! Those of you who are wounded, prepare to be evacuated to the cities. As for the rest of you, report to your positions for tomorrow we will fight and make the enemy pay for this!”

“Yes Sir!”

I turned from the departing warriors and looked back at the great wall that still rose so high overhead even though

its fine towers had been smashed. They had stopped targeting the wall top, having satisfied themselves with the level of destruction there. Now it sounded like they were focusing on punching two holes through the wall on either side of the remains of the central tower.

They'd have their holes through by morning, which, sadly, was a good thing. It would speed up their assault to take the city earlier than anticipated, which was good, because our scouts had reported that the Attorgron army, coming up over the mountain passes behind us, was farther along than we had expected as well.

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On through the night the bombardment continued, but it wasn't until an hour

before dawn that the walls at the focus of their bombardment began to crumble. The wall may have no longer been a match for the technology of the day, but it had been built thick and it was taking longer than I had thought to chew through it.

I revised my time table of their breakthrough upwards into the afternoon. The town was rigged and ready for its final service to the Valley Lands. The soldiers left in the town were getting as much rest as possible, but it was hard given the constant pounding taking place. The sight of the great wall crumbling downward didn't help the morale of the army either.

According to plan, General Santaran had moved off in the night with his allotted share of the army to await the

part of the plan that applied to him. The morning stretched onward slowly until it was finally noon. Dark storm clouds moved in and I prayed that it wouldn't rain.

The invasion would begin soon, as I didn't think that they could take the walls down much further than the two wide gaping holes that they had already punched through it. The talus slopes of pulverized rock that had formed on either side of the wall shielded the lower section of the wall from direct bombardment.

The barrage stopped close to five o'clock. They would come at us with infantry first because the steepness of the rubble slopes was too great of an angle upward, on their side, and downward, on our side, to successfully navigate

with cavalry. The wall was still roughly thirty to forty feet off the flat plain of the pass's floor. The objective of the infantry would be to first secure the two tunnel gates to either side of the pass and open them to bring their cavalry to bear against us.

That wouldn't be such an easy task though. Our warriors had worked all night long and into the morning filling the gate tunnels with the fallen stone from the wall ramparts above. It would take them a while to work at unloading the rock just as it had taken us a lot of time to put it there.

The drums started up, signaling their advance. I turned to General Sanjo who stood beside me and offered my hand, "Good luck, General. Don't stay too long in your defense position."

He nodded and started forward toward the line of archers. “General?” he looked back, “I know how much you want to keep the enemy from this city, but all you are to do is to allay their suspicion of another trap. Not to fight and die to the last man before the remnants of our ancestor’s shattered wall.”

He nodded solemnly, “It will be done as ordered.”

He turned back to his command and I mounted Flin. I made my way through one of the still open avenues through the city to the higher ground beyond. From my vantage point above and behind the city, I had a front row seat to watch the battle for the city take place. I wished that I was able to be down there instead of up here, removed from the fighting.

But this was the way it had to be.

I was the leader and it did no good to overly expose myself to either injury or death before it was time for such desperate actions. I could tell myself that, but my guts ached within me to be down there doing what I was asking others to do in my place. I contented myself with the knowledge that General Sanjo was an extremely capable leader. His warriors were the best trained in the army. They would make the price of capturing Kingdom Pass a bloody one for the enemy.

The first long ranks of the enemy cleared the summit of the walls and started down through both gaps in the wall. They fell in a shower of arrows as did the ones after them and so on, but they just kept coming, getting a little

farther down the slope with every minute that passed by.

Siege apparatuses, using rock that had been scavenged from the wall during the night, fired their short range payloads into the undulating line of the enemy that continued to pour up and over the gaps in the broken wall. General Sanjo's men were putting up a bitter defense at the base of our side of the wall. I couldn't have asked for any greater effort than what they were doing, with barely seven hundred warriors, against an undulating line of thousands that continuously came pouring up over the top of the wall.

Our warriors were falling though. Most of them from archery fire coming from archers hidden within the wall of shields that kept relentlessly pressing forward over the bodies of their slain.

General Sanjo had held them impressively at bay for almost a full hour now, but his warriors were down by half, with more falling every second.

"Sound the horn for General Sanjo's retreat!" I barked out harshly, as the bitter taste of watching good warriors die lay heavy on my soul.

They'd heard the call for retreat and I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw the General call off the defense and order a retreat through the city. They retreated down the streets of the city, not bothering to put up any kind of organized retreat. From the perspective of the enemy, it would appear that they were routing in a panic to save their lives, when in reality I knew it burned at the heart of every warrior who was pretending to flee as they would have

rather stayed and fought. But they were good warriors and they had obeyed their orders, which was crucial.

The regimented enemy formation fell apart as they broke line to chase after our warriors, screaming derisively. They forsook an orderly occupation of the city in favor of a tumultuous onrush of jubilation at being the first foreign force to successfully step foot on sacred Valley Lander soil in over five hundred years. This is what I had been counting on and had needed to happen.

Thousands of the enemy poured up and over the gaps in the walls, uncontested in their eagerness to claim the city, believing our will to fight was broken. The enemy troops rushed heedlessly down the streets in hot pursuit of our warriors. Suddenly ranks

upon ranks of the onrushing enemy were cut down in a vicious crossfire of arrows that came from archers in concealed hiding within buildings or perched on roof tops along the streets.

The enemy's advance into the city temporarily halted in the face of the renewed resistance. The decimated enemy ranks swelled full again, fed by the endless streaming line of soldiers coming through the two gaps in the wall. They marched with shields held high down the streets of the city in a formation that could only be described as a mob.

Soldiers broke from the mob into the surrounding houses and buildings in search of the pesky archers that were thinning their ranks down considerably. When the soldiers found them, bitter

hand to hand fighting ensued, with no quarter given by either side.

An aide to General Sanjo spoke up excitedly from behind me, “Sir! The archers in the city are not obeying their orders to withdraw as their positions are compromised!”

“I can see that!” I replied grimly.

“Sir, should I try to signal them or do something else to get their attention?”

“Do? Do nothing. They're doing everything. They’ve made their choice. They know what’s at risk and they're paying the sacrifice needed to ensure a greater kill of the enemy.”

The progress of the enemy was slow, but relentless. The continued selfless resistance by the archers was keeping the enemy packed together. They got packed even closer together by the

pressure from behind of more soldiers from the wall, eager to get in on the fighting and share in the glorious victory that had almost been achieved. They were getting close to the barriers that had been erected at the ends of the streets on my side of the city.

There had to be well over a hundred thousand enemy troops pressed tightly into the city, with more arriving every second. I tore my eyes from the steady progression of the enemy mob towards the outer limits of the city and looked back up to either side of the pass where the tunnel gate entrances were. I could see scores of soldiers feverishly working at removing the stones and debris that we had put there the night before.

"Fire the city! Start at the end near the

wall and then fire the barriers just before the forward lines reach them!"

The command was relayed and a double line of archers the length of the pass stepped close to their fires and lit their arrows. Then, in unison, they pulled their bows up and released their fiery salvo high into the sky to streak out over the city. Catapults arranged along the entire line quickly launched their burdens of oil soaked bales, and even entire barrels of oil, into the city in close pursuit of the arrows. For several still moments, the flaming missiles arced across the darkened sky to land at the far end of the city.

A murderous uproar flared within moments of impact. The arrows touched off fireballs of licking flames as they contacted trenches that had been soaked

in oil near the gaps in the wall. Barrels of oil that had been buried under the streets, with only their oil soaked tops exposed, exploded into violent fireballs that blew hundreds of soldiers into the air, even as more fuel for the fire rained down from above.

Hungry flames raced through the interconnected houses and the alleyways that bordered the main streets. They had been filled full of easily combustible materials. More barrels of oil exploded within houses, spraying their burning wreckage out into the packed enemy mobs trapped in the streets.

The massive mob of soldiers huddled in the cities' main streets tried to avoid the bordering houses that were wreathed in flames. Soldiers who had been in the houses and were now ablaze themselves,

ran screaming blindly out into the streets catching those men on fire too.

The utter pandemonium only became worse when the fire arrows and their accompanying fuel loads continued to land on top of them, turning even the streets into a hellish inferno. Panicked, the soldiers ran to escape the blaze by climbing over the barrier wall at the end of the city, which was set on fire moments before they reached it, making the way through it impassible. They went completely mad in their panic and tried to climb up over it, only to burn up in the attempt.

More seasoned field commanders still on the other side of the wall, having expected a stiffer fight for the city, were not put off by the noise of what they thought was the typical sounds of war

issuing forth from the city side of the wall. Their answer to the perceived sounds of resistance was to push even more troops up and over the wall in an attempt to simply overwhelm the enemy. As troops cleared the gap and saw the horror unfolding within the city they had no option but to press forward, for while it looked to be death to go on, it was certain death at the hands of their own friends if they were to retreat, as the order had been given that all deserters were to be killed on the spot.

The continuing pressure of troops coming over the walls left no room for those packed within the burning streets to retreat. The troops being pushed over the walls fanned out along the bottom of the wall that was still free from fire, but the smoke was dense and becoming

deadly. Crazed, they tore away at the stones blocking the tunnel gates.

The saying that 'War can be hell' could easily be applied to the scene unfolding before me. It gave me no pleasure to watch what was happening. The only relief I received was that, for every one of them that died, it meant that our chances of surviving this war went up. That was all I could allow myself to care about. They had asked for what they were receiving when they had continually ignored our offers of peace. Instead, they had insisted in pursuing our destruction with all the force they could muster. This was war at its basic element, an all out struggle to survive, deploying whatever tactics it took to come out the victor.

General Sanjo rode up to my position,

bloody, but thankfully alive. “General, I think we’ve all seen enough of fire. Withdraw your warriors to the Shrine of Remembrance. I will join you along the way with my men.”

General Sanjo saluted respectfully and withdrew to gather what remained of his share of the army. The bombardment of the city had ceased, as there literally was no need for more. The city was entirely engulfed in flames.

No one caught within it could have survived the fiery inferno that gripped its ancient stones as it reduced them to ash.

General Nadero rode up beside me expectantly, “General, you will provide General Sanjo cover with your cavalry for the first several miles, until he is safely on his way to the shrine. Then, according to plan, you will take your

forty thousand cavalry north, making enough tracks as you go for a hundred thousand. After that, you know what to do. I pray to the Creator that He gives your horses wings, as without your success I fear we are all doomed."

General Nadero leaned forward in the saddle toward me, "I will be there Roric! Even if I have to run every one of our horses into the ground! I will be there!"

"I hope so. Godspeed, General."

He saluted and rode off into the quickly approaching night.

I waited until he had withdrawn before calling out, "Sound the signal for the water!"

The horns sounded once more and then off in the distance more horns sounded. Long ago, two ancient rivers

had carved out what today was Kingdom Pass. Each of the rivers had carved out deeper channels along the sides of the pass leaving the middle of the pass piled up with the debris of erosion. Before the wall had been built, the rivers were diverted by the use of dams down alternate courses and they now flowed to the sea instead of through the pass.

For the past month, those alternate channels had been partially blocked off and the sides of the dams had been raised to accommodate the extra build up in water. The sound of the horns would soon be reaching those gathered at the dams. The walls of the original dams, already intentionally weakened, would collapse as the remaining key stones were pulled free and the force of the onrushing water would do the rest.

Within an hour, two carefully sequenced tidal waves would rush back down their old river courses picking up debris as they went and smash into the city of Kingdom Pass and the wall beyond it.

Everyone was gone on our side except for the retinue of warriors from Thunder Ridge and my own friends from the arena. We sat astride our mounts on the higher ground at the head of the pass. The flood waters would pass to either side of us into the city beyond. The enemy's advancement into the city had stopped as the field commanders had finally realized that something was amiss with their bulrush-and-pick-up-the-pieces-later strategy.

The many thousands of troops still on our side of the wall that hadn't been consumed in the fire of the city were

pressed into the deeper channeled sides of the pass to either side of the city. There was no fire there and it was still possible to breathe as they were on a lower level than the rest of the city. They could not retreat back over the wall because the heat from the fire was too intense for them to pass by, so they remained huddled in the corners of the city, desperately emptying the gate tunnels of the debris that had been stacked tight into them. The drama played on and I watched a once proud city burn to the ground.

It was a sight that I would never forget, as the fires consuming the city were now backlit against the darkness of the night. Surely, by now, they had to almost be through the debris in the tunnels. Perhaps our plan of full

destruction would not be carried out to the fullest in this last stage of the city's death throes.

I heard the cracks and booms of the onrushing water then and I almost regretted, as I had with the fire, what would befall the invaders next. But the water was an unstoppable force, even if I had wanted to renege on the plan now.

The turbulent water plumes swept by our position on either side, one of the sides being slightly ahead of the other. Both turbulent forces of nature were at least thirty feet high and carried a payload of debris with them. There was a welcome coolness to the air as they passed, which was a relief from the heat cast off by the burning city. The onrushing tidal waters smashed through the obstructions barring its way and

swept into the gathered ranks of the hysterically crying enemy; pulling some of them along in the strong current of water, even as it pulverized many of them where they stood. Those swept along sank beneath the water, as they were dragged down by their heavy armor.

Moments later, those swept along were smashed against the great wall with concussive force. Massive plumes of spray shot upward and the water backwashed into the city carrying its burden of wasted flesh with it. The water continued to mount in the city as more water surged down the old channels fed from the broken gaps in the dams upriver.

Much of the low lying fires in the city were put out, sending off massive

spitting clouds of steam, as they were contacted and extinguished by the surging debris-filled water. Several minutes passed by as a solitary struggle for life against both fire and water could be seen scattered around the city.

Then it happened, like the cork being removed from an upturned water jug, the two side gates of the city exploded outward off their massive hinges into the packed crowd of cavalry that had been massed in front of the gates earlier, in preparation to storm into the city. Water shot out of the tunnel gate entrances under high pressure and two giant whirlpools formed on the city side of the wall as the water, backed up in the city, emptied out through the gates into the packed masses of the enemy beyond the wall, causing even more chaos and loss

of life.

The flood waters rushed down the pass as balking horses, some of them already riderless, ran amuck trying to escape the craziness that the sudden burst of water had inspired, even as more soldiers were swept along in the swift moving current. The resurgent rivers rejoined powerfully at the narrower bend of the pass and wrecked the advanced siege equipment, still arrayed there, that had just brought the once proud wall to its knees.

The destruction of the city was complete, but it had reaped a bloody toll of life in the fight for its conquest. It was time to leave this place of death and shattered glory. I pulled Flin around and silently headed out into the night, followed by the rest of the small column

that accompanied me. The heavens opened up and the rain that had threatened all day dumped down on us now.

We rode slowly through the sheets of rain in the direction of the Shrine of Remembrance, there being no need to rush as any pursuit tonight was extremely unlikely. It wasn't long after though, that I thought I heard something. I drew to a stop and motioned for the column to remain stopped, as I rode Flin towards a small grove of trees accompanied by a few of my friends. Riding through the trees, I stopped on the other side and waited for one of the persistent lightning flashes to light up the night scene.

Crack!

Boom!

The shallow valley beyond lit up as

bright as day for a moment and it revealed a telling tale. Massed columns of troops and flanking cavalry brigades were moving quickly through the wet night in the direction of Kingdom Pass. The Attorgrons had arrived.

What a different tale it would have been if they had been able to join the fight and had attacked us from the rear. As it was, they had almost disrupted our retreat, which would have been disastrous for us. Renewed hope surged within me as I saw how the Creator's hand stretched out in divine providence on behalf of our cause. My optimism wasn't shared by the others though.

"What's the matter? Can you not see how the Creator is fighting for us?" I asked the assembled group of friends around me.

Rolf spoke up, “It’s not that. The Creator is clearly at work on our behalf, I can see that, but look at how many of them there are Roric! That army numbers more than our entire Valley Lander force put together and they're not even the main body of the army! They still outnumber us by at least four to one! We have no tricks left to throw at them. How can we hope to defeat such a force as they still field in open battle?”

I decided to share more of the plan with them, “Your lack of faith does not become you Rolf. It is not so grim as you believe, as everything is not what it appears to be.” I had their attention now, “The army you see before you is mostly a slave army. They number close to two hundred thousand men, but one hundred and fifty thousand of them are slave

warriors. Only the cavalry are regular army and they're the least experienced soldiers that the Attorgrons have. They were only sent along in order to keep the slave warriors in line and for appearance sake. The Attorgrons distrust the Zoarinians motives about what happens after they have jointly eliminated us. They kept their most loyal and best trained warriors behind to defend their cities in case the Zoarinians turn on them after they're done with us. They view the slave army as expendable and unreliable, which they're partially right in believing. My uncle was in contact with their slave leaders, when he found out about their inclusion in the battle plan, and they reached an agreement of sorts. If we can make a convincing case for victory they will

switch sides and join us in the fighting. After the fighting they have asked for, and will receive, refuge in the Valley Lands as free men and be given land of their own. After the war we will bring pressure on the Attorgrons to release the families of the warriors to them under the threat of invading them if they don't. But we have to make a compelling case that its worth throwing in with us or they won't join us and if that happens then yes, things are likely to turn out very grim indeed."

"Is that all you have up your sleeve?" Rolf asked, watching me closely.

I shrugged, with a slight smile turning up the corners of my mouth, "It's possible that we could receive some help from the Tranquil Islanders too, but that is heavily dependent on whether

they can make it through the Zoarinian blockade in time and in any great number."

"It would seem then that there is reason to believe that the future can still have a fruitful outcome after all," Rolf said, inclining his head slightly in a bow to me.

"Yes, there is reason to hope yet and hope we shall, as it is all we have left, other than prayer and I recommend doing plenty of that. Come let's get out of here and catch up with General Sanjo before they spot us."

Chapter Nineteen

According to Plan

The Zoarinian Camp on the highland outskirts of Kingdom Pass the next morning.

General Tessan stood looking out over the multitude of tents of the army he alone had been tasked to lead. It was the largest military force ever congregated together under one banner, even after they had lost so many in the fires and subtle chicanery of taking Kingdom Pass. They really hadn't taken the city behind the great

wall. It had been given to them and they had paid for it in blood.

Over two hundred thousand men missing from the sea of tents before him bore testament to the price that they had paid to set foot on Valley Lander soil the night before. That wouldn't have been so bad if the enemy's losses had been high too, but they hadn't. The assault last night had been a colossal error and now the whole army's morale was in question. Their spirit of optimism as to an easy campaign was shattered.

The Valley Lander army was gone and still intact and able to continue the fight, while they should have been slain to a man within the confines of Kingdom Pass. If they had only held off on the attack! He would not

underestimate them again. The sounds of his aides and subordinate field commanders arguing behind him began to register in his consciousness disrupting the clarity of his thoughts.

"Enough! Stop this senseless chatter!"

Those gathered within the tent fell silent at the general's sudden outburst of anger.

"I listen to you and all I hear is whining and excuses, that what has befallen us was an unavoidable occurrence. What utter ridiculousness! We were beaten clear and simple! Manipulated masterfully to commit ourselves onward onto our own swords as it were. There's no going back! What's been done is done. We need to move forward and accomplish our

primary mission's objective. Our force is still strong and more formidable than anything the enemy can throw at us. Prepare the army. We march for the Shrine at once!"

A longtime experienced field commander spoke up hesitantly, "But what about the cities, Sir? We're not just going to leave them, are we? This is the best opportunity we've ever had to crush the enemy once and for all!"

General Tessan didn't look unfazed for a moment at having his orders questioned, "Our primary objective is to secure the ships at the shrine. Once we have them secure we can return our attention to the systematic annihilation of the Valley Lander people. We need a quick victory to restore our men's moral and capturing the shrine does

that, as well as securing our primary mission's objective. Should we be surprised further by our wily foe, we will at least have that accomplished. We will leave a discretionary force of eighty thousand men to keep the Valley Landers bottled up within their nearest city, which will secure our open supply line with the homeland through the pass, should we need it. Our navy along the coast will offload what supplies we may need as well. The Valley Landers will not want to leave either their families or their city fortresses unguarded with such a strong army nearby and we will have a clear path to the Shrine. Starting today we will take the rest of our force and march directly inland to the Shrine. You have your orders, now go and see that my army is

on the march within two hours or heads will roll!"

General Tessan watched them go, knowing that in their hearts they questioned his choice of strategy. They still saw the army as unstoppable. Why not destroy the enemy as they found them instead of bypassing them for a soft target like the Shrine? As for him, he no longer thought their army unstoppable.

One quarter of his army lay dead with probably less than ten thousand of the enemy slain. If the enemy could keep that odds differential up, this invasion of the Valley Lands was doomed. If they were able to seize the Shrine and the prize it held, then perhaps they could break the enemy's spirit to fight.

He had thought breaking their great wall would do that, but he had been wrong. The loss of their great wall had inspired them instead.

The third morning of the invasion. In the camp of the rearguard army of eighty thousand men assigned to keep the Valley Landers held up within their cities, while the main body of the invading army marched for the Shrine of Remembrance.

It was barely past the brink of dawn when Commander Orlanthis was jarred awake by one of his aides, "Sir, the enemy has left the city sometime during the night and is advancing on our position!"

Commander Orlanthis leaped off his cot and ran outside, only half dressed.

His aide had been right; the enemy was clearly visible as they marched in formation away from the protection of their walls, directly at them.

"Sound general assembly on the double!" Wheeling to face the aide he barked out, "Why have they now just been noticed? Where are our sentries?"

The stammering aide could only shake his head, as horns rang throughout the camp calling for the assembly of the army. A scout the aide had dispatched but minutes before drew up his excited mount before the commander's tent.

"What do you have to report, soldier?" The commander barked out as he stared up at the rider.

"A large force sir! I make it an easy

fifty thousand sir! There appears to be no cavalry support and from the general make up and disorderly form of their force it appears to be comprised of nothing but militia, sir!"

"Militia? They send militia out against us!"

"Yes sir! Older men and farm boys is all I saw!" responded the scout emphatically.

Commander Orlanthis smacked his hands together excitedly. The gods must be smiling down upon him this day! This was a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his overlords. Not to mention the revenge that would be theirs as well! His eighty thousand men were all that remained of the initial strike force that had been deployed against Kingdom Pass.

These old men and farm boys would fall before their superior numbers and experienced soldiers like flies. This was just the opportunity he had needed to redeem himself. He had barely escaped Kingdom Pass with his head after the great loss of troops his contingent had suffered. Within a half hour his force was gathered in readiness for battle.

Their battle line was more disorganized than he would have liked, but it would do and besides they had almost twice as many men as the enemy. They were almost within range and as he sat astride his mount he raised his sword in preparation to signal the first volley of arrows to be released into the fast approaching militia.

An aide pulled his horse up abruptly beside his, "Sir!"

"What?" The militia were within range. "Archers at the ready!" Commander Orlanthis bellowed out, ignoring the aide.

The enemy militia suddenly stopped and issued forth a war cry before breaking into a run towards them wielding a wide assortment of weapons. The brave fools, what did they hope to gain by so impetuous a charge?

"Sir!"

"Confound it all man, what is it?" Commander Orlanthis half screamed as he turned towards the aide. In his anger he prepared to cut him down with his sword.

The aide was shaking like a leaf and as pale as milk as he pointed down the

valley behind them. Before Commander Orlanthis could turn to look at what the aide was pointing at he heard it.

He froze up inside at the sounds of the horns within the veiled morning mists, still hanging low in the valley behind them. Over the blare of the horns he could hear the roar of cavalry at full charge echoing up the valley towards them. Reluctantly he half turned in the saddle to witness his fate.

The gods were not with him, if there be any gods at all, he thought to himself, abstractly. Charging out of the morning mists like a monster from some forgotten fairytale came a solid line of cavalry, several rows deep and as wide as Commander Orlanthis's entire command.

Their lances were lowered as they

thundered over the ground, churning it up. The release of arrows that had been intended for the militia army from the city hadn't happened, because when the horns had sounded out from behind the army the army had turned almost as one, with dread filled eyes, to behold what new torment the fateful horns had heralded.

The army twisted about like a wounded animal between two predators, not sure which would strike first. As a result it wasn't prepared when both opposing forces crashed into it. It was clear that Commander Orlanthis had underestimated the militia too.

Older men retired from the ways of war, but fired up by adrenaline and the righteous cause for survival, sliced into

the less experienced Zoarinian ranks, as if they were once again hardy warriors of thirty five and not seventy and older. The rust fell from their old but sure blades as talents, won over a lifetime of war, came back to them, as if greeting an old friend long unseen.

Farm boys of fourteen and sixteen, made strong by hard work and a proud heritage to uphold, smashed away at the enemy soldiers, as if they were but ripe sheaves of corn ready to fall under the swings of their scythes.

Moments after the militia hit the enemy line, the full column of charging cavalry under General Nadero's command, smashed into the enemy's rear. There was an almost visible shockwave across the enemy formation as it absorbed the impact of the

charging cavalry. Completely unhinged from their defeat at Kingdom Pass and this new brutal twist in their sad tale of invasion, the enemy broke and ran screaming for their lives, too hysterical in their terror to even defend themselves.

It was a slaughter from which none were allowed to escape for fear that they would regroup with the main body of the army and inform them of the loss. Before even all the enemy had been mopped up, General Nadero separated out from the fight to gallop towards the city gates in the distance.

"Open the gates!"

The gates clanged open and out poured a collection of carts and wagons of every conceivable description. Some were pulled by teams

of horses, others mules and even oxen, while spare teams were herded along by outriders.

Their drivers were old shop owners, widows and anyone who could hold a pair of reins and drive a team. In a frenzy of action, General Nadero issued orders to load the carts with the militia members still able and fit to fight. His actions were almost panicked as he was anxious to rendezvous with Roric's forces on time.

By his calculations, he was already several hours behind that schedule. He had lost time, having to divert and travel out of the way of the Attorgron forces coming down from the north. The hastily put together misfit caravan groaned and creaked its way out of the valley in a flurry of its own dust as it

was escorted by the cavalry northward towards the Shrine of Remembrance.

Chapter Twenty

Last Stand

Two days later, the Shrine of Remembrance on the shores of the northern sea.

I watched the banners grow closer over the plain of rich green grass. They had done just as Sebastian had theorized that they would, if first met with a significant reduction in force. They had bypassed our cities, towns and castles to come straight here to the Shrine.

Thank God! Little did the approaching army know that every city and castle

would have fallen easily before them, because every available warrior capable of fighting had been gathered upon this plain for the engagement to come. If General Nadero had been successful in his assignment, then we stood a chance in the battle to come. That is if we could hold out until he arrived.

There were a few other critical factors that had to go just right too, but so far everything had, so there was still reason to hope. General Sanjo came up beside me as I stood looking out over the earthwork defenses at the enemy amassing on the plain before us.

“There sure are a lot of them, aren’t there? General, do you think that they will mount an attack on us given that it’s already early afternoon?”

General Sanjo stared at the congregating enemy force beyond the earthwork fortifications, “We will be dealing with their more experienced commanders now. They’ll want to see what we’re made of, and they have the time and men to spare to find out. I think they’ll attack at twilight. There will be a sudden heavy press and then a withdrawal, followed by light skirmishes throughout the night meant to keep us awake until the main assault occurs in the morning. That is, if we survive the first heavy press at twilight.”

I nodded, “You had best tell the men to get what rest they can then.”

General Sanjo turned to go, “General, there’s one other thing.”

General Sanjo turned back to me expectantly. “I’m sorry for the men and

women we lost in the city. I know that you trained most of them and knew many of them personally. The city had to be fired when it was or our position would have been overrun. Their sacrifice paved the way to a great victory, but I know that must be shallow comfort to you and their families. I wish there could have been a better way and I'm sorry that there wasn't."

The General looked back at the approaching banners of the enemy, "They knew what they were doing. They died for their nation as proud warriors should in the heat of battle."

"Still General, I'm sorry for your loss and I assure you that your loss is mine also."

His eyes flicked from the enemy banners back to me, "Roric, can I share

something with you?"

"Always General. I value your wisdom."

"Something I have learned during all my years of leading men into dangerous situations is the peril of getting too attached to the warriors you command. Every loss of life of those under your command can become a source of personal angst, which eats away at sound reasoning and the will to act as needed. Seeking to avoid the pain of additional loss can lead one to make a choice in battle that is the wrong choice, just to avoid more personal pain for yourself and the families of those you command. You made the right choice at Kingdom Pass, Roric, do not allow yourself to regret it."

He started away, but my words

stopped him briefly, “Tell me General, have you ever managed to achieve such a disconnection between your emotions and the fate your warriors face?”

General Sanjo didn’t look back around as he answered, “No, but I keep trying. If I didn’t keep trying, I wouldn’t be of any use to anyone.”

He continued on his way and I returned my gaze to the enemy that had drawn steadily closer across the plain. I wished that this day and responsibility had never come to me. Wishing had never gotten anyone very far in accomplishing something meaningful though.

Someone always had to do the hard work and make the sacrifice needed to affect any lasting change for good in the world. The only question I had was, why

did I have to be the one involved in the sacrifice?

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They came at twilight just as General Sanjo had said they would. They stormed up and over our trench work and earthwork defenses around the Shrine in three places.

We were hard pressed to hold them back without calling out our reserve troops hidden within the Shrine and by the shore of the bay. Of the eight thousand warriors manning the wall of dirt and wood, we lost over half of them throughout the long hours of the night. Before dawn's early light, we subbed out most of the survivors along the defenses for the fresher warriors still hidden near the Shrine building.

It was an exchange of roughly five

thousand fresh warriors for just over three thousand worn out warriors. Not only had we lost over four thousand of the best warriors of my people during the night, but we had lost General Sanjo too. He had been one of my nation's greatest all time commanders. Several of my old arena friends had fallen too and I felt their loss keenly.

General Sanjo had rushed to where the defenses were being pressed most by the enemy and there he had died, as a warrior should in the heat of battle, with his sword running with the blood of his enemies.

I wish I could say I was glad to see the first rays of the morning sun after the bitterly contested night I had survived, but I found it hard to because of the ugly

sight that it revealed. Easily within bow length, a mass formation of at least one hundred thousand men stood apart from the rest of the army as they silently and patiently awaited their orders.

Two columns of cavalry flanked their position, but we were in no danger from them as they would be unable to charge up and over our wood spiked earthwork defenses. They were just for show, to let us know how hopeless our situation was, as if the greater mass of the un-deployed army still beyond wasn't sufficient to accomplish that. What I saw by the early dawn's light reminded me of something that had occurred during the night.

At some point during the night, I had dozed off between skirmishes and I'd had a fitful dream or perhaps possibly a vision of the future, I wasn't sure. I had

dreamed that there was a field of dead and dying warriors, who had fallen in a great battle before the walls of a city. I was one of the fallen warriors. In the distance a storm was brewing, its black swirling winds fast approaching towards the battle scarred, but yet un-shattered walls of the city. I lay on the plain before the city and glancing up I saw the storm approaching, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. I looked back at the wall and I saw but a single man standing there, but what a man! There was no other man like Him.

He was my master for whom I lay proudly dying. I leaned up on one elbow before my end came to me, determined to gain the attention of my master one last time. I raised my blood stained sword in a final salute towards the silent

figure standing on the wall behind me, hoping soon to experience His eternal peace, even as those before me had. A sword came out of His mouth, which blinded me because of the light cast off from the power of the Word of God that issued forth.

I felt His power flow into me, causing me to stand as I could not otherwise and face what I alone could not defeat. Likewise, all those around me rose to stand, both dead and alive, as His power was greater than the death of the storm that raced toward us. United in faith, we stood against the evil of our time, even as we were built up from within, by the One who is timeless.

The storm howled its glee as it descended upon us, only to shatter like black glass which reflected back the

condition of its fallen nature that had failed to overcome my Master. The storm was gone as our foundation was sure and we found life in the words of our Master, which were enough to sustain us through the length of the day and past the terror of the night.

Now, as I thought back upon the dream and the good feelings and the hope that it had inspired, it all seemed to fade away as I saw so many of the enemy gathered before us poised for the killing strike.

Rolf who, as usual, had been by my side all night through the heat of the action, asked a question, sounding puzzled by the answer he was coming up with in his own mind, “Why do they just stand there? Why not just finish us and

be done with it! I'm tired of this lying around!"

"You know the answer to that one Rolf," I said quietly as my eye was drawn toward something else.

Were those sails out there?

"Rolf, look over there and tell me whose ships those are!"

Rolf had the eyes of an eagle and if anyone could tell the identity of the ships it would be him. The small burst of hope died in my chest, as I realized the answer for myself. The horizon was now liberally dotted with sails. Too many ships to be our friends the Tranquil Islanders coming to our aid.

"They look to be of Zoarinian construction, Roric." I nodded sourly. There went that part of the plan. Really, it had been a wild chance of receiving

any help from the island people, but still I had been hoping. If the enemy's navy was off coast then that meant our friends had at least tried to come to our aid and had broken through the blockade around their islands. On the other hand, perhaps they had failed and were even now all dead. It was a possibility to be considered, but all that really mattered in the here and now was that they weren't here to help us.

The western shore was the only place along this part of the coast where troops could either be landed or boarded. I looked past the Shrine at our backs, at the small northeastern bay that lay situated between two rocky headlands.

It was through this little bay that the mythical ships of our ancestors had supposedly journeyed, but I did not see

how. The bay itself was a perfectly good harbor. It was even somewhat sheltered from the vicious storms that raged up and down this coast at times, as it was shielded by the rocky headlands to either side of it.

What made it unusable, however, was the maze of jagged rocks that jutted above and below the surface of the water at the mouth of the bay, where it narrowed between the two rocky promontories. It would be suicide to attempt to sail a ship into the turbulent white water breakers that washed around the bases of the rocks guarding the bay. We were alone with little chance of succeeding in the battle to come. It had been the chance we had all taken.

General Santaran lay in hiding to the

northeast with forty thousand experienced warriors and ten thousand heavy cavalry. He was not to engage until General Nadero appeared from the south with his cavalry and whatever was left of the fifty thousand militia. I had but a little over eight thousand warriors left at the Shrine, and that was including our reserves.

Our force of warriors had to somehow find a way to last until General Nadero could arrive and then General Santaran's troops would make their presence known. The appearance of two armies on the enemy's flanks would hopefully be enough to convince the Attorgron slave warriors to throw in with us. Without them turning sides we didn't stand a chance. Even with them, our chance of winning was still minimal at

best.

I was starting to feel like Rolf. I wanted to quit thinking about it and just get started in on it, but anything that wasted time was to our advantage so I held back from issuing the order for the archers to fire. If the enemy wanted to stand there and gloat, then fine by me. I'd let them do it all day long if they wanted.

The enemy's trumpets suddenly rang out, splitting the formerly tranquil morning air with their blare of challenge. The enemy formation began to approach and I gave the order for the archers to fire.

"Rolf, we're likely to be overrun early in some parts, so be sure to rush the reserve to those areas as you see fit. Go and make ready for the assault. Give

the order to fall back to the Shrine as our positions are overrun on the breastwork defense. We'll make our last stand at the Shrine itself."

Rolf turned to go but hesitated and then turned back and offered a hand out to me, "See you soon, brother."

I knew what he meant and I took his hand, "Likewise, brother!"

Then he was gone and I turned back to the enemy as they started reaching our forward ditches. I picked up a bow by my side and notched an arrow only to let it fly seconds later.

The bow wasn't my weapon of choice, but I was proficient enough with it to make most of my arrows count. They reached the deeper trench and broke formation as they began to climb down and then up the other side, which

was higher and studded with sharpened stakes and the littered bodies of those slain throughout the night. I laid the bow down, reached over my shoulders and pulled my twin sabers free of their sword harnesses.

I would have preferred to have had Tadias's war sword in my hands, but I had left it on Flin, fearing that its constant glowing and sprays of light would have made me too big of a target to enemy archers during the night. I hated the thought of it falling into the enemy's hands, but I couldn't do any more than I already was in trying to stop that from becoming a reality. There was no more time to think about fabled swords or even winning and losing.

The enemy was upon us and I swept my swords down, smashing their blocks

away as I slashed at any soft target that came available to me. Wounded and dead enemy soldiers fell backward to drag even more of their fellow warriors down with them, but the press of the enemy was relentless and they just kept coming. I lost awareness of the greater battle taking place around me and knew only the perimeter of ground that I had carved out for myself directly around me.

The fighting grew savage as they began to make it up and over the top of our earthwork defense line. I jumped up onto the mound top itself, unmindful of enemy archers, as I was lost in the need to hold the enemy back at all costs. My twin blades moved independently of each other, sometimes combining to take out a single opponent or, at other times,

engaging two or more of the enemy at a time.

Always I kept moving, never staying in one place too long to become a target of the heavy press of enemy soldiers that seemed to be all around me. This was different than the arena. I had never faced so many at once before, but the key to survival was the same. Take the fight to them. Don't let them dictate my movements. Always keep moving. First pressing then retreating, then pressing again.

Fellow warriors were becoming harder and harder to find in the press of bodies and I helped those I could, but they all seemed to disappear in time and I was left alone. I was used to being alone in my fights. Dealing with multiple opponents wasn't new to me either, but

this was pushing it. Still, there was a similarity to the arena about the fight scene. The movement of their slashing thrusts and rushes to grapple with me was almost predictable. One only had to keep up with the dance to deal the fatal blow before they had the chance to start their move or had just missed on their move.

The mound was slippery with blood and it was becoming increasingly harder to navigate with any grace of movement other than a stagger. My left arm hurt at the shoulder from where I had been too late to avoid a crushing blow from a war hammer.

I could feel the blood trickling down under my armor from a graze to my neck caused by a spear point thrust at my head. Sweat rolled into the slash and it

burned like fire. I saw the sweaty, angry faces of the enemy around me, yelling out who knows what as they tried to catch me and at the same time avoid being caught by my ever swinging blades.

All was quiet in my world and I didn't really hear them even though the din of the battle noise had to be overwhelming. I had tuned out the noises and distractions around me and simply reacted to the opportunities I saw, almost unconscious in my awareness of what was going on around me outside of the sphere of death that I dealt out to any who fell within the path of my blades.

Dimly it registered to me that I hadn't seen anyone on my side who was alive for a long time. Clearing a brief swath around me, I glanced to the right and then

the left. It was all bad as both ends of the line had been completely overrun as well as my section in the middle, except for where I alone still defended and my run of luck could be over in a second with one ill advised move on my part.

There was nothing to be done about it. I had no sense of how much time might have passed by. All I could do was keep killing until there were no more of them or no more of me.

Suddenly, like an assault on my emotions that smarted worse than the salt of my sweat falling into my wounds, I thought of Krista and the life I had hoped to experience with her. All gone now!

The knowledge of my futility to control the future and to survive the present enraged me and the enemy once again reeled backward from me as I took

out my rage on them even more savagely than before.

Out of the sea of faces my eyes caught sight of Rolf. We turned back to back and fought in unison of movement unequaled by any other than those who have been tried by fire in the bonds of a brotherhood thicker than blood.

One of Rolf's arms appeared to be almost useless from some wound and I extended myself even further to keep him alive and the brunt of the attention on me and not on him. Rolf slipped and I saw him pitch down the side of the mound in the direction of the Shrine and I dove after him hacking and slashing as I went.

It was useless to stay on the mound anymore anyway. Rolf was trying to get up but wasn't succeeding as his one arm hung uselessly beside him while he tried

to block the downward thrusts of the enemy with his remaining hand. I have big hands and I was never more grateful of that than now. I grasped both of my saber handles in my right hand with the blades set opposite to each other and with my left hand I grasped the back of Rolf's collar and drug him backward across the ground as I headed for the Shrine ahead of us.

I stabbed left and right with my double-sword grip. It seemed the rage on my face was enough to part those ahead of us. Rolf gamely swung out at those who followed after us with his one good arm, as I drug him along the ground toward the Shrine. A sudden crushing blow to my back had me flying forward to my knees, struggling to find breath.

I half pivoted on one knee to see the

source of the attack as air began to leak back into my starved lungs. The enemy soldiers had actually drawn back from me and Rolf slightly and then I saw why. One of the dark hooded figures had come up behind me and slammed me across the back with a broadsword. I was surprised that my armor had withstood such a strike.

The big sword drew back for a killing downward strike. I dropped one sword into my open left hand and I barely had enough time to cross them into an x above my head before the massive sword came crashing down. I caught the strike in the crossing of my swords that would have otherwise cut me in half and I tumbled backward. Breathing heavy, I half stumbled to my feet.

The black hood came back and I

recognized Marfoul. “Stand back, you sniveling cowards! He’s all mine!” Marfoul screamed out, before he came at me with a vengeance.

I did my best to step out of the way of his wild sword swings. “So we meet again, but this time will be the last!” He raged out at me.

“I seem to remember you saying something like that before. How did that turn out for you?” I taunted.

Marfoul howled at me and swung his sword. Thankfully, he missed. He pressed me backward and I had to admit that I was farther gone than I had realized. The sword in my left hand fell from my grasp as my shoulder clamped up in an intense ball of pain from an earlier injury. As I deflected a killing blow with my right sword, the impact of

his larger blade sent my lighter sword sailing from my grasp into the sea of onlookers.

The force of the hit drove me down to my knees and Marfoul drew his sword high over top his head with a triumphant scream of fiendish joy. I watched, helpless to do any more, as the sword began to come downward, only to be suddenly arrested as two massive arms appeared from behind and encircled Marfoul's chest, clamping tight across it and halting the downward progress of the blade as they did so. I recognized the figure behind the struggling Marfoul as that belonging to Olaf.

He was covered in blood, much of it his own, but somehow he held onto Marfoul as the dark enforcer twisted and howled to be set free.

“Get him off me!” Marfoul cried out hysterically, the sword still locked in position above his head.

The surrounding soldiers rushed in and began to repeatedly stab Olaf, but even then he held onto Marfoul. Beyond any normal limit of human endurance, his great strength refused to give in. But as he bled dry his arms fell free and he slumped forward into a heap, having already been dead for several moments as his muscular impulses continued to protect his friend and master.

Marfoul turned and mercilessly hacked away at the fallen man before turning back to me with a vengeance. He came towards me then with baleful death in his eyes. I watched as soldiers behind him shot into the air to either side and dimly I wondered what could possibly

be coming next.

Sensing the disturbance behind him, Marfoul turned slightly, but he was too late to dive out of the way as Flin caught him with a big shoulder that sent Marfoul flying past me.

Flin, in full protective warhorse temperament, swung around me in a circle and sent enemy soldiers flying or crushed them to the ground beneath his hooves. He then wheeled straight at me and catapulted forward onto his knees skidding in his fall to present me with his left side.

His wild, flared eyes connected with mine and I knew in that moment that the Creator had given this horse more intelligence than even I had given Flin credit for, or at least some special awareness in this moment.

I knew in that moment that God had not forsaken me. Even as Flin's crashing weight shook the ground I leaned forward and with both hands, regardless of the pain it caused me, I pulled my sword free of its saddle sheath. I twisted at the waist, falling back against Flin's belly as I swung the sword upward.

The sword came alive in my hands like never before and connected with the downward swing of Marfoul's sword, as he had come rushing up behind me with his blade already descending down toward me. I did not even feel the impact of his sword as it contacted with mine. His blade shattered like glass and he went flying backwards from me through the crowd of men. Gaining my feet, I staggered toward him. I stopped at his feet as he lay stunned.

He looked up at me with an awful comprehension in his glassy eyes. “This is for Treorna, the Kurts and me!” I said savagely, as I brought the brightly arcing blade down with all the force I could muster.

As my sword struck him, a bright light exploded and consumed him where he lay and as the blade of the sword carried on through to hit the ground, a corresponding shockwave of terrific force radiated outward, knocking every enemy soldier to the ground within the compound and even to the ditch beyond the earthwork enforcements.

I remained standing, even as my fellow warriors gathered in a tattered line in front of the Shrine of Remembrance did also. The ground itself coalesced into a consuming fire

that devoured the enemy both alive and slain, but left the bodies of my fellow slain warriors untouched.

Flin went to one knee beside me and I swung onboard as he lifted up and away. Together we rode through the field of fire, untouched by its flame, to the top of the mound. Flin reared back, screaming a challenge to the shattered remnants of the attacking force beyond the burning ditch and I yelled out one of my own.

I held the sword aloft as Flin's front hooves crashed back down onto the top of the mound, spewing chunks of burning wood all around us in a fury of lit embers.

"The Lord my God is the God of battles, of whom shall I fear! He is Master of all and there is none before Him! To Him all glory and honor is due!

Behold this day our Creator fights for us, as our cause is just and His mercy is great for those that call upon His name and are faithful to His Holy Word! He has heard our cries and taken our fears captive, even as we will be avenged this day!”

My words lashed out over the battlefield like words of thunder even as a white light, too bright to look upon, shot out of the end of the sword I still held aloft into the dark clouds of war above. A crescendo of echoing thunder rumbled out over the battlefield.

The remnant of the attacking force dropped their weapons in their haste to flee back to the mass of the larger part of the enemy army still gathered farther back on the plain. As I sat there astride Flin, I watched as the retreating soldiers

were cut down by their own men. As the last of the retreating men fell, I watched the army gathered on the plain slowly start out for us.

I glanced to either side of me and saw the remnant of warriors, who were still able to stand and fight, spread out in a ragged thin line to either side of me on top of the mound. My grip on the sword tightened as I turned to face the enemy once more. We would be wiped out within moments by such a force, but it didn't matter. We had already won.

I felt a hand on my leg and glancing down I saw Nadalarkin standing there, bloody and bruised. He had been with me in the arena and the years that had followed and I had only known him to always be faithful to me. He could very well be the last friend I had left alive

from the old days.

He was gesturing to the sea behind me, “Look Roric! Surely they wouldn’t! They’ll be smashed to bits!”

I turned in the saddle to look behind. Way out at the head of the bay, I saw a row of sails stretched out full with the wind and colored a bright burgundy with streaks of gold across them. They were the battle sails of only one nation, the Tranquil Islanders.

“Roric, they're dead men! They’ll be smashed to bits on the rocks!” Nadalarkin exclaimed, looking up at me.

“Maybe so my friend and then maybe not. Who can say?”

Nadalarkin glanced from the distant sails that were fast approaching the rocks to the glowing sword in my hand and smiled lightly back up at me, “It’s

been a day of miracles so far. Perhaps they'll be another."

Chapter Twenty One

Wave of Creation

Captain Jansa stood at the prow of his first command, the Fair Damson. It was likely to be his last command. Salt spray kicked up and splattered his tunic, but he took no notice of the cold seawater that was drenching him as he thought back to the night before at the captain's meeting on the fleet's flagship.

The night before, Tranquil Islander Fleet at anchor for the night.

The Admiral had spoken first to start the meeting, "Captains, as you know, despite our best efforts we were unable to outrun the enemy fleet after we broke through their blockade. They got to the western shore first and now we are blocked from landing our troops to aid our only allies in this war. I know what I think is best for us in this moment, but I want to hear from you captains as to what our course of action should be now that we have been blocked from our objective. I ask this because I think it is a decision that should not be made by just one man. I give the floor to you captains, what do you have to say? I will preface the discussion by placing two options before you. Either we attack the enemy fleet and try to break through to the

beach, or we turn our ships around and return to our islands to await the fight that will eventually come to our own ground."

Captain Jansa, the most junior captain present, stood up from the far end of the table where he was seated and addressed the admiral, "Neither option sir!"

"What do you mean by such a statement, Captain Jansa?" the admiral asked, as he speculatively eyed the young captain.

"I mean to say that, with all due respect Sir, neither option presented before us can accomplish anything meaningful in the outcome of this war. Attacking the enemy fleet guarding the western shore is sheer suicide, Sir. Not one of our ships will reach the beach,

except perhaps later as a piece of idly floating driftwood. Sacrificing ourselves in such an attempt will serve little purpose other than to help us preserve our honor with a noble death. As for the other option; Sir, as you yourself said, this war will come to be fought on our own shores some day not too distant from now, if the battle taking place is lost by our allies. If we leave this fight we return home without our honor, only to face the inevitable outcome of our own fate at a later date. The outcome will be the same, only we will die without honor after having run from this battle that our allies are proudly facing head on. It is neither the way nor the means that I and our people want to fade into the pages of history!"

The captains were silently contemplative in the aftermath of Captain Jansa's words, with even a few of them nodding in apparent agreement with his expressed sentiments.

The Admiral broke the silence, "True words, Captain Jansa, but tell me, as honorable men, what other option is left to us but to attack the enemy fleet in the morning?"

Captain Jansa met the old eyes of the Admiral squarely, "I propose that we sail north around the rocky headland of Remembrance Bay and make our way through the rocks to beach our ships in the sands before the Shrine. Some of our ships will be lost on the rocks, perhaps all of them, but this way there is a greater chance of us landing a fighting force to help our friends than

in attacking the enemy navy outright. I am persuaded to believe that at least some of us will make the beach, as our ancestors did somehow so long ago. It is an honorable death at the very least."

There was silence around the table as every captain present had at some time seen the rocks guarding the small bay and each was now imagining what it would be like to attempt to sail through such an obstacle.

The Admiral studied the young captain thoughtfully for a moment, "An intriguing option and one that I had not considered. What do you think of the captain's third option Captain Nargo?"

The grey headed captain to the Admiral's right responded slowly and

thoughtfully as he stared at the table top in front of him, as if seeing something there no one else could discern, "The Captain's logic is sound, I believe. I find it only regrettable that no better strategy than this lies open to us, but rarely have I found war to offer an agreeable path to victory either. It has my vote and my congratulations to the young Captain for coming forward with such a daring plan. Who knows, it might work! Stranger things have happened before."

The Admiral looked around the table and saw a quiet acknowledgement echoed on the faces of the other captains.

"It's settled then, gentlemen! Tonight we will weigh anchor and sail around the headland through the night

and make our attempt to pass the rocks in the morning's first light. May it be that the Creator will have mercy on us and allow us to fight by our friend's side after all. Return to your ships and make ready, for we sail within the hour. Captain Jansa, if you would stay behind a moment."

The captains got up and started to leave. The last captain to leave the room, who captained the Admiral's flagship turned back to the Admiral, "Sir?" he asked.

"Yes, what is it Captain?"

The captain looked hesitant to speak, "Sir, as you well know the Tasa'Anna is larger than any other ship in the fleet. We cannot possibly even hope to fit between the narrow confines of the rocks guarding the bay!"

"Be that as it may, Captain, the Tasa'Anna sails with the fleet tomorrow. I never ask more from my sailors than I am personally willing to do myself."

"Yes Sir!" the Captain said quickly, opening the door to leave.

"And Captain, I want her to look her finest tomorrow, understood?"

"It will be done Sir!"

The door closed softly and the old Admiral rose stiffly and walked over to Captain Jansa.

His arms came up and he hugged Captain Jansa to him tightly, "I could never have asked the Creator for a finer son than you! Never was there a prouder father than I!"

Captain Jansa returned his father's embrace, but asked with emotion in his

voice, "How can you say that father, when I have surely killed you and all those aboard the Tasa'Anna on the morrow?"

The Admiral leaned back from his son, still holding onto his son's shoulders, "Who can tell what will happen tomorrow? You must have faith my son!"

Captain Jansa was startled out of his memories of the night before as a sailor addressed him, "What is it?"

"The Admiral has signaled the fleet, Captain!"

"And the message?"

"Godspeed Sir!"

Captain Jansa nodded and thanked the sailor as he turned back to the prow railing. They would need plenty of

divine intervention if they were to make it through the roiling juggernaut that lay just ahead of them. He started to pray as he had all night long since the captain's meeting, when the same sailor tugged on his sleeve again. He turned to see what else the man wanted.

The sailor stood with his sea cap in his hands, his stance respectful, "Beggin' your pardon Captain, but the men and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind praying out loud."

Captain Jansa looked beyond the sailor to see that sailors and soldiers alike were intently staring at him. Stepping past the sailor to make his way to the main mast of the ship, he knelt down on one knee and placed one hand on the mast beam while he held his hat in his other and bowed his head.

"Lord, your servants have need of Your grace in this hour. Give us the courage that our circumstances demand and open up the sea lanes ahead of us and grant the wooden beams of our ships the strength of iron so that we can reach the far shore and help our friends claim the victory that I pray that You would give us this day. Thy will be done in all things, Amen."

Captain Jansa rose back up to his feet, as did many of those on board. He started back towards the prow when the ship shuddered violently.

Had they already run into the rocks? He ran to the starboard side of the ship and was in time to see a monstrous head crown out of the seawater.

A whale!

The blast from its spout sheeted cold

sea water down onto the shuddering deck of the ship. Another splash of water onto the deck had him wheeling around to see another great head rise out of the sea on the other side of the ship.

Two whales!

Suddenly the ship went up into the air and then back down again and then up again and so on.

Men were thrown to the deck and some were almost thrown over the side by the force of the up and down motion. It was like riding a giant bucking horse.

The whales were carrying the ship!

"Cut the sails and let the rudder go! Quick, at it men, these sea beasts are taking us for a ride!"

Awestruck sailors stumbled to

accomplish the tasks given to them. Captain Jansa looked out at the other ships along the line only to see the same unbelievable phenomenon happening.

The rocks loomed close, but the big beasts that bore the ship charged toward them, heedless of their danger. The helm's wheel began to turn freely as the two great whales turned to the right slightly, swimming in unison with each other. The hull of the ship was balanced between them.

The Fair Damson raced into the jagged rocks carried along by its two shepherds. The whales turned first one way and then the other, as they steered the ship through the rocky obstructions in its path. Their great bodies slammed into the rocks, and the sea foamed red

from their injuries, but the ship never touched a rock.

Sailors and soldiers alike clung to each other and the ship for dear life, as the ship rose and fell violently. Salt spray cascaded onto the decks drenching everyone.

Captain Jansa clutched the side of the ship's railing near the prow and looked across at the great eye of the whale, which was so close to him that if he had leaned out he could have touched it. Ships everywhere were being ferried through the perilous rocks by the great beasts of the sea.

They were through the rocks suddenly and the beasts bearing them headed straight for the beach, picking up speed with every moment that went by. What of the flagship?

The Tasa'Anna, being bigger and slower, had been at the back of the fleet. Captain Jansa strained to see what had become of her and his father. The Tasa'Anna was under full sail headed along the cliffside wall of the leeward rocky headland. It was the only place where the channel was wide enough to accommodate it, but it was also the most dangerous route to have taken.

The seawater, in a backlash of current, smashed up against the cliffside wall with a force that would ground anything it caught to pieces. The Tasa'Anna sailed ferociously down the narrow channel at full speed. What was keeping the ship from being pushed sideways against the cliff and destroyed?

Captain Jansa's jaw fell open as he saw a bluish whale's head, far larger than the ones carrying their ship, rise out of the sea on the cliffside of the ship. It was acting as a buffer for the Tasa'Anna, to keep it away from the cliff rocks, at its own expense!

In horror, Captain Jansa looked at what lay ahead of the Tasa'Anna. The narrow channel took a sharp turn that no ship under full sail could ever have made. To make matters worse, the cliff overhung the channel at that point. The overhanging cliff would rip every main mast clear off the ship!

The fleet watched in horrified fascination as the flagship neared the sharp curve and the low overhang. Water began to boil up near an up thrust of one of the bay's rocky teeth. A

great rubbery bulk rose out of the sea and hauled itself up the rocky breaker opposite of the sharp curve. It was a giant squid!

It was easily over half the size of the flagship itself. Some of its tentacles encircled the rocky pier it clung to. As the Tasa'Anna entered the beginning of the curve the remaining tentacles and whips of the great sea monster shot out, fastened to the upper masts of the ship and began to pull the Tasa'Anna over onto its side.

The ship, under the strain of the pulling tentacles, tacked over until the side railing of the ship almost dipped under the foamy waves of the sea. The heeled over masts cleared the cliff overhang even as the Tasa'Anna swung around the sharp curve pivoted by the

straining squid that doggedly held onto it. The Tasa'Anna shot out into the clear waters of the bay, righting itself as the squid let go, even as a second great blue whale rose to bolster the ship's speed toward the beach.

Sailors and soldiers alike jumped up and down in amazed excitement.

"Onward men!" cried Captain Jansa at the top of his lungs, as he drew his saber and gestured toward the fast approaching sands of the beach.

"Of a truth, our God is the Master of the universe and all creation! Onward, for He is with us this day!"

The giant bulk of the squid slid off its rocky pier back into the sea to soon disappear beneath the stirred up waters of the channel. The whales bore their cargoes steadfastly toward the

beach, only letting them go at the last moment before they nearly beached themselves on the sandy shore.

The Tranquil Islander boats skipped through the shallows to then thud thunderously into the sands of the beach. Soldiers and sailors alike boiled over the sides of the ships and ran up the beach, past the Shrine, to the earthwork fortifications beyond, over thirty thousand strong in number.

The tattered line of warriors gathered on the mound top watched them come upwards toward them, looking to each other repeatedly to make sure they weren't alone in what they had just seen transpire on the ocean blue. This was a day of days and all they could think, as they stood weary and bloody, but resolute of will,

was how blessed they were to be a part of something so grand.

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Nadalarkin glanced up at me and nodded, as if words couldn't provide an adequate description for what we had just seen and I tended to agree with him. I saw Captain Jansa in the press of men making their way to the mound top.

"I see you managed to come through after all, Captain. Thank you for coming! I only hope it's to something more positive than our deaths at their hands," I gestured to the approaching enemy that had temporarily halted their advance to just outside arrow range.

There appeared to be confusion among the massed ranks of enemy soldiers as to why they were suddenly so many of us before them, when they

had thought us almost beaten and few in number.

Captain Jansa looked up to me, “Whether we live or we die, we’re here to fight, even if it be to the last one of us in a glorious defeat! We fight by our friend’s side for the freedom of our two peoples!”

“Perhaps not to the death after all, Captain Jansa. Look!” I exclaimed, pointing.

To the south, behind the enemy army on the plain, rose a large dust cloud that grew larger and larger. General Nadero had made it!

The enemy had also noticed the cloud of dust, but not as soon as they should have as their focus had been entirely directed upon us and our resurgent numbers. The cloud of dust grew no

closer, but rose to hang in the air. Slowly, out of the dissipating dust, the ranks of marching men materialized, even as a long unbroken stream of cavalry cut off to the side in the direction of the western shore.

General Nadero intended to cut the enemy off from any support by their fleet, which was gathering offshore. The militia stood in the way of any retreat back to the enemy's homeland in the south.

My eyes drifted to the northeast to see that General Santaran’s army had materialized from hiding and was quickly approaching the battle. He had his ten thousand strong cavalry contingent aligned along his left flank, probably to offer quick support to the militia brigades should they have need

of it.

The field of battle was set and the trap sprung with the enemy caught in the middle. Now all that remained was to see if the Attorgron slave warriors were convinced enough to join in with us, if not it would be them that General Santaran's warriors encountered first, as the Attorgrons were aligned along the left side of the enemy's formation before us at the Shrine.

There was a flurry of action within the enemy ranks and it soon became clear that taking the Shrine had fallen to the bottom of the list of priorities. The Zoarinians had never overly favored the use of cavalry in their military strategy, rather the use of heavy infantry instead. They had but forty thousand of their own cavalry, most of which were lancers.

Lancers were good for charges on ground units, but not so good in the pressed confines of a melee fight with other cavalry. All of the Zoarinian cavalry sheeted off to form a long line facing General Nadero's cavalry that had drawn up in the sands of the western shore and was now busy forming their own line.

I called down to Nadalarkin, who looked up at my call, "Bring the horses up from the beach and mount the remainder of our men on them. When the battle is joined, we will ride towards the western shore and attack the enemy cavalry from the rear after they've engaged with General Nadero's cavalry."

"Yes Roric!" Nadalarkin said quickly, making his way off the mound and

calling out to the Valley Lander warriors to join him.

A group of sea captains had formed around me and I turned to them now, "When the battle is joined, and only after it has been joined, take your men and attack the enemy's flank. Do not attack too early, as it is unclear yet whether the Attorgrons are friend or foe!"

They saluted as one and I left them with, "Godspeed my friends!" before I made my way towards the western side of the fortification line, watching the field of battle take shape as I did so.

The militia was moving up quickly from the south and General Santaran's more rested warriors were moving even more quickly towards the front lines of the Attorgrons, while his cavalry had drawn into a support position for the

militia. General Nadero seemed content to let the enemy make the first move and sat waiting with his cavalry aligned along the beach at almost equal numbers with the opposing cavalry force that was arrayed against him.

From the enemy's shift of ground troops, it became quickly clear that they were primarily concerned with the elimination of the militia to the south, which cut off their escape to their homeland. It was also the softest target and the most likely to be overcome quickly. If they broke the militia, they would probably then sweep around the back of General Santaran's forces, which was why he had probably sent his cavalry to bolster the militia's line. A wise move on his part, but would it be enough? I doubted it.

Everything hinged on the Attorgrons and what they would do. They had separated away from the main body of the army, slightly towards General Santaran, and appeared to be setting up a defensive line, while the bulk of the Zoarinian army was shifting to attack the militia at the rear.

Then it happened. I thanked the Creator fervently, as I watched the slave warrior's change of heart unfold. The Attorgron archers abruptly slipped through the formed shield wall of their spearmen, towards General Santaran, even as the wings of the shield wall of spearmen broke off and charged into the massed ranks of regular army cavalry that were split into two equal flanking groups of twenty five thousand, each on either side of the long spear wall.

The Attorgron cavalry were in a state of complete consternation, as they were speared off their horses by their own slave warriors. In the close confines, and with the element of surprise firmly on their side, the spearmen carved their way into the cavalry contingents to either side of them with relative ease, setting off complete chaos as they did so.

The central core of the spear wall did an abrupt about face and locked their shields together, even as a massive short ranged volley of arrows shot out over their heads into the congested mass of the Zoarinian army. The Zoarinians were thrown into complete turmoil at the unexpectedness of the attack of arrows that dropped thousands of unsuspecting soldiers.

The betrayal of the Attorgrons

abruptly changed the course of the battle, as the Zoarinians were forced to change their focus away from the militia to the traitors in their midst. They attacked the spear wall en mass with little formation or order involved in the attack.

General Nadero's cavalry started out in a brisk trot towards the enemy, intent on taking advantage of the turmoil present in their disorganized ranks. Their movement forward sparked a reaction from the enemy cavalry which took off at an uneven start towards the approaching cavalry.

General Santaran's warriors ran through the ranks of Attorgron archers to strengthen the hard-pressed forward shield wall of the Attorgron slave warriors. On the flanks of the formation they swept through the remaining

Attorgron cavalry, finishing what the spearmen had begun.

The fighting was close and intense as the Zoarinian soldiers realized that the odds were no longer on their side. The approaching militia had seemingly been forgotten in the chaos and they now swept towards the enemy's southern flank uncontested, even as the Tranquil Islanders, with a wild yell, started down the earthwork fortifications in a charge towards the western flank of the enemy's battle line.

There was an opportunity to be had here and I hoped General Santaran could see it. I wheeled Flin to the side to see the remnant of warriors that had survived the earlier battle for the Shrine mounted behind me, led by Nadalarkin.

Their horses shifted about nervously,

as if they were eager to take part in the battle that was raging beyond us in unbridled intensity.

"To me!" I yelled, as I wheeled Flin around and plunged down the mound, weaving in and around the forward facing sharpened stakes.

They followed me, screaming with renewed energy from some deep well of being, as they charged up and over the mound top to plunge down after me. Up ahead of me, I could see the kicked up dirt of the Zoarinian lancers, as they charged in a full gallop at the onrushing Valley Lander cavalry ahead of them.

Flin seemed to float across the ground, covering the distance with ease, and I relished the feel of the powerful horse beneath me that was as committed to the battle as I was. The several

hundred mounted warriors at my back were strung out in a loose line, as they urged their mounts harder to catch up with Flin. Regretfully, I eased Flin back some to let them come abreast of me. As the wind rushed past us, I saw the two virtually equal cavalry contingents ahead of us connect together with a terrific force of impact.

Horses flipped over forwards and warriors were sent hurtling through the air to be crushed in the melee of pounding hooves or impaled on lowered lances. The fighting turned vicious. Broken lances were dropped and swords and maces were drawn out as the two sides fought to get in close to each other.

Those who fell in the initial impact of furious contact were trampled by the

riders around them in their wild desire to kill each other and survive.

The wind whipped by my face as we plunged toward the backs of the halted, melee driven enemy ahead of us. I knew a moment of savage joy when I saw General Santaran's mounted warriors, ten thousand strong, surging towards the backs of the melee-engrossed enemy cavalry on their southern flank, even as we were doing on their northern flank. He had seen the opportunity presented, just as I had, when the enemy had redirected their attention from the weaker militia to attack the Attorgrons.

Letting the mighty warhorse beneath me have his way, I let the reins fall. I raised my sword above my head and gripped it in both hands as the line of the enemy drew near. I crashed into the side

of a soldier's mount which had been in the process of turning to meet our attack from behind.

The rider's eyes were wide with terror as Flin slammed into his horse. Flin's powerful momentum sent the other horse crashing over to the ground and we surged up and over both horse and rider. I swept my sword down to the left and then back up and down to the right as I hacked my way through the tight press of riders in front of me.

Flin was as vicious as I was. He slammed his way through the enemy mounts and I saw him reach out and grab one man's arm with his teeth and yank the man from the saddle with a powerful toss of his head, only to trample over the man in the next instance. Flin needed no urging to fight a way through the enemy

line.

I saw General Nadero's men up ahead and I turned Flin with my knees so that we headed up the enemy line to carve out our own bloody path of carnage. Sparks of color sheeted off the sword with every heavy swing downward that connected.

Curls of colored smoke twined down my arms to my torso and then down onto Flin. I was getting used to it, but it was still rather jarring to behold. Of the enemy, man and beast alike drew back from us, as much as the tight press would allow, unnerved by our appearance. Flin had gone berserk and I'm not sure how I stayed in the saddle, but I did.

The sound and sight of a stallion at war is to see what utter fearlessness looks like. It is an utter ferocity of

magnificent blood lust and I allowed myself to be swept up in it as I swung my sword with abandon.

There was space around me and in the fog of war I looked around to see why, only to discover more of my own kind than that of the enemy. Where was the enemy?

It was then that I saw that they had broken and were fleeing back towards the main army. It was time to finish this day! Grabbing the sword in one hand I hauled Flin around and charged after the departing riders, determined to not let any of them get away.

So lost was I in the action of the moment that I did not know that I charged alone after the enemy, but General Nadero saw it.

He surged free of a knot of the enemy that was still fighting and screamed, gesturing after me with his sword, “To Roric men! To Victory!”

He surged after me, waving his bloody sword in a call to arms, as screaming warriors pulled away from finishing off the rest of the enemy, to charge madly towards the bigger battle ensuing on the plain. Passed over enemy lancers wheeled their mounts toward the south and home, as the Valley Lander cavalry surged in a screaming mass of raw emotion after their leaders and the greater battle raging on the plain.

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Flin stretched out in a pace eating canter. His sweat soaked sides heaved for air as we caught up with fleeing enemy cavalrymen. One by one I sent

them toppling from their saddles with savage strokes of my sword. Ahead of us I saw the pressed ranks of the enemy and I urged Flin onwards toward them, screaming insanely in my desire to destroy them all.

We plowed into them full tilt. The impact almost sent Flin to his knees, but he regained his stride and we carved our way into them, once again lost in the bloodlust of the moment.

One by one, front running Valley Lander cavalry plowed into the enemy and then thousands hit the panicking enemy line with deadening force.

The heavy cavalry swept through the Zoarinian ranks with the tenacity of a sheep dog through a herd of sheep and the enemy reacted as sheep. The

Zoarinian army as a whole visibly wavered, as they saw that their supporting cavalry was gone and that they were being attacked from all sides.

Surrounded and disheartened by a campaign that had promised easy victory, but had only delivered them losses, they broke. The will to fight was gone, only to be replaced with a desperation to live.

The broken soldiers rushed past the onrushing cavalry towards the shore and the ships at anchor beyond. Thousands more of them fell in their headlong rush to the sea, hounded by the Valley Landers and their allies as savagely as a pack of wolves would run down a lame elk.

I drew up in the sand and watched as

the survivors of the broken army swam out into the sea with a strength and fervor born out of desperation. The ships had come in close to pick up the survivors and they began to loose off arrows at us. I gave the order to pull back from the beach to avoid further casualties on our side. The battle was won.

Upon hearing excited screams ring out all around me I turned in the saddle to look back once more at the escaping soldiers. The enemy ships dotting the shoreline were shaking and pitching around like they were the chew toys of some massive unseen hound. Had they run aground?

Then I saw some of the unknown aggressors as they surfaced briefly for air.

Whales!

The same beasts that had brought our allies to us were now smashing away at the enemy's fleet without mercy. Ships began to sink, their hulls shattered, as still other ships made way for the open ocean forsaking the screaming soldiers trying to swim out to them.

The escape of the navy wasn't to be though. I saw one of the ships, farthest out to sea, completely pulled under by the encircling tentacles of some huge sea monster.

What a bloodbath this day had been!

I noticed General Nadero by my side and, as if sensing a gathering darkness crowding the corners of my consciousness, I reached out and clutched at his shoulder, "General, no more killing! Let the survivors go! We

have our victory."

He grabbed my arm, "Consider it done Roric! Roric, are you okay? Roric, are…."

His words sounded hollow and far away from me and I realized that I was falling. Endlessly freefalling downward.

Chapter Twenty Two

Awareness Begun

General Nadero stood at the end of the bed with a look of puzzlement, tinged with concern, on his face as he stared down at the still figure resting on the bed before him.

"I don't understand doctor! It's been almost two weeks since the battle! His injuries have healed! Even his shoulder bruising has gone down. Why is he still not stirring?"

The bent over doctor tried to straighten up, but gave up on the

attempt with a grimace of pain on his face and sighed loudly.

Turning to the General he asked, "General, have you ever had a bad fever that lasted for days?"

"Yes."

"How did you feel after it broke?"

"Like I'd just fought a war," General Nadero said clearly, still not understanding what the doctor was getting at.

"Well that's exactly what Roric's going through. Not only did he exhaust himself physically, but his mind too I think. There may be damage done inside his head that we can't see. Shutting down like this is the body's way of taking the time to heal itself. He'll come out of it when he's ready. What he needs now is rest."

The General still looked puzzled, but less concerned. He nodded and then left the room.

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The doctor stared at the closed door for a moment and then turned back to the patient lying still in the bed and Thaddeus, who was sitting in a chair beside the bed.

"Thaddeus, I didn't want to tell the General, but I am growing concerned. Two weeks is a long time."

"I know," Thaddeus said softly, as he stared at his grandson lying so still on the bed.

Roric's chest was barely moving as he breathed shallowly.

"Thaddeus, I know something like this happened to you when you were a young man. What brought you out of

it?"

A slow tear slid down Thaddeus's old weathered cheek, "My wife. She brought me out of it."

"Is there anything strong and focal in Roric's life that would inspire him to keep living?" the doctor asked.

"I don't know! I've sat here racking my brain about it! I thought bringing him home to Thunder Ridge would help. He loves it here. He could be and do almost anything he wanted, too. Everyone adores him. He has the little girl he brought back with him from the forests to raise. I don't know what to do to motivate him to come back to us, Orlanin."

"Thaddeus, isn't there a woman in his life? Someone he cares for a great deal, like you did for your wife?"

"No, I ...." Thaddeus paused mid sentence as if pondering something, "Where's Zarsha?" Thaddeus asked abruptly.

The nurse that accompanied the old doctor everywhere he went spoke up from a corner of the room, "I saw her playing in the butterfly garden near the eastern tower earlier, Sir."

Thaddeus shoved his chair back, rose to his feet abruptly and headed around the bed for the door. He thumped the doctor on the back harder than he should have as he left the room.

The old doctor, after recovering from the hard smack, met the nurse's eyes and they shared a smile, as they listened to the rapid tap of Thaddeus's cane departing down the hall.

Thaddeus was breathing hard by the time he reached the butterfly garden near the east tower.

"Haven't walked so fast in years," Thaddeus wheezed out to himself, as he leaned against a stone wall, briefly trying to get his breathing under control.

He looked out over the profusion of flowers in the garden in search of Zarsha. There she was.

She was such a beautiful child, with such a sweet temperament to match. Her arrival at Thunder Ridge had been an unexpected joy for him. He had spent many of his afternoons listening to her imaginative stories and then had told her many fanciful ones of his own making. He made his way over to her, his leg throbbing painfully.

She was standing waist deep in the middle of a patch of purple Hatacha flowers. She had her finger held up in front of her face and he could see that a beautiful Naortian Butterfly had chosen to land on her finger.

Thaddeus sat down on a garden bench, not wanting to interrupt the girl's fascination with the beautiful creature that was expressively flexing its wings in front of Zarsha's nose. The butterfly suddenly flew off in search of another flower. The girl watched it go, her lips parted in a sweet smile.

"Zarsha dear? Could you come over here please? I have something I need to ask you," Thaddeus said.

The little girl whirled around, her face all lit up at the sound of his voice. She ran to him with the grace of a

young deer through the wild profusion of blooms, scattering butterflies to the wind, as she came bounding up to him.

The smile at seeing him abruptly faded as she saw his face, "Did something happen to daddy?"

"No, no! He's the same honey, just sleeping!" Thaddeus said, before patting the seat beside him.

The little girl sat down beside him, her expression openly curious.

"Zarsha?"

Thaddeus paused, not quite sure how to put the question to the little girl in the best way, "Have you seen how the baker's daughter and the young guard over by the armory carry on over each other?"

The girl nodded her head with a disgusted look on her face.

Thaddeus couldn't help but smile at the face she made, but then the seriousness of the matter took over again. "Did your daddy ever act like that with a girl?"

The little girl nodded her head emphatically and hope began to spring forth in Thaddeus's heart, "Do you know what her name is?"

"Krista. I don't know what her last name is though. She's very nice!" Zarsha replied in the exuberance of a free spirited little girl.

"Do you know where she is Zarsha?"

A sad look came over the girl's face, "No, she ran away."

Thaddeus, rather puzzled by this asked, "Why did she run away?"

"She didn't want to be daddy's slave," the little girl said matter-of-

factly.

After Thaddeus got over his initial shock, a smile creased up at the corners of his mouth. So his quiet and reserved grandson with a heart of gold had a slave girl.

"Do you know what, Thaddeus?" Zarsha asked, leaning in toward him secretively like she was sharing a closely guarded secret.

"No, what?" he said as he leaned toward her, playing along.

"I don't think she really wanted to leave daddy."

"You don't say."

"I do say!" the little girl declared, as she nodded her head sagely.

"How did your daddy react after she left?" Thaddeus asked inquisitively.

Zarsha made a mean angry face,

which was comical to behold on the little girl's face.

Thaddeus got the picture though. "Zarsha, I need you to tell me everything you know about the slave girl you call Krista. Don't leave anything out."

Thaddeus spent well over an hour listening to the little girl talk. After she was done with her story he took her to the kitchens for a late morning treat. Leaving her in the adoring care of the kitchen staff, he made his way to his office and summoned his clerk.

The clerk left the office in a hurry soon thereafter. Within the hour, twelve darkly clad, capable looking men quietly slipped into the office to stand across the desk from Thaddeus.

"Good! You're all here. I have a mission for you that supersedes everything else on the agenda! I need you to find this woman!" Thaddeus said, as he rose and handed over a surprisingly good facial sketch that Zarsha had drawn for him with some charcoal.

"This is some more information about her. She has likely set up shop as an herbalist healer in a small town somewhere. It is doubtful that she is in Attorgron or Zoarinian territory, but leave no stone unturned. Gentlemen, you have all served me well in the past, please do not fail me now! Find her at all costs and report back to me at once. You can pick up travel expense money from my clerk on the way out. Find her and I will make wealthy men out of you

all!"

One of the men looked up from the sketch of the beautiful young woman with the prominent exotic facial scar and asked knowingly, "Does this woman have anything to do with your grandson?"

"She has everything to do with him!" Thaddeus responded emphatically.

"Then we do this for him. We will accept no payment for finding her."

The dark clad men filtered out of the room as quietly as they had come in. Thaddeus wasn't done yet though. He stood up from the desk and headed for his hothouse.

He had picked up a passion for exotic tropical flowers during his trips to the Attorgron forests and for many years he had nurtured many of his

favorite flowers in a special greenhouse that he had built just for them. He stormed into the humid interior of the hothouse, his cane rapping sharply on the tiled floor.

"Carlan! Carlan! Where are you man?"

His head gardener appeared from around a large Sataka flower bush. Carlan bore a puzzled expression and was clearly startled by his master's urgency.

"Yes Sir?"

"Oh, there you are. You are going to need a large pot. I don't care what you do with the weeds around it, but you are going to pot up this one right here, with all possible care!" Thaddeus said, indicating a small tropical bush that was covered in huge blue flowers that

were pepper streaked with a crimson red radiating out from their centers, with hints of peach along the ruffles of the petals.

It was commonly referred to as a fire flower and it matched the description of Krista's shoulder tattoo and the scented perfume that she liked to wear.

"If it dies, Carlan, I will personally feed you to the cannibals myself on my next expedition to the forests to replace it! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir!" Carlan said, looking clearly shaken by the threat.

"You will personally oversee the flowers transport to my grandson's room!"

"Yes, Sir!"

Thaddeus left the petrified gardener and headed back towards his

grandson's room.

The next several days passed uneventfully. Thaddeus prattled on and on about anything he could think to say about what little he knew of Krista. As he sat by Roric's bedside, he carried on entire conversations with himself, that stretched into hours. He even had Zarsha come in and talk about Krista.

During the entire time, the exotic flower bush commanded a corner of the room where it could get its share of warm sunlight. It released the heady aroma produced from its spectacular flowers into the room's atmosphere as a reward for the diligent care given to it around the clock by Carlan.

Thaddeus thought he might have seen Roric's finger move a couple of times

and his breathing seemed to be deeper and less thready than it had been, but that was as far as any improvement in his grandson's condition went. Thaddeus fought hard not to grow disheartened as time slid by with the absence of any meaningful response from his grandson.

The morning of the fifth day since he had sent his agents out, a servant burst through the door of Roric's room and startled Thaddeus awake in his chair by the bed.

"What is the meaning of bursting in here like this?" Thaddeus blustered out tiredly.

"I'm sorry Sir, but I thought you would want to read this immediately!"

The servant held up a tiny piece of paper and Thaddeus recognized it as

that of a message sent by the use of a carrier pigeon. He leaped up, forgetting his bad leg, and grimaced as he snatched the paper away from the servant. He squinted as he hurriedly read the message scrolled in tiny print on the little paper.

"They've found her Roric!" Thaddeus said excitedly.

He glanced over and saw twitches of movement occurring all over his grandson's face.

Thaddeus crafted his next words carefully, "They've found where Krista is living, Roric. She's set up a small shop in a little town. Here, I'll leave the note on this table beside your bed. You'll want to read all the details for yourself of course."

Thaddeus laid the small page on the

edge of the table near the bed. "It's right here on the table beside you Roric. It will tell you where she is so you can go bring her home, here to Thunder Ridge."

*****

The morning unfolded softly and filled the room with the strengthening day's light. The room grew warm from the sun and the fire flower responded by releasing its heady perfume into the air.

The hand lying on top of the covers twitched and then moved slightly. After a moment of stillness it lifted and reached out toward the table. The little piece of paper disappeared in the grasp of the large hand that brought it back to the bed and with help from the other hand pulled it apart in order to read it.

One hand rolled the little paper up then and closed over it tightly.

Outside the room Thaddeus couldn't restrain himself any further and pushed the door open and stepped in.

His gaze met mine and he exhaled in a sigh of relief, "Praise the Lord in heaven above, you're back with us boy! You gave me an awful scare! Please don't do that again!"

I felt very weird to say the least. "How long has it been since the battle?" I asked, my voice sounding rusty.

"Three weeks."

Just then the doctor brushed past Thaddeus. I recognized him as the one who had stitched me up once before.

"Well, this is certainly better! Well done Thaddeus, for whatever you've

been up to, but now it's time for you to rest," the doctor said, turning to Thaddeus.

Thaddeus protested strongly, but the doctor held his ground.

"It's alright grandfather. I'll be here when you get up. I promise," I assured him, as I cut through Thaddeus's protests.

His eyes met mine and he gave up the fight and left the room grumbling as he went towards his quarters. I smiled slightly as I listened to his colorful grumbling as he retreated down the hall outside my room.

The old doctor got my attention once more, "How about some food Roric?"

The word food hit me like a war hammer. My stomach constricted sharply in pain as my body screamed out its need

for nourishment loud and clear.

I sat up in the bed stiffly, feeling like an old man.

The old doctor laughed, “Nurse, would you bring us some broth please?”

Seeing my expression he laughed again, “I know you could probably eat a whole cow, but it’s best to start out slow.”

I progressed rapidly over the next two days and I felt that I could handle more so I walked to the stables. I entered into the stable barn and walked down the hallway until I came to Flin’s stable.

It was empty!

Panicking, my mind jumped to the conclusion that Flin was dead and they hadn’t told me for fear of upsetting me. A snort sounded from the far end of the

stable barn and I turned to see a man let go of Flin.

Flin bolted across the barn and barely stopped in time to keep from knocking me over backwards into the stable door. He threw his head over my shoulder and I hugged his neck for a moment.

"I missed you boy. The dream world I've been riding in would have been a lot better with you under me."

I stepped back, patting his shoulder. The man who had been walking him had come up to us. It was Rolf.

He looked a little gray and thin in the face, just as I probably did. I noticed the empty sleeve pinned to his side. My eyes rose to his and his gaze shifted away a little, as if somehow embarrassed. I stepped forward and put my arms around him, pulling him close, not saying

anything. He resisted me for a moment and then his remaining arm closed tightly around me and we stayed like that for a while.

I stepped back slightly, “It was pretty crazy wasn’t it?”

He smiled slightly, “Yeah, it was and you were a little crazy yourself too.”

“Speak for yourself, Rolf. It was shear insanity, you coming back through that press to get me.”

He shrugged his shoulder with a wry grin, “Somebody’s got to look out for you.”

“I know and you do a good job of it. I want you to stay here at Thunder Ridge, Rolf.”

He nodded and said, “I like the place. It’s a good spot to settle down I think.” Somewhat more reluctantly he divulged,

“I’ve been seeing a widow woman. She doesn’t mind about the arm. She lost her husband in the fighting and she’s got a couple of young kids that need a provider. It should work out for us I think. The Creator’s been good to me Roric, ever since that day when you waited for me and helped me to escape from the arena. You see, I was raised up as a kid not very far from here, but I rebelled against my parents. I killed a man over a foolish squabble when I was fifteen and I fled the Valley Lands. I broke my parent’s hearts by what I had done. I heard later that they died shortly after I ran away. They were both older when they had me, but I blame myself for them dying. I thought the Creator had forsaken me until I met you. Thank you for bringing me home Roric.”

I'd always suspected that Rolf's ancestry was rooted in the Valley Lands. "The Creator is good my friend, even when we don't deserve it. He blesses us and uses us to accomplish more than we're capable of, if we just let Him."

We walked out of the barn to a spot where we could see over the valley below and for miles beyond. "Are any of my other friends alive?" I asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"No," said Rolf softly and I nodded my head, as I felt the loss of my friends keenly in my heart.

Rolf looked over at me, "Are you content in this place Roric?"

"Not yet, but I hope to be soon."

"When are you going for her?"

Not much slipped by Rolf, "The end of the week."

He nodded, looking back out at the valley, “I’ll have Flin saddled and ready for you.”

I smiled slightly, “What! You’re not going along to babysit me?”

“I think you can handle yourself. The question is, will you be able to handle her?” Rolf said knowingly and I had to admit that he might have a point.

Krista might take some serious convincing to leave her new life, but I was determined to have her by my side.

*****

I wasn’t exactly my old self yet, but the desire to go and find Krista was too great for me to put off any longer. I’d lost a lot of weight that I hadn’t all gained back yet, but I was well enough to travel.

The castle was still wreathed in early

morning fog as I made my way through it toward the stables where I knew Rolf would have Flin saddled and waiting for me. I saw Rolf standing outside the stable with Flin. Thaddeus was also there.

I noticed that Thaddeus looked concerned and his question reflected it. “Is there nothing I can do to get you to stay and rest a little longer?”

I shook my head.

He nodded resignedly, “Just like a Ta’lont. Don’t know when to stay down. About this girl, your intentions toward her are honorable are they not?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He reached out and took my hand, “Then take this.”

He dropped a ring into the palm of my hand. The ring was a beautiful

interweave of gold sinuously wrapped around an array of finely cut diamonds.

"It was your grandmother's. I think she would have liked to have her grandson's woman wear it in marriage. It will be good seeing it on a hand and being appreciated once again. I only hope and pray that you experience with your lady love what I got to with mine. Live every day with her, Roric, as if it's your last. You never know when it can end!" Thaddeus finished emotionally, as he wiped a tear away gruffly with one hand.

Speechless I stared at the ring in my hand as I searched for what to say.

"Oh and before I forget," Thaddeus said, as he started tugging away at one of his fingers. The ring that he tugged on came off his finger grudgingly, "There we go! This is now yours too."

He dropped the heavy gold ring, with the Ta'lont crest on it, into the palm of my hand beside the other ring. "Thunder Ridge is yours now Roric and when you return you will take over the duties of running it. I wore the ring as my wedding ring as well. I've stayed true to both my marriage and the just ways of my ancestor's stewardship over this place. I expect you to do the same, which I know you will."

"I can't take your ring grandfath..."

"Yes, you can! You've more than earned it!" He closed my fingers over the rings and then squeezed my closed hand tightly with both of his. "Now, it's time for you to get out of here and bring back your girl. I want to see those sad reserved eyes of your light up with joy and contentment, boy, and while you're

at it, you can make me some great grandchildren to bounce on my knee before I'm too old."

I heard Rolf snicker in the background, and I flushed slightly.

I hugged Thaddeus and he returned the hug, "Your father would have been proud of you, just as I am," he whispered into my ear.

He leaned back from me and slapped me hard on the back, "Onward to love's destiny my boy! Time is wasting!"

I mounted Flin and rode down the cobbled streets of my heritage. The destiny that the Creator had so generously restored to me.

Chapter Twenty Three

Queen's Ransom

Krista

Krista brushed back the wild ringlets of hair that had fallen across her face as she straightened up. It was not yet mid morning and she already had all the herbs she needed to fill her orders for the week ahead. She headed off towards the small village of Lornas. Maybe she would be able to have a little time for herself this afternoon. She hadn't had a

moment of ease since setting up shop in the little village of Lornas.

Work! Work! Work!

But it had been good for her. The town wasn't wealthy by any means and most of the time her customers couldn't pay her with money, but her work was so rewarding and she made enough to get by.

She wouldn't starve that was for sure. She had run out of uses and appetite for the never ending flow of eggs with which her poorer customers paid her. If it wasn't eggs it was fur pelts. She'd run out of uses for those too. She still had some of the money that Sebastian had given her if times did get too hard. She made her way through the hustle and bustle of the village. Shyly she waved and greeted fellow villagers that greeted

her along the way.

It had been awkward at first, to be treated as an equal, but she was getting used to it and in fact enjoyed every moment of it, as she distanced herself from her past life as a slave. It was new and exciting, this freedom that she was experiencing every day. She never got tired of it. She'd work for free just to be treated like this. Her little herbal shop was nestled in between the butcher's shop and a barrel makers shop. The town's one main commerce item was the woodland ale that they brewed and sold to the lower settlements.

The main ingredient for the ale was derived from the bark of a rare tree that grew in great abundance in the forest that surrounded the little village. The same forest that was utilized for its rare trees

was also rich in herbs. The town hadn't had a healer in years due to the poor nature of the populace and they had received her with open arms of invitation, once it became clear that she knew what she was doing. They had given her the shop she worked in free of charge and her position in the town had only risen with every grateful new patient she had helped to overcome whatever malady they had brought to her. Life was good.

The mood of the townspeople had brightened considerably with the news of the Zoarinian Empire's great loss in the Valley Lands. Everyone breathed easier now that the domination of the entire world by the Zoarinians had been thwarted, but they talked about it quietly. The village of Lornas lay nestled in the

Hills of Ernor directly above the menacing Zoarinian Empire that lay to the south. It was not good to speak too loudly in jubilation over their loss, for obvious reasons.

The Zoarinians may have lost a fleet and a great army, but they were still a powerful force to be reckoned with. Many stories had filtered down about the great battle that had taken place in the north. Krista tried not to listen to the stories, but it was impossible not to. Roric had seemingly won the day single handedly if the exaggerated stories were to be believed. While there had to be some exaggeration going on, she did not doubt that he had played a major role.

She hoped that he had found peace along with the praise that greeted his name everywhere it was mentioned.

Surely he had everything he could possibly want after such a victory? Her thoughts were interrupted as a frantic knock sounded on her door. She opened the door and saw no one at first, but then, looking down, she saw little Talus Tolok standing on her door mat wringing his hands together as he bit his lip hard.

Krista kneeled down, placing her hands on the boy's thin shoulders, "What is it Talus? What's wrong? Is it your mother?"

"Yes ma'am! She's in an awful amount of pain! The midwife wanted to know if you could come and help her with your stuff. There's lotsa blood and she won't stop screaming. I'm scared!"

"Give me a moment to gather some stuff and I'll be over!" Krista straightened and turned to hurry back

into her shop, but Talus's hand tugging on her dress stopped her.

"Father said to tell ya that we can't pay anything and that we'd understand if ya can't come on account of us already owing ya."

"Shush now, don't be silly! I'll be there as quick as I can! Now you run ahead and tell them that I'll be there soon!"

The little boy's face brightened like he had been given the sun and he raced off toward the even poorer section of the village. Krista grabbed a bag and threw everything she might need, and some she might not, into it.

It was better to have it than not, if it became needed later. She rushed out the shop door with the bag, not even bothering to stop and lock the door. She

raced down the muddy street, ducking in and around people and horse drawn carts that were in her way.

She didn't see the rough looking man with the eye patch over one eye standing in the door of the town's only tavern. He turned and said something to a companion further inside the tavern, who came to the door and stared after Krista's retreating form.

*****

Krista, completely out of breath, stormed into the humble one room shack at the outskirts of the village. Mrs. Tolok was breathing heavily and lying on the only bed in the room. Mrs. Lantas, the town's only midwife, looked up, relieved to see Krista.

"Oh good, you're here Krista! She's not doing well and she isn't dilated

enough to push yet! Do you have anything that can help?"

Krista nodded as she rolled up her sleeves and approached the bed.

Little Talus hadn't been wrong about the blood. Krista kept her face serene and confident as she looked down at Mrs. Tolok's weary and fearful face.

"Relax, Tarsa. We'll have that little baby in your arms before the sun sets."

"The blood?" Mrs. Tolok responded with the question as her face reflected her worry.

"Taken care of Tarsa. Now you lay back and relax, because the sooner you relax the sooner you'll be holding your baby."

Krista turned to a relieved looking midwife, "Is there any hot water? I need it for seeping some of the herbs."

Three hours later, a new life came into the world.

Krista held the squalling little boy in her arms for a moment. She cooed and rocked the baby gently as she cleaned him off with a soft towel. She stepped forward and laid him in Mrs. Tolok's arms as Mrs. Lantas helped her sit up a little.

The picture of the mother with her suckling child caused an ache to well up in the pit of Krista's stomach that wouldn't go away. She shoved her desires aside though and started collecting her herbs and tinctures. With one last glimpse at the mother completely engrossed in the new life that wriggled and cried in her arms, Krista smiled and went out the door, closing it

behind her softly.

Mr. Tolok, a little wiry form of a man stepped forward out of the shadows and held out a little basket full of brown eggs. Krista just held up her hand and kept walking up the dirty path to the main street. As she passed by the tavern a rough hand shot out and caught her by the upper arm and dragged her toward the horse pen at the upper end of the town.

Initially she had screamed out of surprise at the rough hold on her arm, which had caused her to drop her bag, but she started to fight when her other arm was seized by a second man. There was little she could do to resist the men who were quickly dragging her up the street so she screamed for help.

Shopkeepers and townspeople alike

rushed out into the street to see what was the cause of the commotion. A chattering throng of people formed. Krista had only been in the town for a short time, but she had already left a favorable impression on almost everyone. The two men dragging her were forced to a halt by the congested crowd of people.

"What is the meaning of this?" bellowed out the burly form of the butcher, as he waved a knife in the air.

One of her captors growled out, "Step aside and let us pass, if you know what's good for you!"

"I will not! What is it you do with our herbalist?" replied the angry butcher.

Her captors responded, "She's no herbalist! She's nothing but an escaped slave and we're taking her back for the reward on her head. Now, stand aside!"

Both men drew their swords and the crowd moved backward slightly.

"Is this true, Krista?" the butcher asked.

Tears in her eyes Krista nodded, "I was a slave, but I'm not any longer! My master is dead and he gave me my freedom and some money to make my own way. I swear it to you!"

The half truth came easily to her lips in her desperation. Her captors moved forward and the crowd hesitantly parted before them. What were they doing?

"Wait, you can't let them take me! I'm one of you! I've treated your sick! Mr. Solat, if it hadn't been for my medicine your son would have died! You can't let these men take me!" Krista twisted her neck around to look back at the townspeople, imploringly begging for

them to come to her aid, but they stayed where they were as the two men drug her to where their horses were tied up.

They pulled another horse from the coral, threw her across it and tied her hands to her feet beneath the horse, as she screamed and pleaded to the townspeople to help her. But the townspeople remained standing, their faces downcast, as one by one members of the crowd slipped away from the scene.

The two men mounted their horses and loped out of town, tugging Krista's horse along after them. After several miles the two men stopped and one came back and cut the rope binding Krista's hands to her feet.

She was picked off the horse and thrown roughly to the ground onto her

face. Everything hurt from the rough ride.

She started to push up weakly from the ground when a voice from her past spoke, “Well, well, what do we have here but old scarface herself!”

Krista’s insides clenched as she looked up through the tangles of her hair and saw the fat corpulent form of Esmeralda standing before her, who had only grown uglier with age.

“You’ve only gotten prettier with age, honey. You brought me big money once and I’ll bet you’ll bring me even bigger money this time! Throw her in the wagon boys, but be gentle! She’s a high priced sex slave if you ever saw one.”

One of the men near Krista groped one cheek of her bottom cruelly, but let go at Esmeralda’s shriek.

“Let go! Look is all you can do, you bunch of mangy cutthroats. She’s arriving at the slave market in Capeacal unspoiled!”

Krista was led to a wagon with a cage on the back of it and pushed inside it. The door slammed shut behind her.

“Pack up boys! The gods of fortune have been kind to us today!” Esmerelda said gleefully.

Krista fell to the straw floor of the cage and quivered as her body was wracked with sobs that didn’t seem to end. An older woman, who was already in the cage, leaned down and pulled Krista’s head up into her lap and brushed her fingers through the wild tangle of curls, trying to comfort as best as she could a prisoner of the same fate as her own. *****

Krista leaned up against the side of the small room she was locked in. She was the only one in the room, for which she was grateful. They had reached the city in the late afternoon and it wasn't long after that she had been separated from the rest of the women in the wagon and sent up to this upper room of the slave market building.

All her tears gone, she sat in complete apathy of emotion. What did it matter anymore anyway? No matter what she did nor how hard she tried she couldn't escape the curse of her birth. She was a slave and no matter what she did to wipe out the ugly stain of her life's history it just came back to plague her again and again.

The illusive dream of gaining her freedom had been crushed once again.

There really was no point in searching after freedom anymore, in fact what was the point to even living? Her hand closed over the little piece of broken pottery that she had found earlier in her cell and she brought the little piece of pottery up to her face and contemplated it more closely.

The shard of pottery had one sharp edge. It was sharp enough to do the job. She bit her lip as she brought it up and held it to her wrist. Scared by the decision she had made, but seeing no other way out, she glanced up.

"If you're up there God, I'm sorry, but I just can't take it anymore! I know what's going to happen tomorrow and I would rather die than experience any more of what this life has to offer me!"

She looked down at her hand and

made to pull the pottery across her wrist, but her hand wouldn't move. She tried again and it still wouldn't move. She could move her hand back from her wrist, but when it was against her wrist it wouldn't move!

She gritted her teeth and strained with everything she had but her hand wouldn't move. Uttering a cry of sheer frustration and anger, she drew the piece of pottery back and hurled it against the opposite wall of the room.

It shattered into dozens of tiny little pieces. As the pieces fell, several dusted down onto the robe of the figure of a man sitting against the wall across from her. The man calmly reached up and brushed the fragments of baked clay off his shoulder. Krista gasped and flattened herself back against the wall.

“Who are you?” she whispered in fear.

“A messenger from the Creator of all life.”

Krista choked out, “God?”

The figure nodded solemnly and real fear fell upon Krista, as she realized that the Creator had seen what she had been trying to do.

Was this messenger going to kill her for what she had tried to do? The absurdity of the situation, given that had just been what she had been trying to do, caused her to almost laugh out hysterically, but she held it in at the last second.

The messenger across from her smiled. It was a nice smile, surely he wasn’t about to kill her, she thought to herself.

“Peace Krista. I have not been sent to cause you harm, but rather to bear you good tidings.”

Good tidings? She was about to be sold as a slave for the third time in her life. What could possibly be good about anything that could come of her current situation? The messenger across from her had claimed to have been sent by the Creator and he had appeared out of nowhere, which testified to a higher power at play within the room than could be faked.

It would be unwise to doubt what he was saying, no matter how unbelievable it seemed, because she’d already seen the unbelievable take place before. She remembered full well what had happened in the arena at Santarus.

She decided to test out the waters a

bit, “Good tidings?”

“Yes, tomorrow you will be set free from the bondage that has oppressed you your whole life.”

“Set free?” Krista asked, as tears flowed down her cheeks.

She wanted to ask, ‘Are you sure?’ but that wasn’t the thing to say. But not being able to put off confirming what he had just said, at least a little, she asked, “Really?”

She was going to make the messenger angry she just knew it, but all he did was smile warmly again at her and nod his head in confirmation.

Not being able to help it she asked, “Why?”

“Don’t you want to be free Krista? Haven’t you prayed for this to happen?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think the Creator

was listening to me."

"The Creator is always listening Krista. He has never ceased from caring for your plight. He mourns every tear that's falling down your face even now."

Krista couldn't take anymore. A sudden belief in the Creator, like she had never had before, coursed through her. She fell forward onto her face and cried, completely overcome by what was happening.

The Creator had heard her cry for help. The Creator was going to set her free. The Creator loved even a slave like her, enough to send an angel with a message of promise just for her.

"Thank You! Thank You!" Krista said over and over, as she felt faith come into her and change her as it washed away the layers of bitterness from her life.

She saw her life, as if through a fast moving lens and, as bad as it had been, now all she could see was how she had been kept all along the way by a Divine hand and how it had never been as bad as it could have been.

"I love you God!" Krista whispered against the floor, as she felt peace begin to take away all of her fears.

"Come here dear one," the messenger said, as he pulled her up to lean against him, putting an arm around her consolingly.

Gradually she calmed down and the messenger asked, "Ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes!" Krista said firmly.

"Good! Now I must leave you, but do not fear as the message I have been sent to deliver to you will even so come to

pass."

The messenger rose up off the floor and headed toward the door.

"Wait! You haven't told me what will happen tomorrow!" Krista cried out, half starting to her feet to follow after the messenger.

He turned towards her, "Only have faith and you will see all that the Creator has said will come to pass. You will have freedom and joy added to you tomorrow in overflowing abundance."

The angel turned once more and walked through the door of the cell. Krista got shakily to her feet and moved to the door and touched it. The door was very real and yet the messenger had simply walked through it!

She went back to where she had been sitting. Drawing her knees up she hugged

them to herself as over and over again her mind re-lived everything the messenger had said. Tomorrow she would be free.

Not only free, but full of joy too. She could never have asked for more and she closed her eyes in contented peace and rested in anticipation of the future to come.

*****

The rosy red color wouldn't leave her cheeks as Krista viewed herself in the mirror of the prep room. Several older women had just finished preparing her for presentation to the buyers. Soon she would be sent to the stage and she felt her resolve of faith falter some at the prospect of having to face what was to come. She had worn skimpy outfits before when she had been in service to

Sebastian, but nothing like this!

A tiny bit of green linen supported her breasts, but there was more exposed than was covered! She was all but naked except for a slip of silk fabric that hung across the front of her thighs and a slip of fabric behind her that failed to completely cover her bottom.

Her hips and the sides of her cheeks were clearly visible. She knew she was regarded as a beautiful woman, but this outfit left little to be discovered or imagined. It was humiliating!

Why did she have to go through this further humiliation before she could be free? She bit her lip and tried to hold on to the hope that the messenger's words had brought her, but it was hard and she fought against the tears that threatened to fall. She would not show any weakness

to the mongering crowd she could hear jabbering in the market room beyond the thin walls of the prep room. The door of the room opened, they had come for her.

The boards of the stage that her bare feet traveled across had been worn smooth by the countless poor souls who had been led across them before her. Stillness had fallen over the formerly mad atmosphere of the place.

The stage was well lit in the otherwise seedy and rundown building. She was led to the center of the stage and the iron anklet around her left ankle was securely fastened to a ring set into the floor of the stage. She was alone on the stage now except for the auctioneer off to her left.

The stillness was shattered as several

hundred buyers erupted into applause at the exquisite offering before them. All manner of things were being said and Krista ignored the chattering of the lecherous buyers as best she could, but it was hard to remain calm with what the rabid crowd was planning for her, sounding so loudly in her ears.

Inside she felt like a poor defenseless little rabbit surrounded by a pack of ravenous wolves, and to some extent that was exactly what she was in this moment.

The auctioneer ambled cockily over towards her. “I know. I know. It is not as often an event as it should be to see a rare exotic flower such as this portrayed before you as an item of sale. So, as this is the case, I know that none of you will want to miss a chance at bidding on the

exotic creation standing before you, as the chance might never come again to purchase such a rare girl as this for your collection!"

The auctioneer had a cane in his hand. It was a firan cane. He swished it about menacingly, when he wasn't using it as a pointer. How ironic, thought Krista to herself, remembering the many beatings she had taken with those cursed switches in her youth in the firan cane fields as a field slave.

The firan cane switch reached out toward her and lifted the back slip of fabric up, exposing her rear to the crowd behind, who erupted in applause once more. Krista's face flushed red at the further embarrassment and it was all she could do to keep from turning and grabbing the cane and ramming it up the

auctioneer's bottom in payback. But she stayed still under great force of effort and endured the moment of humiliation as best she could. It would do her no good to resist.

The auctioneer put a hand to his ear and cupped it as if he hadn't heard the uproar of the crowd, "What, still haven't seen enough?"

Before Krista could expect what was coming, the cane was withdrawn and smacked sharply across her lower back. She jumped from the sudden pain of the cane's strike and one of her breasts popped out of its inadequate covering.

She gasped and her hands flew up to push her breast back in, but they were smacked down viciously by the cane. The crowd erupted again and the auctioneer pranced off towards the edge

of the stage.

"Who will give me two thousand tarsas?"

Hands shot up everywhere. Krista's gaze remained downcast and she couldn't help the single tear that traced down her face. Anger began to burn hotly inside of her and she brushed the tear away with an angry gesture.

Throwing her head back she raised her hands and pushed her breast back into place. Meeting the auctioneer's gaze she dared him to come closer and make something of it, but he wisely stayed away.

The bidding went higher and higher as Krista silently begged within her soul for her promised freedom and joy to hurry up so that she could leave this awful place and the even worse

assortment of human trash that gestured and called out to her crudely. She scanned the crowd gathered in the slave auction house. Where would her freedom come from in such a place as this? Her gaze slipped over the hungry eyes of the soulless mongrels that inhabited the place, looking for a potential savior in their masses.

She had all but given up hope of finding any such savior, when something prompted her to look back over a section that she had just scanned. Something caught her eye in the back of the room.

The something she had more sensed than seen was a man, who was standing in the shadows at the back of the room. He was a warrior by his build and the stance of his outline in the shadows, and somehow she knew who it was. Being

honest with herself she admitted that it had been for him and him alone that she had searched the crowd, in search of a savior.

He had come back for her! Fresh tears ran down her cheeks, but they weren't tears of embarrassment. If the people in this place found out who he was, they would rip him apart and yet he had risked just that to come for her. She continued to stare intently, with her heart in her eyes, at the shadowy outline of the man in the shadows, praying that he would step forward and buy her.

The auctioneer began to wind down his sales spiel as Krista had already brought more than any slave girl in a very long time.

"I have a bid of five thousand tarsas for the beautiful slave standing behind

me. Going once?”

Krista stepped forward toward the man in the shadows at the back of the crowd as far as her short ankle chain would allow her and lifted her hand and pointed at the man in the shadows.

“Going twice?”

The muttering of the crowd must have alerted the auctioneer that there being something going on behind him. He turned to view what was going on, his gaze following the direction of Krista’s pointing finger.

The shadowy figure of a man was striding down through the crowd toward the stage. The crowd parted before him, somehow sensing that his bark would drown out any strangled yelp they could ever make. His face was still covered by the hooded cape he wore, but the

meaning of his six raised fingers was clear.

The auctioneer was so excited that he about stumbled over the edge of the stage. Catching himself he called out loudly, “I have six thousand tarsas for the beautiful slave before us!”

The wealthy buyer from one of the southern seacoast cities, who had offered the previous offer of five thousand tarsas, raised his hand again angrily.

“I have seven thousand tarsas! Do I hear an answer from the mysterious gentleman to my right?”

The hand lifted again and the auctioneer, almost beside himself, screamed out, “I have a bid of eight thousand tarsas!”

The wealthy buyer from the south

looked absolutely apoplectic, but he raised his hand again; though he looked noticeably reluctant to do so.

"I have nine thousand tarsas!"

The crowd's attention had been going back and forth between the two and now it returned to the mystery man, who flipped back his hood as he arrived at the base of the slave auction stage.

Looking up into her scared eyes, Roric winked at her! Krista almost moaned in frustration at him. How could he wink at a time like this! It was an unimaginable amount of money to be paid for a slave girl, no matter how pretty she was.

Krista's hands were clenched at her sides in tight fists and her insides were tied up in knots of tension as she waited to see what Roric would do. The crowd

was silent as the handsome stranger reached inside his cape and withdrew a hefty looking black velvet bag. Undoing the pull cord, he stepped close to the stage and sprayed the contents of the bag out across the stage in the auctioneer's direction.

Exquisitely cut gems of every imaginable color spilled out onto the smooth wooden floor of the stage. The gems caught and reflected the light as they tumbled over and around Krista's bare feet.

Krista's mouth fell open in complete shock as her stunned gaze lifted from the glittering jewels to Roric's face. He had just spilled out a king's ransom onto the stage.

The auctioneer choked out, "The bidding is closed! Release the girl to her

new master and may he be well pleased with his expensive purchase here today!" The auctioneer then commenced to fall to his knees and pick up the gems that were scattered all across the stage.

A guard rushed forward and unlocked the iron manacle around Krista's ankle as pandemonium reined in the auction house. Krista walked to the edge of the stage and would have jumped into Roric's arms, but his big hands came up and closed around her narrow waist and lifted her down.

As her feet touched the floor her arms wrapped around Roric and she buried her face against his chest, soaking in the comfort of his familiar smell and the radiant warmth of his body, even as his powerful arms closed around her tightly.

She felt him kiss the top of her head

and she leaned against the security of his chest, finding a place of peace from the humiliation she had been made to suffer. She grew aware that he was talking to her. She reluctantly dropped her arms from around him and stepped back as far as his arms would allow.

"Honey, let's get out of this hell hole!"

She nodded her head vigorously and he turned to make a way through the crowd which had gathered as spectators, to watch a show that illustrated a concept and a range of emotion that was completely foreign to them.

There was one thing she had to do first.

"Roric."

He turned back to her questioningly. Krista knelt down before him and

extended her hand with her palm up in a sign of submission.

"Master, I promise to never run away from you ever again! I swear it! I will serve you all of my days faithfully! My body is yours to enjoy as you wish and my heart will be obedient to every word you say, but my spirit I give to the Creator, who has used you, my master, to save me from the darkness of these people and the hell that resides within them. My Creator has given me a better master in you than I could have ever wished for, but one thing I beg of you master is that you would never allow me to be parted from you again, because I love you with all of my heart!"

Throughout her impassioned speech tears had been streaming down her face, and her voice was choked with the

strong emotions that she felt for the man risking his life to save her.

Roric

I couldn't stand to watch her blurt out her heart in promised slavery to me for one more second. Her head had fallen forward in yet another sign of submission that I was sick of seeing from the woman I loved.

I kneeled down in front of her. This had not been where I was planning to do this, but oh well.

I flipped her still upraised hand over and held it with mine tenderly and with the other hand I tipped up her teary face

and my eyes met her beautiful blue eyes, "I love you, too!"

She gave a half sob that I took to be a good kind of sob.

"I had a different arrangement planned out for this, but I don't want you to go on like this one moment longer. Krista, you're not a slave. You're as free as I am right now."

I watched her eyes grow expressively large and more tears threatened to cascade out of them at my words.

"Now, I have a request for you. As a free woman with the right to make your own choices, would you please honor me with your choice and become my wife? Would you please share my life, share my heart, share the desire I have for only you and be my companion through all the years of our lives to

come, as my friend, my lover, and the other half of my heart?"

Her eyes had grown huge as I watched her beautiful tear-stained face reflect emotional comprehension of my words.

She launched forward and fairly knocked me over backward as she screamed, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" while she hugged me around the neck tight enough to cut off my air supply.

I laughed and pulled her away from me for a moment. "One more thing," I said with a smile.

I picked up her left hand and pulled out my grandmother's ring from my cloak with my other hand. Her eyes got big again. She was so pretty! Not just physically, but inside too. My heart swelled within my chest at the knowledge that my emotions and desires

would be in her tender safekeeping from now on.

The beautifully molded diamond ring slipped perfectly onto her finger and she melted again into my arms.

She pulled back and said mournfully, “I don’t have a ring for you!”

I leaned forward and whispered into her ear, “I have one, but it wouldn’t be a good idea to put it on right now. You’ll see why later. What do you say we get out of here?”

She nodded her head, her face all smiles, and I rose to my feet and took off my cape. I extended out my hand and she took it and rose with the grace of Eve.

She had knelt before me as my slave and she rose now as the queen of my heart. I took my cape and whipped it around her shoulders covering up her

state of near nakedness from the sight of all the men around us.

She looked up at me, grateful for the covering, and then leaned up on tiptoe to whisper into my ear, "I'll be your living breathing fantasy and satisfy your every desire so long as breath remains within me to please you. I'll bless you with the beauty that so many have desired to have, but that only you will ever possess and my heart will forever be yours to care for as you wish."

My eyes met hers as she slipped back down to stand on her feet and I saw the promise of her words reflected in the smoky depths of her sapphire eyes. This day had been long in the coming, but well worth the wait and I felt shaken inside at the depth of the Creator's understanding of me and His willingness

to give me more than I could ever have asked for; much less could ever have deserved.

The crowd was still thick around us as they watched a tableau of something beautiful unfold that their worldly eyes could not understand, even though they clearly saw it. I drew my sword and they parted before me at the sight of the shimmering blade that snapped with color.

Striding out the way I had come in, with Krista's hand on my arm, I knew something the rest of the denizens of this unhappy place did not know. All the other doors had been closed and barred by a group of dark clad men numbering twelve. The door I was heading for was the only one left open.

"Sir! Sir!" rang out from behind me. I

turned to see the auctioneer run up to us, out of breath.

"You almost forgot this!" he said holding out the bill of sale to me.

They still didn't get it!

I snatched it out of his hand. "Thanks!" I growled and he fled back down the aisle, as he saw the sword in my hand.

Arriving on the boardwalk outside the slave market house, I whistled loudly and Flin bolted out of the side alley where I had left him and mounted up onto the boardwalk.

The timbers shuddered loudly as he ran up the boardwalk to pull up in front of us.

"Roric?" Krista asked.

I turned to her, "Yes?"

“You forgot something in there.”

For the life of me I couldn’t imagine what that was. “What?”

“This!” She stood up on her tiptoes, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me with all the passion that I had remembered from our encounter on the beach and more.

I was just about to return the kiss, when she pushed away from me. I looked at her, not understanding why she’d stopped things yet again. Was she going to slap me again?

I didn’t think so, because she was looking up at me with a saucy little grin on her face, “There’s more where that came from, but you’ll have to wait till later!”

I shook my head smiling, as I lifted the little tease up behind the saddle. I got

into the saddle and her arms closed tightly around me, which was a very good feeling.

My sword was still drawn for a specific purpose. I handed the bill of sale to her over my shoulder.

"Hold this, please."

As she took it, I backed Flin up against the side of the building.

"Zarta!"

On my command Flin lashed out with his back hooves and crushed in the side of a barrel full of lamp oil.

As the oil spread out across the dry boardwalk Esmeralda stumbled out of the auction house shrieking, "What do you think you're doing?"

Flin, out of his own volition, lashed out a hoof and sent her toppling backward into the building. I extended

the point of the sword over my shoulder.

"Your papers, my darling?"

With a giggle of pure joy, Krista shoved her bill of sale onto the end of the amazing sword her husband wielded. I pulled Flin forward and reached the sword upward to the lantern overhead.

The papers caught flame and I swung the sword in a downward arc to shake the burning shards of the bill of sale off into the spilled oil so that they could burn up with the past. As the boardwalk and the front of the building burst into flames I heard shouts of alarm from inside. Let the fools burn up with their blood money in hand!

I let Flin have his way and we busted through the railing of the boardwalk and headed northward for home as fast as Flin could carry us. I was free to be

content now, wherever I lived and through whatever I did, because I had the girl of my dreams, that I loved more than anything else, holding on tight to me.

Krista buried her head against Roric's back, loving the solid feel of the man she held onto, knowing that the solidness she felt was more than just something that went skin deep. This amazing man had come back for her!

The slave buyers had wanted her body, but he had wanted her heart, and the Creator had freed her soul. A slave no more, but the wife of a proud warrior she would forever be.

Life's journey for her may still hold valleys and mountains to cross, but she could do it with her husband by her side and God showing her which way

was up. Life was worth the living after all, because the Creator had made it so.

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me

I live in the country. It’s the best place to be I’m
thinking. I share my life with my beautiful wife, Beth,

my three children and one cat named Herman. When I’m not lost in a daydream, the most likely
place you’ll find me is flower gardening or at the movie theatre. I used to think I was strong, but
now I freely admit that I’m weak. My new reality is
okay because Jesus Christ has me covered. It’s better that way, trust me!

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