



THE
KINGDOM

GUY S. STANTON III

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by

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Book 2: *The Proverbial War*

Book 3: Title not yet announced,

Coming 2015

The Wind Drifter Series

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Book 2: *Ice Wind, Coming 2015*

Book 3: *Hard Wind, Coming 2015*

Book 4: *Rift Wind, Coming 2015*

Book 5: *Drift Wind, Coming 2015*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to an unknown
author,
who approximately 1500 years ago
wrote a
declaration of his/her Christian faith on
the
back of a grain tax receipt made out of
papyrus.

The relic of antiquity I reference is
referred to as

The Last Supper Papyrus

Dr. Roberta Mazza of the John Rylands
Research Institute recently rediscovered
the relic

and dated it as 6th century Egypt

– Below is what the unknown author has
to say

*“Fear you all who rule over the earth.
Know you nations and peoples that
Christ is our God.*

*For he spoke and they came to being,
he commanded and they were created;
he put everything under our feet and
delivered us from the wish of our
enemies.*

*Our God prepared a sacred table in the
desert for the people and gave manna
of the new covenant to eat, the Lord’s
immortal body and the blood of Christ
poured for us in remission of sins.’”*



The Kingdom Map

Chapter One

Journey Begun

I cleared the last rise before I reached the home place. As a home it wasn't much, but it was all I had. There wasn't much to be proud of, but the land was suitable enough for farming and most years we didn't starve in the winters.

That was more than could be said for many within the Kingdom of Smirnaz. Like my home, the kingdom I lived in wasn't much to speak of either. In a way, it was only hanging on by a thread. Without the outside intervention from the

other six kingdoms of the Kingdomer faith, Smirnaz would have long since fallen prey to the Nicationer Nations, of which there were many.

While the faith of the seven Kingdomer Nations was unified in the belief of the one God, El Elyon, the beliefs of the Nicationer Nations were as wide-ranging as the stars in the celestial heavens. Some worshiped gods of stone and wood, while others practiced the dark arts of the fallen Malachim.

The Nicationer Nations hated those of the seven kingdoms down to the last woman, man, and child. Most of all they hated us for our belief in El Elyon. Their name for Him was the Awful Judge and their hatred spanned back to the time before, when El Elyon had destroyed the

world the first time because of unrighteousness and corruption.

I found it hard to relate to it all as I was just a simple farm boy. I wished things would get better, but wishes had never really gotten me far in life. After all, I was still here on this miserable patch of land that gave birth to more rocks than potatoes.

I crested the rise that overlooked the farmhouse and stopped abruptly. White-hot, seething anger coursed through me to the point that my vision became blurred.

There was a horse tied up outside the house. I knew the horse and I knew what its rider was up to.

The pails full of berries dropped to the ground as I took off down the slope in a pace eating run fueled by my anger. I

reached the barnyard and noticed the man, who called himself my father, wiping at a bloody lip as he stood in an aura of shame just within the boundaries of the barn.

He saw me and quickly moved away into the darker recesses of the barn. I felt my level of anger burn hotter at the visible evidence of his cowardice.

I did then what I had done many times before. I rushed headlong into the house and grabbed hold of the man who was busy raping my mother on the floor.

It never ended well for me, as I always lost, but today felt different. It had been six months since the last visitors and then there had been two of them. I hadn't stood a chance and it had been a near thing that I had even survived. As it was I had been unable to

walk for a month and my broken ribs had made my ordeal last well into the winter.

I didn't care about the beating I would receive though. What was happening was wrong and, Creator help me, I'd never stop fighting out against it!

In the here and now though I relished the feel of bludgeoning in the face of the man I straddled on the floor. With every strike of my fist and corresponding splatter of blood I felt a small retribution of revenge for all the times before, when it had been me being hit and kicked about on the floor.

The men who came to visit my mother almost got as much satisfaction out of beating me up as they did from playing around with my mother. That thought spurred me on to greater depths of hatred and I grasped the man's head and

smashed it backward against the floor repeatedly.

Dimly, through the blood wrath that clouded my mind, I heard my name being called and the feel of someone tugging at my shoulder.

“Rollan! Rollan stop!”

Numbly, I lifted my head to meet my mother’s eyes. She was down on her knees beside me. At her urging I let go of the man, who lay still on the floor beneath me.

Her face bound up with worry, my mother began feeling at the man’s throat, in search of a pulse. She brought her hand, now wet with the man’s blood, away from his throat with a shocked gasp, “You killed him!”

I should feel something at that knowledge, but so help me I didn’t. In

fact I felt completely empty of caring about anything.

One thing I did know, though, was that I was glad this man was dead. He deserved to die. All of his kind did.

I heard a noise at the door behind me and then my father's voice screeched out, "What have you done, boy?"

Bitterly I spoke into the silence that followed, "What you should have done years ago!"

I started to turn to face whatever abuse he might deal out, but I wasn't prepared for the sudden jerk on my shirt by my mother or her deafening screams into my face, "You fool! Look at what you've done! You've messed up everything! Now they'll kill all of us!"

"What?" I asked dumbly.

My father seized me from behind and

dragged me back across the floor with more effort than he'd ever shown in any protective effort on behalf of my mother. I halfheartedly thought about resisting, but I was too lost in coming to grips with the situation that was unfolding.

My father heaved me off to one side and I tumbled off the porch into the dust near the hitching rail. I sat up in the dust to see my mother and father standing on the porch, staring with nervous anxiety at each other.

Slowly, as if asking a dumb question or one that I couldn't believe the need of even asking, I asked, "You're mad at me for keeping you from being raped by that man, mother?"

My mother turned on me and with surprising harshness said, "How do you think we've survived out here on the

border Rollan? Open your eyes boy! The visits by the surrounding Nicationers are all that's kept us from going under out here on the borderlands. But now, because of your foolish stunt, they'll come and burn this place down around us!"

I blinked repeatedly as I felt my whole world begin to collapse in on itself. Feeling far too much emotion leak out into my voice I managed to choke out, "All these times that I've come to defend you..... save you..... it was all just acting out a part?"

I watched my mother's eyes dart off to the side as she said, "They paid more for the double experience. They liked beating you up almost as much as they liked having me."

I felt bile rise in my throat at the

reality of the lies I had been living under and suffering from.

My eyes turned to my father, “And you were in on all this too?”

My father gestured around broadly, “Look around boy! Do you think we could have made a go of it with this crummy place? It wouldn't matter how much effort we made or how much good weather that we could ever have, we'd still not make a success of this place. If it hadn't been for your mother doing what she has, we would have starved long since or been killed by the border raiders!”

“What are we going to do Ralin?” My mother asked, breaking into the conversation anxiously.

My father looked past her to the Nicationer's horse and then back to me

still sitting in the dust. “This is what we’ll do Ezney. I’ll haul off the dead Nicatorer, while you get busy scrubbing up the blood. As for you boy, you get on that horse and ride out of here and never come back or, so help me, I’ll kill yah!” To underscore his words he picked up an axe from beside the door and brandished it at me threateningly.

I wasn’t scared of him and, like a glutton for punishment, I made my way up to my feet and asked my mother, “Don’t you love me?”

She shrugged, “It’s not really a question of whether I love you or not, it’s about survival. It was good while you were here, but now you need to leave, as your father says.”

“I ain’t his father!”

“What?” I stammered out, as my eyes

went first to my father and then to my mother.

She shrugged expressively, the torn dress falling off one shoulder with the action, “Why do you think I named you Rollan?”

The last part of this nightmarish puzzle clicked into place. I was the bastard child of one of my mother's visitors!

My mother went on talking, as if she has no clue as to how utterly she had just crushed my world into broken jagged pieces of useless flotsam now set adrift upon an unknown sea. “He only visited once, but he left his mark with you. You take after him a lot with your looks. He was from the Nicationer kingdom of Rollanic so that's what I called you. Now, don't think I'm cruel for naming

you so, but naming you after one of the Nicator Nations helped me to separate from you and keep our relationship within the proper light. You may be my son, but you're also a half breed and thus not of the pure blood lineage of the seven Kingdomer Nations like Ralin and I are.”

I needed no further urging to leave. My feet made their way backward from the porch of the house to the horse of the man I had killed. Fumbling, my fingers managed to slip the reins of the horse free of the hitching post and then I swung up onto the saddle.

I quickly turned the horse away from the place of my upbringing and dug my heels into its side as I urged him to carry me away, even as the wind consumed the tears from my face.

I stopped the horse and leaned forward in the saddle, breathing almost as hard as the horse. I'd stopped on a rise overlooking the barren hills that lay before me. It was said that this had once been good grazing land, but no more. The endless droughts and sandstorms coming in off the wastelands to the east had seen to that.

I'd never seen the land looking lush and green, but then I was only fifteen. There were men well over a hundred who'd never seen these hills look as it had been fabled that they once had.

All that was lost on me right now though. What was I going to do?

I'd never been farther from the home

place than the nearby settlements and once to the capital of Smirnaz. I knew that a far larger world lay out there than this small neglected backwater of a place, but where to go?

To the west and south lay the other six Kingdomer Nations. All around them were the nations of the Nicationers.

I was half Nicationer. Was that such a bad thing? Was I somehow cursed through no fault of my own because of who my father had been?

I refused to believe such a thing. But what I believed would matter nothing to the greater world of the other Kingdomer Nations if they all looked upon me as nothing more than a lowly halfbreed. Did they all, like my mother, believe that their Kingdomer blood was of higher value than mine?

I didn't really feel that I fit in with such people. If the soul of my existence was to consist of being looked down upon as something of lesser value then I wanted no part of a life spent with the people of my mother's lineage.

What options did that leave me? Did I go and settle in the surrounding lands of the Nicationers and become as they were, not bound by any Kingdomer principles of faith in the one true God, El Elyon, in whom I had firmly believed since early childhood?

There were other issues with the Nicationer nations that I wanted no part of. My love for my mother may have grown cold within the last few hours of time, but I could not condone the way the Nicationers subjugated their women into the status of being a slave, with no

respect given to them.

My mother was not a good woman, but that did not free me to join the ranks of my father's people in their abuse of their women. It was not so in the Kingdomer Nations, but as I'd already realized there were other problems to be had with that route.

On the other hand, if the oppression of women wasn't enough to consider not settling in the lands of the Nicationers, their heathen practices of sacrificing their own children to their false gods was. I had no respect for people who would do such things.

Something occurred to me then, which brightened my mood considerably. Here I was, contemplating the merits and fallacies of the two divergent people groups of my world, and I was finding

myself to have quite a moral framework of thought for one of such mixed birth as I. Perhaps I wasn't so cursed after all.

Did El Elyon care whether I was part Nicationer or not? I wasn't sure, but until I knew it would be best to assume that He would be willing to overlook the matter of my mixed heritage. If He didn't, I truly would be alone in the world. As it was, I still had my faith and this horse, which wasn't such a bad animal, even if it was of Nicationer birth or perhaps it had been stolen from a Kingdomer on one of the many raids by the surrounding nations into the Kingdom of Smirnaz.

I looked off to the East. There, across the bordering Nicationer Nation of Roba and the great Masag River, were the Wastelands. The Wastelands were the

location of the original kingdom of all Ayenathurim, the world on which I lived. That kingdom had been from the time before, but it was long since gone now.

It was said that those of the old kingdom had been unable to keep the precepts of El Elyon. Not only had they not kept the holy commandments, but they had fallen into doing the perversities of all the lesser nations of Ayenathurim.

There had reached a time when El Elyon had become so wrathful at their disobedience that He had driven them out from the good land beyond the river, which He had then turned into a wilderness of sand and hidden dangers.

Over time the wilderness of the Wastelands had become a dwelling place for monsters and every mad beast,

whether of human or animal origin. The Yesathurim, El Elyon's chosen people of the old kingdom, were driven out into the rest of the world for their rejection of El Elyon's covenant. Scattered, they now roamed over all the kingdoms of Ayenathurim, with no place to call their own.

With the fall of the old kingdom El Elyon had ushered in a new covenant, which only a few of the Yesathurim accepted. The new covenant had not been one limited to just the Yesathurim as the old covenant had been. Out of this new covenant the seven Kingdomer Nations had been born.

There had been dreams on the part of the early Kingdomer's to reconcile the Yesathurim into the new covenant, but those dreams of oneness with the

Creator had dimmed over the years to the point that few still held out hope of it ever occurring. In many regards the opposite had occurred. The Yesathurim were looked down upon and scorned by both Kingdomer and Nicationer alike to the point that they were considered not worthy of life.

I wasn't sure why, but I headed my horse down off the hill in the direction of the neighboring country of Roba. I would make my way through it and then I would go into the Wastelands of the old kingdom. There I would not be looked down upon for my birth, for to the monsters I would look as tasty a treat as either unbeliever or Kingdomer alike.

It was both risky and crazy to contemplate heading in such a direction, but at least I would be free and maybe I

would survive. Survive to do what, I wasn't sure, but something was urging me on towards the Wastelands in the distance and I bowed to its insistence, even as my youthful urges to discover and experience thrilling danger aided in the decision.

Add becoming a thief to the list of crimes I had begun to accumulate in greater volume in my life. First, I had been nothing but a humble farming boy, who then turned murderer and now I was stealing food. I didn't know if I could hope to have the God of Shamayim honor any mission of mine, for what I was exhibiting, to my chagrin, was the actions of an unbeliever.

I had not bowed the knee to a false god though. That I would not do. El Elyon help me, that I would not do.

I would eat tonight, but the weight of the sack of stolen provisions nestling against my knee on the horse seemed to be a great burden to not only me, but the horse I rode. I'd needed the food so I'd taken some. What was the crime in that?

There was no answer to my thoughts, other than that the subconscious weight I was under seemed to deepen in some new level of angst. Figuratively, I pushed the weight of stolen provisions away and focused instead on the trail ahead of me, which I was hoping was a shortcut to the passageway into the Wastelands and not some Robian's Homestead.

The trail swerved to the left and my

horse, without direction by me, picked its way along the path. All of a sudden the horse began to balk at some unknown disturbance and I came to full alertness as I glanced around, hoping to ascertain what was disturbing the horse so much.

I saw nothing, but I felt it. The vibration of hard running horses coming down the path behind me!

I was such a fool! I should rather have suffered through some days of starvation than risk bringing down the judgmental Robian tribesmen upon me, who, from the sounds of it, were hard-pressed in their eagerness to catch me.

I understood the level of revenging emotion that was being exhibited, even over the few provisions that I had taken. People had so little in this part of the world that to lose even a little could

mean the loss of all.

I lifted the heavy burden of guilt from off the saddle horn and hooked it on a tree branch beside the path before I kneed my horse forward. My act of letting go of stolen goods wouldn't help me against the vengefulness of my pursuers, but I felt better for it. Like I was free of an invisible weight.

The branches of trees off to the sides of the path tore my old homespun shirt as I descended down the trail at a rate of speed that far exceeded what was smart to do. At any moment I was sure I was going to experience my mount tumble from a broken leg, only for my own young life to then be extinguished moments later, as my head was cleaved off my shoulders by a Robian saber.

Miraculously my horse kept its footing

and we put the steep downgrade of the hill behind us as we streaked out over the uneven terrain before us. The Masag River couldn't be far.

Glancing back as I crested a rise in the terrain I beheld a terrible sight. It wasn't Robian tribesmen behind me. They would have been bad enough, but the sight of the royal blue and yellow colors of Rollanic Knights meant far worse implications for me.

It was known that I had killed a man. Apparently a man of Rollanic origin. Was my father even now chasing me to my death?

There would be no quick death for me if I let myself get caught. Death would be slow in the coming and I would no doubt wish for it a thousand times over before it came.

It was a chase, but I kept the distance between me and my pursuers to a healthy gap. I had to, Rollanic horsemen were known for their prowess with archery from horseback.

The shrubby growth of my surroundings had gradually given way to larger shade trees. The river couldn't be far. An arrow whizzed past me, then another and another.

The direness of our imminent arrival at the river and my possible escape into the Wastelands had brought an extra urgency to my pursuers. My horse neighed loudly and a quick glance revealed an arrow lodged deep into his rump. He began to stumble forward painfully at only half speed. I wasn't going to make it!

More arrows came whizzing by all

around me and I made a quick decision. I bailed out of the saddle and hit the ground running. Moments later the horse fell heavily off to the right of me with an arrow protruding from its neck.

I was unmindful of the stones beneath my bare feet as I ran headlong toward the river. I got my first glimpse of the river that was now the sum total of my only form of salvation.

I swept down the high walled muddy banks of the river's sides until I was splashing forward into the shallows. The river got deeper than this, didn't it?

I saw a faster moving current ahead and I waded for it as arrows started plunking into the water all around me. I inhaled deeply and dived forward into the fast current. I almost lost my breath as the strong current of the river

slammed into me and dragged me downriver.

I didn't dare come to the surface. My life depended on it, but it was hard to justify as my burning lungs felt as if I was about to die at any moment if I didn't take a breath.

I couldn't stand it any longer and I tried to come to the surface, but there was a problem with that as well. I couldn't swim.

Instead of rising I sank further. In desperation I sank to the bottom and pushed off mightily. I vaulted toward the surface and gasped in much-needed air, but then, far too quickly, I sank below again. Again I struggled to get to the air above, only to sink.

I gave up and prepared to push off the bottom of the river again. My drawn up

feet came down and I pushed with all my might, but I didn't go up. In panic I glanced down in the murky water, but I could see nothing of my feet.

I didn't need to see though to realize that my feet were stuck fast in the mud at the bottom of the river. I panicked in earnest then, but it did me no good. I was stuck fast.

My lungs were burning and in my delirious need for air I saw something move. Whatever it was, it was coming fast and it had teeth!

I fell over backward as teeth from the wide flaring jaws of a crocodile swiped at where I had just been standing upright. The green scaled beast started to beat its way past me to no doubt circle back to bite at me again.

In a desperate act of insanity I reached

up and latched onto it as it swam overhead. My hands clasped onto the plate-like armor of the river predator's back. Exerting all my strength I held on.

What was I doing?!!!

I was getting free! That was what I was doing!

Thinking was difficult, because my need for air was so vital, but the realization that I was no longer stuck fast to the river bottom gave me hope. The crocodile was performing somersaults and barrel rolls in its desperation to be rid of me.

In the struggle we crested the surface of the river and I let go and grabbed hold of a dead tree branch. Out of breath, but driven by fear, I hauled myself up out of the water onto the dead tree that had been uprooted by erosion along the

shoreline.

There wasn't much of a perch for my feet but I was out of the water and breathing. The unwelcome sight of the long snout coming clear of the water, along with its deep throated hiss, had me scrambling up the trunk of the fallen tree as fast as I could go.

Finally, I reached the bank of the river only to see my uncaring savior from a watery grave surge free of the water and head for me at a surprisingly quick pace. I scrambled up the deeply cut-in bank of the river. I slipped, but my foot found purchase on an old root. Shoving off, I muscled myself up and over the riverbank's edge.

Glancing down I surveyed my disappointed savior, who grumpily turned tail and headed back to slip

beneath the surface of the water. Quickly I glanced around for the riders from Rollanic, but they were nowhere to be seen.

I could see tracks along the far shore that headed off downriver. I'd given them the slip.

Shaking from a mixture of fatigue and excitement I got to my feet and turned to see my first ever glimpse of the Wastelands. A chill swept through me as I looked out into the desolate landscape before me.

Resolutely, I stepped forward towards some nearby sand dunes, whose shifting sands whispered ominously. Not even mounted Rollanic Knights would follow me into the Wastelands.

Chapter Two

Unspoken Words

You'd think for essentially being a desert, the Wastelands would be warmer than this, I thought, as I hugged myself with my arms, stumbling along the shadow of yet one more overreaching dune of sand.

I was cold, hungry, and above all thirsty. The occurrence of all three were making life downright miserable, but at least I was alive.

I stopped my journey through the sand as my eyes took in the cornerstone work

of an ancient dwelling half consumed by the desert. Beyond that lay another work of stone and another and more after that. I'd stumbled onto one of the ancient cities of the old kingdom!

What to do?

So little was known of the Wastelands or from the time before when the vast plain had been host to El Elyon's chosen people, the Yesathurim. Idly, I wondered about the people who once made their home here, only to be kicked out because of disbelief in the Creator and the false worship of others. I had never even seen a Yesathurim for myself, although it was said that there was Yesathurim blood mixed in with the blood of both Kingdomers and Nicationers.

Looking now upon the ancient city that lay in stark ruin before me, I could not

but feel sympathy for the people upon whom such calamity, deserved or not, had fallen.

“You do well, stranger, to have sympathy for the plight of others less fortunate than even your own poor self.”

My blood froze as the words spoke directly into my consciousness. I was sure that they had not been spoken audibly, but rather they had been spoken from within. How was that even possible?

Looking upon the scattered ruins I had the unreasoning fear that I had stumbled upon the home of a demon. What else could it be?

Stuttering slightly, my words hindered by cracked lips, I asked, “Who are you and how do you know what my situation is?”

The words came once again from within and, as at the first, I could detect no threat in them, but only a calm sureness of spirit, “I am a sojourner come to find my way among the peoples of Ayenathurim. As to the condition of your place in life, well forgive me for stating the obvious, but you are alone and well within the borders of these once fair lands that now suffer under a curse that few wish to challenge by being here.”

“Where are you and why do I feel that you know exactly where I am?” I asked in fear.

“There is much for you to learn Rollan, but for the moment you will do well to last through the night. A word of warning. Go no further into the city, least of all stay within its dwellings, for they

are a deceptive refuge. Go back a ways into the dunes, dig into the sands and you will be warm enough.”

I continued to look for a moment at the city before me in the gathering gloom of early night. Sure, it looked ominous enough, as any deserted and mostly destroyed city would, but there were intact dwellings that would likely still have furniture of some kind that I could break up and use to make a fire.

Despite all my reasoning for going into the city, I turned my back to it and made my way up the dune to my left, whose sands would most likely still be the warmest from the day. Reaching the top of the dune I began to dig into it.

I felt a bit like a venomous sand viper as I worked my way beneath the loose sand of the dunes outer surface. It was

admittedly a lot warmer beneath the sand of the dune.

It got a lot darker then and the wind began to pick up. My eyes started to close as my body fell into a fatigued slumber, when a bloodcurdling howl ripped through the night air.

My eyes wide open I managed to turn my half buried head in the sand to look towards the city that had suddenly come alive. Large Evanik dogs were everywhere!

Evanik dogs were worse than any wolf could ever hope to be. Wolves had intelligence and while they were known to attack humans it was by no means an active thing on their part to do so. That wasn't the case for the wild dogs of Evanik.

It was said that they were one of the

leftover traces of the manipulations of creation done by the fallen Malachim of El Elyon. The stories were old and some truths were hard to substantiate, but it was said that all manner of twisted creations had arisen from the interference of the fallen Malachim into the natural order of the world's original created kinds.

Some of these creations still existed; such as the giants, who lived in their stone fortresses, in the neighboring Nicationer Kingdom of Sapan. Other twisted creations had seemed to fade from the memories of men, such as the manipulations of men with the body of a horse and even lions. Many of the gods that the Nicationer Nations still worshiped were represented by these hybrid creatures of man and animal.

The Evanik dogs, although not as scary as some of the other creations of bygone days, were still a scourge in and of themselves. They killed for the joy of killing. They were known to run down entire flocks of sheep and goats instead of just taking down one or two, as a wolf would've done. Not to mention eating the shepherds along with the flock.

If I hadn't heeded the advice of the words spoken to me from an unknown source I'd be torn into so many pieces by now that all that would've been left of me would have been shards of broken bone scattered in the sand.

I watched as the large dogs congregated in the ruins and picked fights with each other. One dog limped back from a scuffle and an entire pack of the dogs attacked the injured member,

consuming it live. It was unnatural and terrifying to behold.

All of a sudden, with a flurry of high-pitched yips and howls, the packs holed up in the ruins of the old city dispersed and ran out into the dunes in every direction. I closed my eyes and silently prayed that I would remain hidden from them.

Surprisingly none of the mongrels seemed to pick up my trail, which left me blessedly undiscovered beneath the sand.

Time went by and my lips moved in a whisper, "Thank you," I said into the darkness of the night.

"You're welcome. Now get some sleep," came the response from within, which, oddly enough, I was getting used to.

My eyes closed as if on command and I drifted off almost instantly into the realm of unconsciousness.

My eyes were gritty with sand and a general lack of moisture. It was a pain to open them, but I forced myself to. It was daylight.

Were the hounds back from their evening jaunt? I sure hoped so!

Feeling stiff and on the lean side, I eased out of the sand and carefully slipped down the side of the dune and began making my way away from the city. When I was out of sight of the forlorn ruins, I made my escape from certain death out to the greater unknown of the windswept plain devoid of larger

sand dunes.

I'd escaped death for the moment, but if I didn't get water soon I'd suffer death of a different kind.

"Over here," came the response to my need.

I turned to the southeast, somehow sensing that was the direction of "over here."

It wasn't long, and yet it felt like a long time in coming, until I drew near the still figure of a man staring out over the desert to the south. As I came to a stop the man broke his focus on the southern horizon and gave me the full force of his gaze.

At once I felt completely overwhelmed by this man's presence. Swallowing nervously, I waited to see what would become of me, because

against such a man I would be helpless.

The strength of his enigmatically searching gaze gentled and he spoke in an audible voice for the first time, “So Rollan, what brings you to this place of lost dreams?”

I glanced down, thinking about what my answer should be. Something drove me to be honest with this man and in a stuttering voice I said, “I killed a man. A man of Rollanic.”

I glanced up then to see what my fate would be. Was this man of one of the Nicationer Nations?

Surely, if he was, he would even now pull free his sword to avenge the death of one of his own.

The large sword stayed by the man’s side though and slowly my eyes met the piercing intensity of the man’s brown

eyed stare that seemed to gaze straight into my soul.

“Why Rollan?” he asked.

I felt the need to cry, but I was so dehydrated that I couldn't even manage the evidence of my grief. “I was protecting my mother, at least I thought I was.”

I sank to my knees then in the sand, as the losses of my life piled up to a heaviness beyond my soul's ability to bear. I asked, “Are you going to kill me now?”

Instead of answering the man knelt down and pressed a skin of water to my lips, which I began to drink in great gulps.

“No Rollan,” he finally said in answer to my question. “I'm going to give you life.”

I stopped drinking for a moment to stare into the man's eyes and I asked, "Why?"

The man's lips parted in a smile that had warmth to it, "It's what I do."

I drank some more, but then made myself stop. It wasn't good to drink too much water too fast and I didn't want to drink all of this man's water. Already I respected him too much to do that. Akin to that thought was that I wanted this man to respect me, even as I wanted to please him.

I offered the skin of water back to him but he shook his head and rose back up to his feet, "Keep it Rollan. The day will be hot and you will need more."

The man made as if to leave and I tottered up to my feet quickly, "Can I come with you?"

The man stared towards the southern horizon once more before again turning and probing me with his gaze. His gaze seemed to measure my inner worth and I could only wonder as to what he saw in me.

“Rollan, the journey before me is by no means an easy one. You are welcome to come, but know that it could lead to your death.”

I shrugged, “I would have been dead last night if it weren’t for you. My life is yours.”

“You pledge your life too easily young friend.”

“But I pledge it all the same,” I said resolutely.

The man’s large hand, that showed the scars of bygone battles, settled over my shoulder and squeezed, “I like your

spirit Rollan. Come.”

He let go of me and started out toward the south and I hurried to keep up with his long stride, which I could almost match, but my energy was lacking. Seeming to read my mind, his hand dug into a side pouch and held out a handful of dried jerky which I gratefully took from him.

The man's generosity in sharing with me was beyond anything I had ever experienced before by either Kingdomeer or Nicationer.

“If I may, what is your name?” I asked hesitantly, around a mouthful of jerky.

“My name is Kurios, but you can call me Kuri,” he said.

Silence followed for a few brief moments before I felt the need to share in more depth who I was, “My full name

is Rollan Artenor from the Kingdom of Smir.....”

Cutting me off he said, “Your name is no longer Rollan and it would be unwise of you to mention from where you come. Your name is now Benaiah.”

As my mind grappled with the knowledge that I had just been renamed I couldn’t resist asking, “Of what people are you from?”

“By birth I am of the Yesathurim lineage, but I’m not prejudiced as are some of my kindred. I call people from many lands my friends and have been close to many of them as if they were my brother.”

My mind reeled with the awareness that I stood within the presence of one of the mythical Yesathurim, El Elyon’s chosen people. Not only that, but it

seemed that the man had adopted me.

Again, as if reading my mind, Kuri spoke, “You have a choice before you, Rollan. No one can take that from you. It is a divine gift from above. You are free to go or come along if you wish.”

For a brief moment I thought about stopping, but my feet kept going, perhaps even a little faster than before.

Kuri nodded positively, “Benaiah it is then.”

I felt a strange peace envelop me then. Almost as if I had been joined into a family of some kind.

“What does Benaiah mean?” I asked softly.

“El Elyon has built.”

I glanced at him in shock. Why would he give me such a name? Surely, I was not worth so much as to have a name that

meant that?

“Everyone has worth in El Elyon’s eyes,” he looked at me then and said, “Even the life of the man you killed had worth. All life endowed with a spirit from the Creator has value.”

I swallowed and looked away from his gaze, “Why do you wish to have a self-confessed murderer tag along with you?”

He shrugged, “Name someone you know who is without sin.”

I couldn’t so I remained silent.

I needed to know something and he didn’t seem unwelcome to questions so I asked it, “What am I to you? I mean, I’m just a Kingdomer from the weakest of the seven kingdoms, while you’re of El Elyon’s own people. I’m not even a full blood Kingdomer at that. It would seem

that I am unimportant and yet you have made me to feel that I am.”

His face turned to me and I relaxed upon the sight of his smile. Regarding me steadily for a moment he then said, “You have value to me Benaiah. I care not who your father or mother were, for you have chosen to follow me and that is enough.”

Confused, I shook my head. He'd given me an answer and yet I wasn't satisfied with it. Something dawned on me then. This man truly didn't seem to care that I was the product of a mixed union of two opposing blood lines. Knowing that made the invisible cord I felt binding myself to this man grow only stronger somehow and yet I was confused. What had I gotten involved in?

“What exactly have I chosen to help

you do?” I asked, not feeling too good as to the sense behind my question.

“For a long time now there has been a war going on in the spiritual realm which has gone back and forth within the confines of mankind’s existence. I’ve come to bring an end to that war. A war in which the result is already known.”

I blinked repeatedly as my mind traced back over the words he’d just spoken. Suddenly I wondered about the wisdom of my joining up with this man. He spoke of things far above the life of a farm boy and yet, in a way I’d left the farm behind. What was I now?

“Don’t think too hard on it all, Benaiah. It’s really quite simple, the complexity comes in the application of the details, but if you know where you’re going there is no need to worry about the

journey to get there.”

“Where am I going?”

“It’s not so much the where as the fact that I’ll keep you safe wherever we are.”

“I thought you said earlier that following you could lead to my death?” I asked in consternation.

“This is true, but it changes nothing of what I have said.”

“I’m confused,” I exclaimed out loud.

“That’s because you lack understanding, but cheer up Benaiah, with experience comes faith.”

“Faith in what?” I asked blankly.

“Faith in whatever El Elyon has purposed for you to do in life.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“And yet you will. It’s as simple as that and yet for some it is too much.”

I shook my head, “It’s as if you speak

in riddles.”

“Tell me Benaiah, what is it that you are wanting of me to say?”

I debated on it and decided it all boiled down to one thing, “Can I trust you?”

“Yes, Benaiah. I never go back on my word. Does that satisfy you or do you need to know something more?”

I shook my head, “If I can trust you then I guess the rest of what I don’t know doesn’t matter.”

His hand reached out to pat my back warmly, even as his words rolled out authoritatively, “And thus faith is built.”

That seemed to be indicative enough of how far we’d both come in such a short time together.

“How do you end a spiritual war?” I asked curiously.

“Through prayer and the right application of strength.”

“I’m not much for prayer,” I admitted.

“And yet a man can change if he wishes.”

“I’m only fifteen.”

“And yet I say you are a man now. It’s for you to choose, be the man or be the child in need of milk to sustain itself.”

I fell silent.

We walked on and I drank some more water from the skin of water that was draped over my shoulder. There was one thing I knew. I certainly didn’t want to be a child in need of milk. It was time to become a man. A man with a new name and a peculiar sounding purpose.

I missed my horse. It really hadn't been mine, but for a while at least it had been in my possession. I really didn't have anything that was really mine.

“You have your soul, which is of great value Benaiah.”

I glanced to the side at my benefactor as I gestured angrily to my head, “What's up with this reading my thoughts all the time? Don't you have something better to do?”

Kuri glanced around the still desert scape that we were wandering through before his gaze finally came to rest on me, “It would seem that I don't.”

I shook my head disgustedly and looked away. Well, at least he was honest.

“How do you do that anyway?” I asked.

“It’s a gift.”

“Can you teach me?”

“No.”

Well that was abrupt, I thought to myself.

“But I will teach you other things if you’re willing to learn.”

I looked around for a moment before my gaze came back to the warrior who seemed to have adopted me. It was hard to tell how old he was. He had scars that bespoke of hard-won experience and while there was some gray in his beard I didn’t think that it was so much a sign of age, but rather of burden.

On the whole my companion did seem to be rather burdened of spirit. Almost as if he carried the weight of the world on his broad shoulders.

He struck me as both very wise and

yet as one who didn't put forth his own wisdom rashly. While I was someone who lacked control over my emotions. Just like with killing the soldier, when emotion took hold of me I was a lost cause, until my emotion was spent.

Kuri wasn't like that. He had control over his emotions.

"Could you teach me to be.....?" I found it hard to put into words.

"Controlling of your emotions?" Kuri inquired.

"Yes."

"Now why would you want that?"

I blinked, as that wasn't a question that I had been expecting.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked uncertainly.

Kuri remained silent.

"Isn't it good to have control over

one's emotions?" I asked, still uncertain of how I had gone wrong.

"Mastery yes, control no."

This man was utter ridiculousness with the way he seemed to twist words! What was the difference? Mastery versus control?

A question came to mind. Who had the mastery, if I was the one exerting the control?

I glanced to Kuri, "Mastery, how is it done?"

Kuri smiled, "Well, it starts with listening, as opposed to talking."

"What do I listen for?"

"No talking Benaiah. Just listen."

"I....." Kuri held a finger up and I stopped.

I waited, but he didn't say anything. How was I supposed to learn, if he

wasn't going to teach?

The thought occurred to me then, how was I supposed to learn if I couldn't first listen?

I blinked, as the value of that truth occurred to me, which meant that I had just learned something. Okay, now what? More listening I guess.

Kuri was still headed southward and the pace we kept was a fast one. The water and the food had really helped to restore me and I kept to his fast pace rather well.

What was that sound?

The sound of the sand first giving way then falling from my foot with each stride forward. I'd never paid attention to so simple a commonplace sound as that of sand moving underfoot. It was quite rhythmic in the ebb and flow of its

resonance.

I found myself speeding up slightly just to hear the difference of the sound as the sand compressed and gave way beneath me. A bird's flutter of wings nearby sounded loud to my ears and my eyes caught the bright yellow markings of a So-so bird in flight.

The regular beat of its wings, alternating flashes of color, the sound of its melody trilling out in soft chords of musical harmony, all set against the heavier bass sound of my relentless journey across the sand was inspiring.

There was another sound. My breathing. It was loud and yet it had rhythm to it, even purpose as it drove my feet to create a beat of their own.

I listened to all of it. The fall of sand, the steady beat of my heart, the beat of

the bird's wings coupled with its sweet notes.

There was an order to everything, a consistency of will. There was my will to move. The bird's ordered existence to fly and sing. The sand to act as sand. The sun to remain in its fixed progression across the sky. Nothing I saw or heard existed of itself. Far from it.

Everything was rather at play in a tandem array of intentionally purposed design. I hadn't designed myself, nor the bird itself, and yet everything around me flowed in harmony that was ever variable and always changing. Even changing as it was, it never outpaced the design which governed it.

Everything then must be subject to mastery. Mastery of a divine origin. It wasn't about control or me having

mastery. Rather it was about El Elyon having mastery over His creation of which I was a part.

The mastery of self was in learning to give over mastery to the Master of all life. How long had I thought that I existed in and of myself, when in reality I had always been a part of all the divine design that was around me?

I'd been like one wheel of four on a wagon, loose on its axle, causing a dis-rhythm to the whole ride of the wagon. As a wheel I couldn't fix the problem, but rather I was reliant on the wheelwright to set my wheel into balance, even so I was reliant on El Elyon to set me right in life.

It wasn't about me being in control of anything, but rather me being reliant on El Elyon to keep my purpose for

existence continuing on in the rhythm of all life. Wow!

This was really amazing. I turned to say as much to Kuri, but he wasn't there. Where was he?

I saw him then in the distance. He had to be almost a mile behind me!

How had I run so far?

I sat down in the sand, suddenly exhausted, even as I contemplated on what I had learned. There was so much I still didn't understand! But I understood more than I had before, which was progress.

I glanced at the sunny sky overhead. Was El Elyon watching any of this?

Was I alone in my discovery of my need for my Creator to take charge of my life in order that I might fulfill my created purpose in the rhythm of all life?

“No, you are not Benaiah.”

I blinked, only to see Kuri standing between me and the sun. How had he covered so much ground so quickly?

He moved then and I blinked against the harsh glare of the sun. Kuri sat down beside me in the sand. His hand fell on my knee as he said, “It is good to have someone to teach, who is willing to listen.”

I looked at him as my mind puzzled away at something that remained just out of reach. Slowly I said, “It’s good to have a teacher, who knows how to make me listen.”

Kuri smiled and slapped my shoulder before getting up and then pulling me to my feet, “Come along then. We’re too exposed out here in the open. We’d easily fall prey to a pack of Evanik

hounds tonight.”

It was a sobering thought and it gave energy to my tired body to once again move forward briskly. I keenly felt the tiredness of my earlier fast paced travel, but I also felt richer for it. I didn't understand a lot of things, but I was learning.

As weary as I felt, Kuri seemed to have gained in energy and before long I felt his hand slip around my shoulders as he helped aid me along, even as the sun began to dip beneath the western horizon. Where had the day gone?

It had been morning, but soon it would be night. Had I run for that many hours today?

I can't remember making camp after darkness fell. I remember drinking, then eating, and then falling asleep.

Chapter Three

Song in the Night

My eyes opened only to see that it was still night, but there was enough light given off by the moon to see. We were camped on the flatness of the plain!

The reality of that fact had me coming to full awareness in short order. I looked around and in the faint moonlight I saw Kuri standing there. Then I heard the howl, which was soon followed by many more.

My heart had frozen at the first howl and it all but shattered at the sound of the

voices of many. They had found us and we were without ability to take cover from them out here on the plain.

“Slip beneath the sand as you did before, Benaiah, and leave this to me,” Kuri said softly.

“I can help.”

His gaze turned to me and somehow I felt pressed back into the sand by the authority that he seemed to manifest at times, but even though his gaze was overwhelming his words remained calm, “I have not yet taught you how to fight Benaiah. To let you attempt to help me now, in your inexperience, would be to put your life at peril. Do as I say and trust in my protection until you are able to handle more.”

I said nothing more and began to start scooping sand overtop my legs and then

my torso. The frenzy of crazed yips had gathered in force out on the plain. Submerged under the sand I waited to see Kuri torn to pieces by the mob of glaring eyes that I could now see all around us.

There was no sense to these dogs. They were always starving and yet killing many. Why did they run in packs of 40 or more, when they ruled the night uncontested?

Their eyes glowed blue and their howls made me long for the sound of a wolf's howl instead.

“Remember to stay down, Benaiah, and do not speak.” Kuri said. He stood alone in the dark as the snarling horde drew closer and closer.

What was holding them back? Why did they hold back from a man alone?

I heard the grate of steel leaving its sheath and my eyes opened to see Kuri pulling his sword free to hold it up before him. The moonlight glinted off the blade lending a sheen to the night as blue-eyed glares closed in for the kill.

Kuri did something then that I would never have expected. He began to sing. At first it was only a deep hum and then it rose into a wordless song. It's pitched resonance seemed to impact the sand around me, as if the sand wanted to join in with the rhythm of the song.

The singing did not dissuade the horde, who seemed to become incensed by the lack of fear of the opponent that they had singled out in the night. Evanik dogs leaped forward with huge canines bared for Kuri, who suddenly wasn't where he had just been.

His feet seemed to slide along the sand in a whisper of sound, as the sword flashed left and right seemingly everywhere at once. Unholy howls rent the night, for it was said that every one of the horde had a demon in it.

Demon power or not, I watched from beneath the sand as a man unlike any warrior I'd ever seen stood his own against a howling storm of viciousness. Although I heard the sound of the dogs, what I heard most of all throughout the fight was the deep resonance of Kuri's voice continuing in soul stirring song that seemed to bring life into the dark of the night.

As I watched the fight I noticed that there was a rhythm even to it. Even as I had run today faster than ever before, I now watched a sight unlike any I had

ever encountered. Evanik dogs fell and shrieks rang out and yet the bloody flashes of the sword by moonlight never stopped as they carved up every attacker that came near.

There could be no warrior such as Kuri in all the seven Kingdomer Nations or beyond for that matter.

There were too many slain bodies to count laying upon the ground as dark shadows in the night. I heard the last of the pack give up the fight and run away across the desert.

Kuri stood there alone in the dark in the stillness that followed. Never had I heard of a pack of Evanik dogs giving up a fight. There was something about Kuri that had gotten to them where other men had failed.

Kuri turned and walked to where I lay

beneath the sand. I watched by moonlight as blood continued to drip off the blade hanging at his side.

He squatted down beside me, but his eyes remained focused on the flat expanse of moonlit desert that stretched out all around us. His face showed little of the exertion of battle and I marveled all over again.

“Tell me, Benaiah, do you fear me now?”

I swallowed, as his gaze left the distant plain to gleam probingly down into mine.

“Not even if you taught me all that you know could I ever fight so well as you. There can be no man alive who is your equal!”

Kuri said nothing for a moment and then he broke his silence by re-asking

his question, “Do you fear me Benaiah?”

Why did he want to know this?

“Yes.....and.....no,” I said in a stutter, not overly sure of my answer.

Kuri cocked his head to the side and regarded me with a questioning smile that somehow relaxed me enough to let me form my own thoughts and explain, “If I was ever to desert you and become your enemy I could never win. If I’m to remain by your side as a friend then why should I fear you?”

Kuri nodded before extending a hand to me and saying, “Well, let us pray then that you are forever my friend.”

I took his hand and he pulled me up to my feet, “Come, let us move off a ways from the smell of waste that lies around us,” he said, as he grabbed up his pack and started to move off.

“Kuri?”

He stopped and glanced back and I said, “I always want to be your friend Kuri.”

“And so you shall be!”

I broke free of my stance and hurried to catch up with him. As I fell in alongside of him my mind replayed over all that I had seen. After we'd gone several hundred yards Kuri stopped by some dry brush and made a fire.

I looked around, a little surprised that he would welcome more confrontation by making a fire. Then, I heard something in the distance from where we had just come.

“The survivors have come back to eat their own. Fallen creatures are ever opposed to the ways of creation's foundations. We're safe here for they

have plenty to eat.”

I turned away from the sound of gory carnage and sat down next to the welcoming heat of the fire. I was staring into it reflectively when Kuri asked, “What are your thoughts?”

Surely he must know what they were as I seemed to be nothing but an open scroll before him? Out of respect I responded anyway, “I was imagining what it would be like to be able to do something like what you did back there.” I ducked my head down, slightly embarrassed at the admonition, because I knew I would never be Kuri.

“No, you will never be me, but I’m going to teach you to be like me. With my help and provision from the Most High, there is the likelihood that not only will you do things you have seen me do,

but even greater things.”

I looked at him as if he were crazy and asked, “How is that even possible? I know I can never be as good as you.”

“I’m going to help you Benaiah, which means a part of me will be in you and from there, what can man tell in regards to what El Elyon may purpose to come to be? Now go to sleep and dream of the battles to come.”

Obediently I lay down on my side, still watching the flames flicker as they consumed the dry wood.

“I heard you singing and yet it was as if you weren’t. It was like the sound was inside of me like some ancient rhythm, but not confined to me. It was beautiful. It took all my fear away.”

“Go to sleep, Benaiah.”

I closed my eyes and at once I heard

the resonance of a melody that had the power of life behind it, which lulled me into a deep sleep almost instantly.

Walking. It was all we did it would seem, but that was not true. Kuri talked. It seemed as if his words never stopped and I did not wish for them to. I was learning so much.

Never had I had so much one on one communication with another individual before. I had grown up largely alone, with little outside exposure to the world around me. It was like I'd been held in the dark for 15 years before experiencing the light of the sun.

Kuri talked of everything from ancient historical events to matters of science

and the understanding of the signs of nature all around us. He talked of past battles and even of the former realm of the old kingdom and his people, the Yesathurim.

“Does it bother you Kuri, that your people have fallen on such hard times?”

“More than you can know Benaiah.”

I studied on it a bit before asking, “I know I asked before, but I didn’t understand so I’m asking again. Why, if the Yesathurim are the chosen people, of which you are one, are you having anything to do with me, a stranger?”

“The blessing that was imparted to my people is still one that resounds today. We have a custom that if a stranger wishes to be of our family and observes our ways then we are to adopt him.”

“That’s what you’re doing with me,

right?”

“No.”

“No?” I asked puzzled.

“You have no need of adoption as you are already an heir to the promises of Shamayim, because the door was opened long ago by one man’s sacrifice for all, to come and be known of El Elyon as heirs of the Kingdom of Shamayim. If you do that which has been recorded down in the Holy Scrolls and preserved to this day with a faithful heart then you too will see the Kingdom of Shamayim one day. My people, the Yesathurim, are in error, because they have rejected the belief that redemption is available for all and in turn they have rejected El Elyon; for they have rejected the message of the one He sent to sacrifice for all. They now hold to old traditions

that are of no effect, as they daily turn their backs on the truth freely given and recorded down for them to read and yet I tell you that they are still El Elyon's people. The seven Kingdomer nations once bravely put themselves forth in the faith of the new covenant at their birth in the Ruach, which is the Holy Spirit of El Elyon, but now they have largely fallen away from the truths that were entrusted to them. What do you think their position is in the reality of the eternity to come, if El Elyon did not spare the Yesathurim, His chosen people, for their lack of belief, but instead cast them out from His presence?"

"A precarious one," I said softly.

"It is. Look around you, Benaiah, and see the devastation of this former kingdom dedicated from its foundation to

the Most High. Even as it was not spared, neither will the Kingdomer Nations who choose not to believe the truth that they were given be spared.”

An involuntary shiver coursed through me at the thought of that and I asked, “The seven kingdoms..... it’s as I’ve heard then? They have all fallen away?”

“Many have, some Kingdomer Nations more so than others, but there are still those who remain who believe. This is what I have heard.”

“Haven’t you recently been in the seven kingdoms or at least near them?” I asked, surprised.

“No, I’ve been away.”

“Away?”

“Yes, to the East beyond the wilderness and the forests of Darkor.”

My jaw fell open in astonishment,

“I’ve never heard tell of a land beyond the forest of Darkor, much less of any man to have made such a journey!”

“And you won’t, for I am the only such man to have done so.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. Benaiah you must listen to me when I tell you that the time has grown short. Ayenathurim will not go on much longer as it always has up until now.”

“You’re saying that our world of Ayenathurim is going to be destroyed?” I asked incredulously.

“Not yet, but an era of its history is coming to an end and after this present era is over there are but two more before eternity begins and one of those two eras of time has been shortened. The time is short and there is much work to

be done before the Ruach is gone from the world.”

We walked on in silence for a while, which Kuri broke by pointing off to the East saying, “In that direction there lies a way of gaining access to the Kingdom of Shamayim, a kingdom that shall never fall. The way is open to all who believe the truth written within the holy scrolls and trust in it. Many have gone already who believed and died in the faith, but one day many shall walk into it who have never died. The prophecies of the holy scrolls are being fulfilled as we speak and I tell you plainly Benaiah, that the generation of your father will not pass before all these things are accomplished.”

“You’re telling me that I will live to see that day, when the Kingdom becomes

open to those who believe and yet live here on Ayenathurim?”

“Yes.”

There was silence for a while, which Kuri broke, “Tell me Benaiah, do you doubt what I have told you?”

Incredible as it sounded I said, “No.”

Kuri nodded, “That is good. There is much work to be done and I would have you as my helper to see that the lost are reached, the weak defended, and those who are poor cared for. It is a heavy responsibility that I ask of you, to join me in such work, but the rewards are eternal and far outweigh any praise or treasure that is to be gained in this present world. Are you with me to that end?”

I nodded without hesitation.

Kuri nodded and pointed to the south,

“Our work together begins there. To the south of us are the Holy Mountains. When we get to the mountains I will begin to teach you, over a course of three years, all that you will need to know to do the work that will be assigned to you. At some point we will journey out from the mountains and go into Nicationer and Kingdomer nations alike in order to complete your training.”

Beyond humbled, I simply nodded in astonishment at the honor bestowed upon me by this great man, who was equipping me to be his helper in reaching the lost people of Ayenathurim and bringing them back into the fortress of El Elyon’s love.

“When will we reach the mountains?” I asked.

Kuri stopped and regarded me

speculatively before asking, “Are you ready for more?”

“I think so,” I said hesitantly.

He smiled and said, “Take my hand.”

I obeyed instantly and my eyes closed as I felt the song of life course into me from the contact of his hand with mine. Within the corridors of my soul I heard a voice say, **“Even now and forever more the Spirit of El Elyon will reside in you. Take heed, for the Ruach will instruct you of all My ways and be your comfort in peace and in war.”**

I opened my eyes, which were wet with tears, only to see that I was not where I had been before. I was high up on the side of a mountain, almost within the clouds that obscured the summits of what must be the Holy Mountains.

In astonishment I looked at Kuri and

he smiled as he said, “Your training starts now.”

Chapter Four

Faith Walk

One year later

“I’m not ready for this!” I exclaimed loudly.

“Yes you are,” Kuri said calmly.

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are. Now calm yourself and continue on with the exercise.”

I gritted my teeth to bite back any further protest. My nostrils flared wide in search for more air as I focused on moving my foot on the tight rope and

inching it onwards a bit further on the rope.

Oh No!!!

“You’re too stiff! Relax your posture and be easier with your breathing,” Kuri called out.

I spared a glance from the rope beneath me to look ahead towards Kuri, “What happens to your plans if I die right now?”

“You’re not going to fall. Come to me. I wouldn’t have put you up to this if I didn’t think you were ready for it.”

I glanced back down to my lifeline and desperately fought to hold steady on it against a sudden updraft of air from the valley below. Sweat was running off me as if I was being rained on. My entire being was sick with the fear that I felt at my current endeavor.

My eyes took in the drop of several hundred feet which formed the narrow mountain gorge between two upthrusts of rock across which was stretched the rope I stood on. There was no soft landing below, only more rock.

I would die if I fell, of that I had no doubts. If I didn't get off this rope soon I'd become too stiff with fear to even maintain my balance and that would be the end of me.

“Benaiah?”

I looked up to Kuri from my sealed fate that waited below.

“Come.”

I had to get off this rope and somehow he thought I could do it!

I took a big step and then another and another, until in my haste to escape the rope my foot slipped and I fell. I banged

up hard against the wall of the cliff and was momentarily puzzled as to why I wasn't still falling.

In a daze I looked upward and saw that Kuri had a hold of one of my hands.

“I won't let you fall Benaiah.”

I nodded and he pulled me up the rest of the way. Quickly I crawled away from the cliff's edge and pressed up against the wall of the ledge that ran along the side of the mountain.

Pulling up my knees I hugged them to me and buried my face against them. My whole body was shaking and even though the day was warm I felt cold. I was such a coward!

“I have something to tell you Benaiah,” Kuri said, as he sat down beside me and stretched out his arm to pull me against his side consolingly.

“It took courage to cross that gorge. You had courage to start out and then to get over halfway across, but then you let the fear of failing get to you and trip you up. At no point were you to be absent of the fear of attempting to cross such a dangerous obstacle, but you let fear control you instead of you controlling it. Next time you’ll do better, because you went farther than you thought you could when you started out. Now there’s less for you to fear on your second attempt.”

“I don’t see it that way,” I said before then adding, “I fell!”

“And I caught you. Next time you won’t fall.”

“I wish I had your confidence about that!” I said with feeling.

“You’ll see.”

“Why does there even need to be a

second time of crossing this rope?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, just like with life, it’s a certain fact that you’ll need a liberal application of courage more than once and so is there the possibility of coming to a gorge like this that needs to be crossed.”

I sighed loudly. There was no way around my mentor’s devised strategies or plans for my advancement into learning to be like him. It was a very hard journey.

I deeply wanted to learn and excel at everything that he was teaching me, but why did it have to be this hard?

“Come along Benaiah. There’s something I want to show you.”

Kuri was on his feet and pulling me up to mine. He started out along the ledge above the cliff and I followed

along, curious to know what it was he would show me.

We had lived for a year now in the lower slopes of the Holy Mountains. During that time we had never ventured farther into the mountains than we were now.

The trail curved out of view and rounding the corner I gasped at the sight of what was revealed. In direct contrast with the desert sands that lapped up against the base of the mountains all along the northern front, I now found myself gazing down into a garden paradise of vivid greenery.

Nestled in amongst the lofty peaks lay a large continuous valley that was more lushly green than I had ever before seen in nature. While I didn't know much about the topography of Ayenathurim as

a whole I did know some, and to date I had never heard of this place.

I turned my shocked eyes to Kuri's and was surprised to see that he was gazing down into the idyllic valley with an unsmiling gaze that bordered on anger. What would move him to be angry in the face of such beauty as existed in the mountain valley below us?

I had come to trust Kuri's instincts on all things so I looked at the valley more closely, in particular the open stretches of terrain not covered by verdant tree canopies. I soon picked out the shapes of moving objects in the lush grass of the valley. There were a lot of something and they were big!

For the distant objects to look so big so far away must mean that they were absolutely huge up close. Kuri, in a grim

tone, spoke into my study of the valley and its huge occupants, “This place, like so many others, was once a paradise, but now it has become corrupted. Some of the creatures that you see are of fallen Malachim design. They are a plague to the higher-order creatures that were given this valley as their home. There is a war going on down there. A war between simple animals perhaps, on the surface, but a war between good and evil at its heart. The evil kinds are trying to devour and drive out all the good that remains in this valley. You’ve completed your first year of training and now it’s time to begin the next.”

I turned my eyes from the valley to Kuri, even as I prayed that he wasn’t going to say what I knew he was. His eyes were confirmation enough and his

words were only a mere formality for what I knew was coming, “Over the next year you and I and the created higher-order kinds of pure blood that remain within the valley are going to kill and drive out all the unclean flesh that has made this sacred valley their home. Light cannot coexist with darkness. Even so, that which is of El Elyon has no place with being mixed with the abominations of darkness’s delight.”

I looked away from Kuri to the valley below once more. In my mind’s eye, a valley of idyllic beauty populated with the fallen Malachim's created monsters made the gorge back in the mountains behind me look like a thing of child’s play. As if in tune with my thoughts I heard the roar of one of the monsters from the valley below echo up to us.

“Come along Benaiah. We need to get back to camp so we can pack up and move into the valley in the morning.”

Kuri headed back the way we had just come and with my mouth suddenly dry I asked, “Isn’t there another way that we can go back to camp?”

Kuri never stopped walking as he called out, “This is the straightest path to our destination. There is no sense in diverging from it.”

Oh I could beg to differ with that, but I kept my thoughts to myself and obediently followed. With the coming task at hand looming large I nonetheless retracted my thought of crossing the tight rope as being a thing of mere child’s play.

It took everything within me just to dare myself to cross such an obstacle

again. How was I going to be able to kill monsters, if the current task before me was too great for me to accomplish?

Kuri seemed to think I was up for this so, armed with that confidence, I started out on the rope that was now stretched out before me. In a way, I guess I had to first conquer my own fears and bring them into subjection before I could face a monster that invoked fear just by the sight of it.

The task at hand was not easy, but it helped to look away from the gorge below to Kuri up ahead on the other side, confidently waiting for me to join him. I made it across in half the time and I didn't fall this time.

Even though Kuri hadn't had to catch me, it seemed as though the magnetized power of his gaze had helped pull me

across my worst fear to date.

I stared into the campfire somberly. This was to be our last night on the outer reaches of the mountains. I'd been here a year already and yet the time had seemed to fly.

During that time we hadn't encountered so much as one person. That was all right by me. Well, mostly all right.

A persistent ache seized hold of my mind. It would've been nice to see a girl.

I'd seen so few of them in my life, as I'd rarely had the chance to leave the farm, but I remembered what they looked like. Memories however were no

substitute for reality.

Kuri tossed a log onto the fire and sparks leapt upward for a moment. Completely startled I blinked rapidly from the disruption of my thoughts. I glanced dazedly at Kuri before guiltily looking away.

After a tension filled moment on my part I heard him ask in his deep voice, “Is there something you want to talk about?”

I remained silent in my shame, as I knew full well how much of an open book even my private thoughts were to Kuri. He could see everything. My eyes closed in shame as I delved back over the thoughts I had just been having.

“What do you want to know about women?”

My eyes opened and I gazed at Kuri,

startled. My lips fumbled out, “What?”

Kuri just smiled and eased back against a log more comfortably. I looked away from him, not sure what to think of his question, let alone what to ask.

Staring into the flames Kuri spoke, “In the beginning El Elyon fashioned man after His own image and out of the man He fashioned the woman, together the two are one. So by having stated that, I hope you can see that there’s nothing wrong with the desire within you to be one with the other half of your creation. It’s a natural, even Creator attributed, function of being a man.”

“Benaiah?”

I glanced over to him and met his gaze as he said, “There’s nothing wrong with you and I certainly don’t disapprove of you fulfilling your created function and

the desire intended for you to experience from the union. There is only one thing that I will caution you on. Your desire should only be fulfilled with the other half of you, which means I want you to wait until you find that woman. Don't be like the men who visited your mother or, for that matter, the Kingdome's who have a wife at home but visit brothels every chance that they get when away from home."

I nodded and looked down. I had a question and I asked it, "How do you know when you've found the other half of yourself? The girls that I've seen..... well..... I was attracted to a lot of them. How do you know which one is the right one?"

"It's easy to say, but hard to explain Benaiah. You'll know her when you see

her. The important thing is to wait for her and that can be a very hard thing to do as a man.”

I gazed into the fire, privately acknowledging the truth of those words. I wondered how long I would have to wait. I glanced at Kuri to see him fire gazing as well.

I had another question, but I didn't know how he'd take it. His eyes left the fire to come to mine and I realized that I might as well ask my question anyway as it was common knowledge now.

“Did you ever find your woman or are you still waiting?”

He spoke slowly, as if seeing a scene from the past play out into the present moment, “I was engaged to be married, but she wasn't ready. More simply put, she didn't want me. So I guess you could

say that I'm still waiting.”

I stared at Kuri incredulously. What woman could possibly pass up on a man like him?

I swallowed nervously as I contemplated how slim my own chances might be at finding the right girl based on his luck. Hesitantly I asked, “So what are you going to do? Are you going to find another woman who will want you?”

Kuri smiled bittersweetly, “I suppose for some that would be an option, but you see Benaiah, for me the situation is that I still love her.”

“Even though she turned you down?”

He nodded.

“You're going to continue waiting for her to change her mind?”

He nodded and said, “Yes. My love

for her has no bounds. Whether she changes her mind or not, I will be waiting patiently for her until there is no more time.”

I shook my head in consternation, “Kuri, you’re the best man I’ve ever met, if anybody deserves to be happy in life it’s you!”

His bittersweet smile turned to one of warmth then as he said, “Oh, I will be Benaiah. You’ll see.”

“You have that much faith that she’ll change?”

“I do.”

“What about all the time that’s already been wasted?”

“None of that will matter as long as we’re together in the end. As I told you, Benaiah, my love for her is boundless. I truly mean that. My love for her is not

based out of what I will gain from the union, but rather out of the love I have for her the person.”

I shook my head, “I don’t understand.”

Kuri smiled and just went back to staring into the flames.

I felt anger against this woman who had rejected my mentor and friend. He seemed to have no anger towards her though, so why should I?

I hoped I didn’t suffer rejection from a woman like he had and still was. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Chapter Five

Deceived

One year later

Drip. Drip. Drip.
Splat!!!

I heard the gob of saliva fall and I knew that the mouth of the monster had opened. I ducked out of my hiding spot at the knowledge that my location had been found out. A screeching wail of great magnitude erupted as I broke cover.

I heard a sound like thunder clouds clapping in a storm as the huge jaws bit

through the tree I had been hiding behind. It was after me then with a ponderous stumble of heavy steps even as it wailed out its avarice to kill me.

I ducked into a tight grove of Avarno trees and the fallen order beast howled in rage and began to smash its way ponderously through the soft pulped and closely grown trees. The trees were slowing it down, which gave me the time I needed to make it to the clearing. This was so much easier when things went according to plan, such a blessing was rare so I always planned accordingly for the chance of things going wrong.

I broke free of the rain forest and out onto the lush grass of the valley's main grazing pasture. I was a powerful runner and my life of surviving and fighting had made my body hard. I had the scars and

enough near-death experiences to prove it too. The high order animals busy grazing on the lush grass of the valley picked up their heads in alarm as a wail of aggression broke out from the forest behind me.

The fallen order beast was clear of the Avarno trees and would be after me swiftly now. Faster than I could run.

Okay, which one was it going to be, I contemplated to myself, as I ran straight toward a group of three horned Tricans. Kuri had taught me many things, one of which was that some of the high order beasts could still be communicated with. I cried out my need from within and for a moment the herd of giant three horned beasts came to a standstill.

They blinked their large eyes at me out of their heavy armor plated skulls

and then I saw their gazes shift to the forest edge behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see one of the fallen order kinds explode out of the heavy vegetation on its two massive rear legs as its short upper arms grasped the air in their eagerness to get a grip on me.

I glanced ahead as all the high order beasts of the plain began to run. It would be a short day for me if all my available rides ran off and left me here.

A young female Trican surged free of the pack of stampeding prey animals and headed straight for me. It was a brave move and one for which I was supremely grateful. To face the threat, coming up fast behind me, alone meant certain death for her, yet she was coming full on as the herd forsook her and headed off down the valley.

To the herd there was no overcoming the beast behind me without greater numbers and so, listening to their fear, they gave flight, but there were still special ones like the big female before me that still listened to directions given to them by man.

Kuri had told me that all the animals had once been so responsive to the dictates of man and had even spoken in a common tongue, but that ability had been lost at some point in the distant past. The Tricans could still detect dire emotional context though and one had listened and heeded my cry for help.

It appeared she would run right over top of me for a moment, but at the last moment her great head dipped downward and I vaulted upwards to land standing on her lower horn, with my

body poised between her two upper horns. Great chunks of sod went flying through the air as the young female in her prime peeled off to the left in a desperate lunge to avoid a head on course with what was behind me.

The change of course successfully made the Trican beneath me begin to put forth the greatest effort of her life. I looked up and over her raised protective neck frill of sinew and bone to see slavering death just behind us.

I vaulted upward to stand on her upper horns and then I flipped over her neck frill to land on her neck. Looking up, I saw that the fallen order beast was gaining on us. It seemed unnatural to me how it could be faster than the beast I rode, which had the benefit of four legs and less overall bulk.

The fallen order beast may be faster, but it would not eat us this day. It was the last of its kind and I intended to see it die just as all the others had over the past year. I had nothing against predators in general, but this fallen kind Kuri had marked for slaughter as it was nothing but a mouth that knew only endless hunger and was never satiated, but killed for the joy of killing.

I pulled my bow off my back. It was a powerful bow and the muscles of my arm stood out in stark relief as I fitted an arrow shaft to it and let it fly. The arrow sped true and launched deeply into the gut of the beast all the way up to the feathers of my fletching.

The pain the beast experienced drove it to new heights of hatred for me and I called out in my mind to the big female

beneath me to change course. Obediently she surged off to the left side in a display of several tons of weight in action, even as the fallen beast's teeth raked furrows through the dirt where we had just been.

I let loose with another arrow and caught it in the neck. These things were hard to bring down and this last one of its fallen kind was putting up quite the fight as if it knew what was at stake. It dove at us again, and again at my direction the big female Trican dodged off to the side as I put arrow after arrow into our pursuer.

Suddenly the chase was over and I was shocked by it. Badly bleeding the fallen order beast completely broke off pursuit and headed as fast as it could go towards the open mouth of the valley

where the valley opened up into the arid wastelands that surrounded the Holy Mountains.

Never before had I seen such behavior from one of this kind. When they attacked there was no let up until it or its victim was dead.

I didn't give it much of a chance in terms of survival, as my arrows had found their mark, the evidence left behind in a trail awash with blood. There was so much blood that I marveled that it still had the strength to run. Again, there was just something unnatural in the moment.

I calmed the beast I rode as it was still in full flight and slowly she came to a stop, her sides heaving hard as she took in great gulps of air. Then I asked the impossible of her and she listened to

me. Turning, she began to follow after the hunter of us both at an easy lope that shook the ground.

I couldn't even see the beast we trailed anymore, but its blood lay dumped out on the ground in a trail that was unmistakable to see. There was just something about this that I did not like, but the desire to understand what was going on had me urging the big female to go a little faster.

The amount of blood grew less and less and then I knew that I was dealing with something beyond the physical realm. Under natural circumstances no animal of such great bulk could go on with so little blood left in it.

“El Elyon help us!” I said, as I urged my increasingly reluctant steed to continue on.

A half-hour later the bulk of the beast we had been trailing came into view. It had run completely out of the valley and was laying upon the parched sands of the Wastelands.

Creatures of the valley rarely if ever left it, as what value was there in roaming the Wastelands that had little to offer in terms of food. That said, why then had this fallen order beast run so far to reach this desolate spot?

There wasn't even a blood trail anymore, which was perhaps most eerie of all. Something had driven this animal beyond even the limits of its obscene killing abilities to do the impossible.

It was windy outside of the valley and

sand tornadoes were kicked up here and there all around us.

I quickly saw that the sand in the air had hidden the real reason for the monster's desire to bring us here. We were completely surrounded by Saber Cats!

I felt a quiver course down my spine at the sight of so many of them. I had thought that Kuri and I had killed them all, but I had been wrong. Very wrong, as we were literally being encircled by hundreds of them.

These must be the leftover pack remnants of all those we'd spent a full year killing. They closed in from all sides; an unbroken wall of unnatural teamwork on full display.

It was normal for these big cats to run in packs of 30 or more, but never so

many as this. They were united in purpose to kill me, one of the perpetrators of their demise within the valley beyond, which they had once ruled.

Although they had the appearance of other big cats such as lions they were partly something else. It was not sure what that was. Their unnaturalness also lay in both the size of the packs they kept and their most obvious feature which were the elongated canines that came down from their upper jaw and went a long way into giving them a ferocious appearance.

For all the fear the oversized canines evoked, they were absolutely useless. The canines were so long that the cats couldn't open their mouths wide enough to properly bear down on anything and

the teeth themselves were very prone to breaking off, which was the saving grace for many of the creatures.

With canines in place they couldn't get a good bite on anything. Even though they were larger in size, they couldn't win by themselves in an upfront confrontation with a lion of smaller stature because they couldn't use the power of their bite.

Their way of coping with the limitations imposed upon them by their teeth was that they ran in very large packs and would attack en-masse. They had killed all the other big cats and high order predators in the valley over time with their large pack mentality. Only in the higher ranges of the mountains did a few scattered and much smaller numbered packs of lions continue to

survive.

Those lion prides were coming back down to the valley now as our war was not with them, but rather with these freaks of nature all around us that had hunted almost all of the smaller prey within the valley to extinction. They, like the Evanik dogs, never had enough to eat.

Now, as I looked around, I realized that I had been set up by forces beyond any at work within the physical realm. I stared into the faces of the encroaching Saber Cats and knew a moment of anger the likes of which I'd never experienced before.

The knowledge that these animals were being used by demonic forces to bring about my death, because of my beliefs and faith in El Elyon was

material for my rage to burn upon. Something of my intense anger telegraphed out of me into the big Trican beneath me, who began to grunt aggressively and stamp its feet.

Under normal conditions the Tricans were under no threat from the Saber Cats because of their tough armored hide and aggressive herd instinct, as the Tricans held together under a Saber Cat attack and charged on them instead. But one Trican against so many was a doubtful thing.

It didn't matter. I cared less about living right now than I ever had before. The urge to fight out against this pressing darkness that destroyed all that was well and good was overwhelming.

I had no more arrows so my bow was no longer of use to me. I unhooked my

bowstring and tied it off to my spare bowstring. I then tied the one end of the elongated string to my belt. Turning I tied off the other end of the string to one of the bony projections of the female's neck frill.

Tether now in place, I pulled the sword that Kuri had helped me make out of its holster which lay along my back. One hand holding onto the sword and the other on the neck frill of the beast that I rode I cried out, "Let's ride!"

The big Trican half reared up for she seemed infused with the same killing passion that I was. She came down with crashing force and took off at a lope for the wall of snarling Saber Cats.

My intention was not to escape. No, my intention was to do war with the unnatural forces at play within the

misguided flesh which surrounded me. The Sabers let off with a concussive roar and lunged forward toward us.

The big Trican, far from being put off by the sound of the Sabers' roars, let out a roar of her own as she picked up speed. Not 10 or even 20 sabers would be enough to bring her down, but a 100 or more was a different story.

Our certain death was far from our shared thoughts as we plowed into the enemy line of fur and teeth. Saber Cats went flying or were crushed underfoot, while one was gored through by the big female's lower solitary horn.

With a shake of her big head the Trican dislodged the gored wreckage of life and hunted for more. Her feet churned the desert sand in a wide arcing turn as she sought to run down the line of

Saber Cats before her.

They ducked out of the way to avoid her dangerous horns and crushing hooves. As they peeled off to the side they pounced and latched on to the big female's flanks as they tried to bring her down by weight alone.

I explored the length of my tether as I ran back and forth across the shifting platform beneath my feet. My sword swung faster than I had ever wielded it and my sharp regret of the moment was that I did not have two swords to wield.

Saber after Saber launched to land on the flanks of the big female. Some fell off to be churned under, but others hooked in with their massive forepaws and held on. I severed Saber after Saber of its forelegs in my bid to keep the Trican rolling forward unencumbered by

the weight of the horde.

Occasionally Sabers managed to claw their way up onto the broad back of the Trican to attack me. They came at me with deep chested roars and I hacked away with true savagery, until the back of the big beast I rode ran red with blood.

My footing on the bloody surface became treacherous and I slipped many times, until I fell. My cord brought me up short of hitting the ground, but there were snarling Sabers all around me taking swipes at me.

The big female turned sharp and brought her head to the right and I leapt toward the proffered horn hanging out in space, even as I sliced through my tether with my sword.

I grabbed the horn, but a massive paw

slammed into my shoulder and sent the sword flying along with my breath. I held on to the horn through sheer force of will, as my ride brought her head around and charged on as more and more Sabers fought to latch on.

My breath had come back to me and I pulled myself up and over her horns and past her eyes to stand against her neck frill, only to duck a paw swipe aimed at my head. I dodged back up to be met with the snarling visage of a Saber. I let him have my fist to the side of his head with all the strength I could muster.

The Saber's eyes glazed and he tumbled off the Trican. Warily, I flipped up over the neck frill and landed on my feet as I pulled a pair of long knives from my belt. There were at least four Sabers on board and they were all

surging toward me.

This was a battle for survival. With a roar I ran toward them.

The desert wind was blowing again and I was grateful for it, because it had blown sand all over the blood on the surface of the Trican's back. I could tell the Trican was tiring, but gamely she kept on as at least 30 Sabers were climbing up her sides, tearing into her thick hide in search of a perch.

I ducked under one paw strike and ripped my knife along the Saber's flank. The Saber fell over the side and dislodged two of its brethren on the way down. Another Saber was before me, rising up to give me a fanged hug, and I stepped into the embrace of its paws and rammed both blades deep. Its paws shrugged off my shoulders even as the

insane light in its eyes faded into darkness.

Another Saber swiped at my legs and I heaved the dead one before me over to fall onto it, knocking the newest aggressor free of the Trican's back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a Saber in flight and I let the momentum of my heave of the dead Saber carry me over backward.

I landed hard on my back. Numbly I thrust one knife upwards just in time to gut the Saber passing overhead of me.

Awash with blood from my gutted victim I scrambled up to my feet, only to be startled from my fight for survival by the loud bellow of the big female. It wasn't a cry of death, but of war, and then the air seemed to ring with the sound of my friend's cries only

manifested in greater volume.

It was almost comical to see the way the heads of the latched on Sabers swiveled forward. They abruptly let go of the Trican's flank and dropped to the ground.

I turned my head forward to see what had provoked such a reaction. The entire herd had come to us. Not just the female's herd, but all the Tricans of the valley. They were strung out in a long unbroken line running at full tilt with horns down. Sand kicked up behind them forming a wall of dust 50 feet into the air. It was a beautiful sight.

My head turned back to see the rest of the Sabers, numbering almost two hundred, running in the opposite direction. They weren't going to make it.

The battle line before us opened and

the horned host swept along past us at a full gallop. Tired Sabers dodged left and right to miss being trampled or gored, but the tight-pressed line of Tricans didn't falter in its intent to destroy all. Each of the Tricans held its place in the line as they swept back and forth with their projecting horns in search of a target, even as they trod other Sabers underneath, into the sand.

The big female came to a lumbering halt, her sides heaving for breath. Somehow I found myself suddenly sitting on her back instead of standing and absentmindedly I patted her back. It was doubtful that she felt my touch, but I had to show my appreciation in some way.

She was all cut up from where sharp claws had managed to penetrate, but she was young and with rest she would

recover. The herd was coming back to us.

I continued to sit, feeling quite done in by everything. I saw Kuri then. He was riding a big bull, which diverted from the herd to come towards us.

Kuri stood there at the frill above the horns and regarded me somberly for a moment before a smile broke free, “I believe we have accomplished the goal that we set out to do a year ago. I think you’re ready for the next and final step of your training.”

Trepidation for what that next step would be rose sharply within me, “And what would that be?”

“Civilization and in particular, the art of diplomacy.”

I could’ve laughed out loud then, “You had me scared there for a moment, Kuri!

I was expecting a new level of death-defying import.”

My good humor faded quickly away though at the somberness reflected in my teacher's face. What had I said wrong?

What could be so hard about diplomacy?

Kuri's ride drew close and Kuri broke the somberness of the moment by saying, “Do not be deceived by appearances Benaiah. The fight today, indeed this whole past year, has been a battle ever before you. You've always been able to see, feel, or even sense it and then respond to the threat, but it is different in the realms of man. There, nothing is certain and almost everything you see is a lie. Where in nature the weak die off against superior foes, in the realms of man the weak kill the strong by

stealth and subterfuge. The evil inside can be hid in the form of a friend, who will stab you in the back when you least expect it. Men and women are ever deceptive in revealing their true intentions. To them you would appear as naïve, an open scroll to exploit. You have much to learn Benaiah. There is a way to talk that does not give away too much and yet speaks only that which is true. There is a way to evaluate the truthfulness and motives of others and yet still remain friendly. There is a way to avoid the pitfalls of those weaknesses common to mankind by which many are snared and pulled down to a place of everlasting torment. No Benaiah, this coming year you have as much, if not more, to learn than you did these past two years put together.”

I sighed inwardly. My bask in the glow of a great victory was over and I was once again humbled. Why did the circumstances of my life have to move along so fast?

Why couldn't things proceed at a bit of a slower rate than they did?

Glancing at Kuri I felt a moment of guilt. It wasn't right to question his teaching methods and I was sorry for my thoughts. I trusted Kuri and yet why couldn't there just be a moment of rest now and then?

“Benaiah?”

I glanced up, knowing that he already knew what I had been thinking. He spoke softly, “Come down to the ground.” As Kuri spoke the bull he rode inclined its horned head lower and Kuri gracefully stepped down onto the desert sand.

I slid inelegantly down the side of my ride to tumble into the sand. Apparently I was as mentally tired as I felt physically in order to have misjudged how dismounting in such a fashion could've been a good idea.

Kuri helped me up as the two Tricans moved off. The big female stayed abreast of the bull, who was the herd sire. Her actions this day had just vaulted her, at an early age in the life of a Trican, into the dominant role of alpha female of the herd.

I was glad for her. It was nice to see her rewarded in some way for her gallantry today.

My eyes drifted to Kuri standing beside me. I'd reached my full height now and I could stare him right in the eye. There was a wealth of unsurpassed

knowledge tempered with the warmth of a friend in the way that he looked at me. He made me feel special in a way that needed no words to express.

He spoke and I listened carefully, "Reward is coming Benaiah. But first, there is a war of the spirit to contend with that has spilled over into the lives of men. There are few willing to take up the sword and fight. I tell you now, Benaiah, that in the courts of Shamayim you are already known for your willingness to do what is right. One day you shall have great reward, but first comes the war of this life, for that is the will of El Elyon. The covenant enacted of old shall be completed and the separation of those who believe in that new covenant from life eternal will be abolished. The time is short, Benaiah.

While there is yet time we labor. I know what I ask entails sacrifice, but it is the life of a servant of the Most High that you and I have embarked upon.”

Quite honestly I said, “When you put it all like that Kuri it doesn’t seem like much of a sacrifice.”

“Oh it can and it will be a sacrifice, Benaiah. The road we travel can cost us everything and yet we gain everything that there is of value to be had, which are not things of this world.”

I shook my head and asked a question that I had always wanted to, “Just who are you Kuri?”

He simply smiled and slapped me on the shoulder and said, “Your teacher, your fellow servant and your friend. Now, I do believe that our rides are here.”

Not understanding, I turned to look back out into the wastelands only to see two horses coming toward us, dragging their reins. I glanced quickly to Kuri. This wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. How he had so much foreknowledge about everything I did not know, only that El Elyon must reveal it to him somehow.

As the horses came closer I couldn't but help notice that they weren't quite my picture of how I had envisioned my first ride into greater civilization. One was an older looking gelding and the other was a mare.

“The mare will be your mount. I'll ride the other.”

My face wrinkled a little in disdain and Kuri noticed, “What is it Benaiah?”

I hesitated, but then spoke, “I just sort

of imagined myself riding something a little more lively and bold like a stallion.”

“You didn’t object to riding a female steed earlier today.”

“That was different and you know it!”

Kuri chuckled and gripped my shoulder, “The time of war horses is coming, but for now you are working on, among other things, the art of diplomacy. I think you will find that we will attract far less notice in the places we are headed by riding mounts such as these than steeds of war.”

I turned from the horses to Kuri, “Is there anything you don’t already know?”

Kuri spoke slowly, “I know all that is given to me to know.” He mounted the gelding and I turned to my mare. He hadn’t really answered the question, but

that didn't really matter now. A new adventure was beginning.

Chapter Six

Lesson Learned

The last year of training

So which of the seven Kingdomer Nations are we headed for?" I asked, in hopes that Kuri would divulge the route he was taking. His answer shocked me.

"We're not going to any of the seven Kingdomer Nations, as it is not yet time for that."

"If we're not visiting the seven Kingdomer Nations then where are we going?"

“Well, we just entered Ezon and after that Sarran followed by Portanisha and Orpital.”

“But those are all Nicationer Nations!”

“Precisely.”

I didn't understand it.

Kuri glanced over to me, “Have you forgotten your own beginnings so quickly? Whether they are Nicationer or Kingdomer they are alike in that they all possess a soul. One is no better than the other in the eyes of El Elyon.”

“How can that be true? Kingdomers serve and reverence the name of the Most High, while Nicationers bow in reverence to any dark entity or simple aspect of nature!”

There was a sad note to Kuri's tone as he said, “And yet I tell you the two are

the same. In fact there are many Nicationers of higher regard in the eyes of El Elyon than those in the seven kingdoms. Many of those within the seven kingdoms say they worship El Elyon, but they serve another, while there are those among the Nicationer's who have never heard of El Elyon. Tell me Benaiah, which is worse?"

"To say you know El Elyon and yet not serve Him," I said slowly, as new comprehension dawned within me.

Kuri nodded and said, "Neither is good and both are in danger of Sheol, but those who have been given more chances to know and follow El Elyon's ways will have more expected of them in return. Theirs is the greater guilt for not believing, while ignorance is the Nicationer's defense against greater

judgment than that received by the Kingdomer.”

“Why do we go at all, if things have deteriorated to such a great degree?” I asked.

Kuri glanced over at me, “I never said it was hopeless Benaiah. People can change. Whether they be Nicationer or Kingdomer they all have the ability to change and become something far better.”

As we rode along, I idly mused on why Kuri had chosen me to be his fellow messenger to a lost world. In a way I was, by blood, half of both worlds and yet Kuri saw me as just another man. Why should I be prejudiced against visiting the lands of my father’s heritage?

“What are we doing after we reach

Orpital?” I asked.

Kuri seemed reflective for a moment and time stretched out. I didn't think he was going to answer me when suddenly he spoke, “After our work is accomplished in Orpital we will head south into the Targon Mountains.”

“The Targon Mountains! I have heard that is a place of great evil where the monsters of the fallen Malachim have gone to live in great number!”

Kuri shrugged, “So? What are facing such beasts in open confrontation to you? Haven't you been slaying such beasts for over the past year now?”

When he said it like that my objection to what he proposed didn't make much sense. Nevertheless I said, “I've heard it's worse there.”

With a smile Kuri asked, “And when

have you heard this Benaiah? You've been with me for two years now and we've seen no other in all that time.”

“In the towns where I grew up. It was a thing of common rumor,” I said defensively.

“Ahhh rumor. Rumors are tricky things, Benaiah, and most often not to be believed, as there is little truth to them.”

“You're saying there are no monsters?”

“Not at all, rather I'm saying that it would be best for you to approach the unknown without preconceived ideas about it or else you will find yourself bound up by many fears. Every step you take in the mountains could be haunted by the fear of being discovered by a monster that may not even exist, while on the other hand you walk across a

market yard of one of the seven kingdoms in blind trust that you are safe when really you are in the midst of a den of vipers more harmful than any monster. As you learn diplomacy over this coming year you will learn the value of approaching every situation you encounter with watchful caution, but also with a willingness for things to go right instead of wrong. If you do so you will not be motivated out of fear to engage in unnecessary actions as so many others are want to do. Instead, you will be the master of your own actions and able to chart the best journey forward regardless of the situation at hand.”

I shook my head as I stared out at the dusty miles that lay stretched out before us. Diplomacy and its accompanying attributes might not be such an easy

lesson to learn after all.

It occurred to me then, as to something else that I had heard about the Targon Mountains. It was said that most of the remnants of the Yesathurim people lived there. Kuri's people.

“Do you mean to rejoin with your people when we reach the Targon Mountains?” I asked, curious to see what reaction I would receive from Kuri.

Completely unfazed he said, “My people are scattered across all of Ayenathurim, but yes, there are many of my people held up in the mountains to the far south. I intend to gather them and lead them to a safer place. A place within the borders of my people's ancestral land. The same place that we've just come from.”

I nodded, feeling somewhat more

assured of a plan of action now.

“What then? What happens after your people are gathered in the valley of the Holy Mountains?”

“Enough with the questions for now Benaiah. Time will tell as to exactly how the future will unfold. Only El Elyon knows for sure when the end will occur. Now, are you ready for your reemergence into civilization?”

“What?” I asked, at a loss because of the sudden change of thought.

I glanced forward and saw the dim outline of a village taking shape before us on the plain. I swallowed nervously in sudden anxiety at re-exposure to society.

How had I fearlessly killed ferocious monsters in close combat but a few days ago to now feel fear at the unknown

world of men?

It didn't make sense and yet there was excitement to my fear as well. Idly I wondered if there were any pretty girls in the village ahead.

What if there were?

It was an uneasy thought and I viewed the approaching village with new trepidation.

I dismounted and tied my horse off just as Kuri had done. Reluctantly I followed him into the poorly lit building constructed of mud and sticks that looked to be on the point of collapse.

As bad as this building was, it was still the best looking of all the shacks that the village had to offer. I found

myself wanting to be free of this place and all of its squalor, but out of obedience to Kuri I sat down at the rickety table off to one side of the open room and mentally prepared myself to choke down whatever was put before me.

There were only a few others within the room and they stared at us suspiciously out of drunken eyes. I did not like the place at all and I certainly did not care for those present either.

My eyes found Kuri's, only to see him looking at me with a censoring gaze. Immediately I felt that I had messed up somehow and Kuri, always the teacher, didn't let me dwell in the question of my unknown trespass for long, "Do you think yourself so much above these people to look at them with such utter

disdain and disregard?”

I ducked my eyes down to the table. To be truthful, I did think of myself as being better, but was I right to do that? Apparently not.

I looked back out at the room with a new regard for what I was seeing. Instead of seeing what I had the first time, I now saw beneath the drunken visages of the shack's patrons to their underlying weariness of spirit. It was as if everyone within the place could barely summon the strength to keep drawing in their next breath of air.

It seemed that the only solace anyone was finding came from the foul-smelling tankards of alcohol set before them. I felt pity for them now in place of the disgust that I had earlier. Something of my inner thoughts must've reached my face,

because the hostility of the drunken onlookers seemed to dissipate away and one by one they glanced back to their tankards and took a swig as they resumed their usual business of hopelessly watching time go by.

This was diplomacy. My first lesson so to speak.

My attitude of dislike had been clearly evident to all within the room and I had made potential enemies of all of them, until I'd had the sense to really see them for what they were. They were simple, but tired out people with no hope of anything ever getting better.

Even as I now pitied them I found myself rather thankful to not be sharing their lot in life. What a change in perspective could make in terms of viewing a situation.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

The voice was feminine and youthful in quality and inwardly I girded myself against any sudden infatuation with a member of the opposite sex. My head turned to take in the speaker and I relaxed instantly.

No vision of temptation's beckoning allure stood before me. It was just a girl of perhaps 10 or 12. She had a pretty face, but she was so thin that she appeared to be on the point of starvation.

Her features, stark as they were with the lack of food and meaningful care, echoed of something finer. What was it?

I glanced from her to Kuri and back again. She was a Yesathurim, or at least partly so. What was a girl of her ancestry doing in a place like this?

“We would like the best of what you

can offer,” Kuri said, giving the girl his full attention.

The girl’s darker cast features blushed for a moment and she looked down before haltingly asking, “Can you pay?”

Kuri reached forward and pressed several coins into the girl’s dirty hands. Her eyes got huge and she quickly hurried off, I presume to get us the best that this place had to offer. That said, I wasn’t expecting much.

She came back quickly with two tankards that looked marginally cleaner than the others on display around the room, although the contents still stank of the same vile concoction of alcohol mixed with something that smelled like rotting fish that the others within the room had before them.

“I’ll just have water. Thanks anyway.”

I said.

The girl snorted derisively at me and I glanced at her in indignation as I started to hand my tankard back to her. Kuri's fingers closed about my wrist and the tankard stayed on the table.

“My friend has reconsidered and will be more than happy with what you have brought,” Kuri said smoothly and the girl, after sending me a condescending look, hurried off to what I presumed was the kitchen.

Kuri released my wrist and picking up his tankard he drank an unhealthy amount of the foul-smelling fluid. He shook his head at the taste of it for a moment before motioning to me to do the same.

I still had some stale water in a skin bladder out on my saddle that, although gamy to the taste, was, by comparison, a

far better alternative to what the tankard before me contained. I shook my head and asked, “Why couldn’t I have had water instead of this?”

Kuri’s brow wrinkled good humoredly, “Have you ever had the tumbly grumblies?”

“Worms?” I asked, in verification of what he meant.

He nodded, still smiling.

“Goodness no!”

“Well, if you’d like to continue being unfed upon from within, you’ll drink the beer that’s set before you. The fermentation process of the alcohol kills off all the parasites and, while it doesn’t taste good, it’s the safest thing you’re going to find around here to drink.”

I stared at the tankard before me in revulsion. As revolting as it was though,

it was less so than the thought of invaders twisting about in my guts feeding on me from within. I took a sip and about spewed it across the table.

The stuff was as vile as it had looked and smelled! I took a second sip and managed to hold it down and fight off the urge to vomit.

The girl was back with two steaming bowls in her hands. She sat them down with a flourish and I stared at the contents in the bowl before me. The contents of the bowl, for lack of a better description, looked like a grey mound of mud with lumpy twigs stuck here and there in it. No wonder the girl was so thin.

“Thank you,” Kuri said warmly, not at all put off by the sick looking porridge before us, which I wasn’t entirely sure

was completely dead. Was that twiggish looking lump moving?

I glanced up to see the girl looking at me and I said, "Thank you." I saw her smile for the first time and then she left us, presumably for us to enjoy our meal.

I looked back down to the bowl before me. I poked the one lump suspiciously, but there appeared to be no movement. My reintroduction to society wasn't going well at all.

With the meal finished, and feeling the worse for it, I rose to follow after Kuri, only he wasn't headed for the door. He stopped and motioned me to go back out to the horses and obediently I did.

It was almost with eagerness that I

slid into the saddle of the mare I rode. Eagerness to be gone from this dreary place. What was Kuri doing anyway?

Time stretched on and I was about to dismount and go back inside, when the doors of the shack opened and Kuri came out, only he wasn't alone. To my consternation the servant girl was with him and she had a dirty sack hung over one thin shoulder.

No, it couldn't be!

Kuri mounted up and then pulled the girl up behind him. He turned his mount to go and I couldn't help the question that came from my lips, "Why?"

"Why not? Benaiah, when it is in your power to do good you should."

"This is good?" I exclaimed.

Kuri gave me a censoring look and turned his horse onto the trail out of this

little hole in the middle of nowhere. The girl turned her head back to me and, mildly shocked, I watched her stick her tongue out at me.

The brat turned forward and I turned my mount to follow along after Kuri. Kuri was making a terrible mistake in bringing this girl along.

I don't think I'd ever seen anyone eat so much before. Early in the day I'd ridden ahead and been fortunate to bring down a Roan deer with an arrow. I had it gutted and dressed out with a fire already made when Kuri had arrived with the girl.

All the while the meat had cooked over the fire the girl had stared at it in

rapt focus. Hadn't she ever had meat before?

As I watched her devour her third steak, I soberly acknowledged the possibility that perhaps she hadn't. Whether she had or not she was certainly making up for lost time.

I'd had one steak so far and I'd been about to start into a second, but there wasn't much meat left as most of the usable deer meat I had packed in salt for the journey. I was still hungry, but it didn't seem right to eat more in the present circumstances. I laid the second piece of meat before the girl.

She stopped eating for a moment to glance up and stare at me intensely. She didn't say anything and after a moment she went back to eating, but at a slower pace.

Why had I done that? I didn't particularly care for the girl and from all appearances the feeling was mutual. She needed help though and it had been right to give her extra, as I had been far more fortunate than her as of late.

I guess I understood now why Kuri had done what he had in bringing the girl along. There was also the fact that she was of his people and he had already told me that he had plans of gathering them together.

The girl was likely going to still be a nuisance. A nuisance that was going to eat us out of provisions in short order. Where was she putting it all?

Kuri rose to leave the campsite, but before he left he leaned down to whisper into my ear, "After she gets some sleep I'm going to need you to help me cut her

hair off. She has lice.” He left and I stared at the girl across the fire from me, who was eyeing me up suspiciously.

Oh this was just great. I had not signed up for this!

“You’re not cutting my hair off!” The girl screamed, as she struggled against my hold on her. My hold was unrelenting though and about the most strenuous aspect of the whole endeavor was trying to keep back from the girl’s unkempt and greasy looking hair.

Kuri stopped the girl’s sharp head movements by grasping her face with both hands. He didn’t say anything. All he did was stare in that way he had that said he knew everything you felt and that

he cared deeply for you. I'd been the recipient of that stare many times over the past two years.

The girl resisted the warm current of Kuri's gaze for only a moment before her body began to shake in a series of deep sobs. I found myself hurting for her, because of the empty forlorn quality of her cries.

Kuri's words were the soul of comfort, "There is no shame in this. Your hair will grow back and you will be even more beautiful than before. Now are you ready?"

Slowly the girl nodded and I felt a pulse of emotion course through me. The girl had courage. I admired that.

Kuri brought out a sharp knife and began to gently cut all the girl's hair away. It was a humbling experience, as

the girl I held seemed to sink within herself with the loss of more and more of her hair. Finally it was over and I let her go.

She instantly pulled away and headed down a path towards some boulders nearby that offered concealment. I watched her disappear from view, but I could still hear her crying. I hated the sound of that. It affected me like nothing else ever had.

I had no experience with women and every moment with even just this girl was a lesson on what the realm of being female was about. It was nothing for a man to be bald in life, but for her..... well, it was everything.

It made sense to me. It shouldn't have, but it did. I found myself wanting to help her in some way, but to her I was the

enemy.

I looked around the desert environment, at a loss as to what to do. It was hot and the sun was at full strength. Immediately I thought of the newly uncovered skin unused to the rays of the sun.

I went to my saddlebag and opened it, taking out my one and only change of clothing, which also happened to be my favorite shirt. It didn't matter.

Unmercifully I ripped it up and retied the pieces of it together in a different fashion. Satisfied I approached the nest of boulders. The girl immediately drew back from me, but I pressed forward and backed her up against a boulder. Without saying anything by way of explanation, I reached out with the torn up shirt and began to wrap the makeshift turban

around her head in the way that I'd seen Robanic tribesmen do.

She held still until I was done and perhaps the look in her eyes was a little less hostile. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Mayrin."

"Well Mayrin, we'll be moving out in a little bit. It's probably best for you to ride double on my horse for a while so we don't tire the other one out too much. It's cooler here in the boulders than out in the open, so stay here and I'll be back when it's time to leave."

I turned to go, but stopped as she husked out emotionally, "You didn't want me to come along with you and your friend. Why are you being nice?"

I had to think about it for a moment and when I spoke it was as if I was

experiencing the reality of the truth that she was hearing as it registered for the first time within my own consciousness, “I was like you once. Alone, afraid and without any hope of things ever getting better. Things did get better and I.....”

“You what?” she asked.

I looked back to her and finished my thought, “I hope things get better for you too.”

I watched her nod and then look down as if in contemplation of something. I left her to be alone and went to check up on the old mare. Kuri was there, already tending to his even worse looking mount. I didn't say anything, but I kept my back to him.

“That was thoughtful of you to do,” came Kuri's voice from over my shoulder.

I grunted in reply.

“Do you think I should have left her back there?”

I stopped fiddling with the saddle and stared vacantly over it at the distant horizon for a moment.

“No,” I finally admitted.

Kuri’s hand came down to squeeze warmly upon my shoulder, “Sometimes doing the right thing in life can seem to bring with it the burden of something unwanted, but it is often the case, in my experience, that the burden of the present is the joy of tomorrow.” Kuri moved off with his horse and was soon mounted and back on the trail.

Was that what I had been to start out with? A burden?

Looking to Kuri I once again thanked El Elyon for bringing him into my life

when he had. The girl was beside me and I lifted her up to the spot behind the saddle that I had made for her, only to then realize it would've been simpler for me to mount first and then pull her up behind me. There was always something new to learn.

Chapter Seven

Dark Invasion

We made our way slowly, but without delay, across Ezon. We skipped Sarran and instead went south through Portanisha and then Orpital. The grandness of the Targon Mountains lay before us. We'd seen them for several days now and yet it seemed that we'd gotten no closer for they still lay off in the distance.

At midday Kuri stopped. He had the girl with him and I pulled up alongside both, curious to know why he had

stopped. He was staring at the mountains before us as if in a deep trance and although I wanted to ask what was going on I waited, not wanting to bother him for he seemed to be praying.

Kuri spoke all of a sudden, “We will be in the foothills of the mountains in another two days’ time. The situation here in these mountains is a very grave one.”

He turned from the mountains to look at me and the character of his bearing had me sitting up in the saddle in expectation of something I didn’t think I’d want to hear.

“Benaiah, this is as far as you and I go together. I’ll take the girl on from here, but you will need to go another way.”

I was so startled at his words that for a moment I had the thought that he was

trying to play a cruel joke on me, but that wasn't his way. Instead, cold hard reality stared me in the face. It was the first time that I'd had to face it on my own in years and I wasn't prepared for it. The words fumbled from my lips in a rush, "What am I to do? I thought I was to be with you?"

"You always will be, in spirit Benaiah, but for now our paths go a different way. Even though we are parted in the lands of the living, what I have taught you goes on with you and so a part of me will always be with you."

Beyond even thinking of embarrassment before the girl, I felt tears fall down my face unchecked. Why was this happening?

I looked to the mountains ahead, searching for answers. Kuri's people

were in those mountains. Was he getting rid of me because I wasn't of his blood? No, I knew better than that. But the question of why remained.

“You will see me again Benaiah. When that day will be I do not know, but I'm sure that it will take place.”

Still staring at the mountains I asked, “What about my final lesson? How are you going to teach me diplomacy, if you're not with me?”

“That's easy, just do and say what you know I would do and say.”

“What about the dangers of these mountains? You can't want to face them all by yourself and what of your people? What if they don't listen to you? What then?” I asked, as I finally turned to look at him again. I felt completely raw and exposed before the world, lost at the

idea of going on without him by my side; teaching me the difference between right and wrong and the endless encouragements that he'd given me so generously, not to mention the feeling of self-worth and love that he had imparted to me.

Kuri's words were kind, but the look in his eyes was firm, "I can take care of myself Benaiah."

I looked down to the ground. Obviously he could take care of himself, but I had just figured that it would always be me and him slaying monsters together.

Then, in a way that I hadn't experienced from Kuri since our first days together in the Wastelands, his words emblazed across my mind, "Oh Benaiah, if you could only see what I do

of what is to come! Whether together or apart we both strive to please El Elyon. In His name we will both slay our share of monsters. This is not an end, but rather it is the beginning of something that will go on into eternity without end, an eternity where I want to have you right by my side, seeing and partaking in all that has been prepared for those who are faithful to believe.”

I looked up into Kuri's eyes then, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt just who he was. The clues had been there and I had thought it many times, but now I knew. I knew. I knew and the enormity of knowing almost drove me to fall off my horse to my knees, but Kuri's hand kept me from doing so.

I stared into his knowing eyes, seeing the wealth of a future that I could only

imagine, but falling short in terms of comprehending.

Completely overwhelmed and yet needing to be of service I asked, “What would you have me to do my King?”

“Remain faithful and help those of our shared belief in El Elyon, even as by your faith you open the doors for others to walk through into what has been prepared before the foundations of this world were ever laid. The Ruach of my Father is strong within you. Listen to Him even as you have been faithful to listen to me. He will lead you in the way you should go and He will be your strength in the darkest of hours and your encouragement in the face of all opposition. I send you out armed and ready for the battle. Armed with El Elyon’s Spirit there is nothing that you

cannot accomplish, for even as you ask in faith so shall it be done!”

Kuri pulled back over into his saddle and with kind but firm resolve he asked, “Are you ready for the journey?”

I knew all his words were true even as I felt a strength within that was not my own, so even though my human weakness said no I knew that the opposite was true, because I was a man not ruled by my flesh but rather by the spirit of El Elyon living within me and so I wished it forever to be.

I nodded and Kuri spoke, “When the time is right I need you to go and collect my bride and bring her to me. She rejected me of old and yet the prophecies will be fulfilled. Although she has done evil she will yet be flawless in my sight, when she turns

from her fallen ways and believes in me, for I am the King!”

“You are the King! Where will I find her?”

“In the country of Vella to the far north there is a temple over which she presides as high priestess, but I tell you now that she is a witch and has fallen away after every abominable practice of the fallen ones and to them she is chained. Do not go for her now, as it is not yet time, but when it is time, go without fear for I will be with you as a strong defense against all that oppose you!”

“I will do it, even as you give me strength,” I solemnly pledged.

“I know you will Benaiah. I know you will.” Without another word Kuri turned and rode on towards the mountains.

The girl, I'm not sure how much she understood, but she had the look of one who had stumbled onto deep truth. I prayed that she realized the full truth of whom it was that she rode with. Turning slightly she waved back at me and I waved at her in return.

I watched them a little while longer and then I turned my horse northward. Kuri was about El Elyon's business and so even must I be.

I rode northward out of Orpital and into the Kingdomer Nation of Thyana. Thyana was a grassland country. Long drifting moors capped off with the bronzed heads of mature grasses.

Here and there the bright colors of

late blooming wildflowers were intermixed with the dry grass. It was a beautiful country. Wide open with more room to grow.

As beautiful as it was it did not call out to me to make it my home, but rather like a pretty picture it was something to be enjoyed in the moment before moving on. My home, if I ever had one, would be somewhere in the higher elevations where all four seasons of the year were arrayed to their most extreme glory.

Another thing that came to me, as I looked at the endless miles of grass before me, was the lack of trees. I liked trees.

Something else that began to stand out to me was the towering column of black smoke rising up from the prairie in the distance. I was reasonably sure that it

wasn't a grass fire, as it seemed too localized. Although as dry as the grass was it might turn into one.

That possibility suggested I go around the smoke in order to avoid being caught and taken down by a fast-moving prairie fire. Despite that sound logic, I found myself still headed for the columns of black smoke on the horizon before me.

A sense of danger and a thirst for adventure spurred me on. I couldn't help but think that I was a fool though. Fool or not, I wanted to see the cause of the smoke and meet my future head on.

An hour later I spurred the old mare up another rise in the terrain close to where the smoke originated. I was getting close now and I could tell that the smoke was coming from several fires and not just one.

I rode on and as I cleared the last rise that barred my view I came to an abrupt halt. The source of the fires were wagons. The kind of wagons that farmers used to convey their goods to market.

There were 10 or more of about 30 wagons set ablaze upon the prairie and it was as I had feared. Small prairie fires were starting up around the blazing wagons.

The instinct to leave was strong, but the bodies lying about on the plain called out to me. I pulled my sword free of its saddle scabbard and held it down along the side of my mount as I slowly eased the mare towards the scene of carnage openly spilled out onto the grass of the prairie.

The wagon train looked to have been caught in an ambush of some kind. That

was mildly surprising, as how did one ambush in such an open country as this?

I drew closer until I was alongside one of the burning wagons. The smoke burned my eyes and shortened my breath, but I ignored both as I was too taken in by the horror of what lay around me.

Men, women, and children of all ages lay strewn about in the grass. They all bore the marks of having been viciously mauled. What beast could be responsible for such a scene of chaos as this?

Many of the dead lay with eyes still open, staring at the sky with such a look of horror on their faces that it must surely have been the imprint of the fear they had been made to feel in their last moments of life. What animal possessed the ability of invoking such horror as

this?

My stomach churned at the sight of a child almost mauled in half. My grip tightened repeatedly on my sword as I slowly made my way down the long line of wagons stretched out on the plain.

These people hadn't stood a chance against whatever had set upon them. It didn't look like they had even made an attempt at self-defense. What could so overwhelm people as to not even fight?

The hair lifted on the back of my neck as my mind ran wild with possibilities. I had slain monsters for over a year, but those bulky counterparts didn't match this scene of horror. Saber Cats were something to be defended against by even the weakest of individuals and yet these people had fled in abject terror.

The carnage about me had the imprint

of evil all over it. I drew the mare to a halt as she began to balk. She had no love for the sights and burning smoke of the scene from the pits of Sheol and I didn't blame her.

I heard a moan and my head whipped in the direction of the cries. I wanted to know the story of this place and at least bring myself some closure as to the horror that I had seen. I dismounted and hurried over, sword in hand, towards a small hummock of raised grass nearby.

There, on the sheltering side of the small rise, lay a man who was near death. He was awash with blood and I could barely fathom what willpower the man had managed to exert to even survive to this point.

I knelt down beside him and his eyes flared wide in alarm. Sucking in a deep

and painful sounding breath he grabbed hold of me and rasped out in a whisper, as if in fear of being overheard, “Run you fool!”

“What happened here?” I asked in return.

“Happened? All Sheol broke loose is what happened! They’re not still here are they? You need to get away now before they get you!” he finished with renewed urgency.

“Who is they? Who gets me?” I asked, but just then there was a husky, somewhat off key, roar that I identified as belonging to a lion.

The man’s face twisted into a caricature of extreme fear as he whispered out brokenly, “You’re too late! They’re back, the Lion Men of Itarga!”

“Lion Men?” I whispered back hoarsely in alarm, but the man was dead, his face frozen over with a mask of fear.

Trembling slightly, I lifted my head up over the small rise to take in the long stretched out line of idle wagons. I saw nothing but the buzzards that had started to congregate overhead in large numbers.

Then I saw it! My heart froze over within me at the sight of a creature that could only have been designed by the fallen Malachim of Sheol.

What was before me was the body structure of a large powerfully built man. He was moving about between the bodies, stopping occasionally to tear into one before moving on. The resemblance to that of a man stopped at the upper chest area where humanity

blended into the head of a lion. I had heard rumors of these creatures as a child, but it was said that they were all dead a long time ago. However, the opposite reality was right here before me.

How was a hybrid being of this sort even possible?

My eyes took in more motion further on down the line of wagons and I saw more of the Lion Men headed this way. Fear mobilized me and I backed away from the knoll top and circled back around for my horse.

The way it looked, these Lion Men were working their way back down the line of their savagery, looking for victims that they had missed the first time. I would be discovered instantly as these creatures no doubt possessed some

of the instinctual abilities of the big cats that had been bred into them.

My foot was on the stirrup of my horse's saddle, when a scream belonging to a woman rang out in a tone that expressed extreme terror. Unable to stop myself from looking I turned and saw the body of the shrieking woman thrown from a wagon to the ground by one of the Lion Men, who burst out in a language that I couldn't comprehend, but which sounded too dark and animalistic for the surrounding air to bear.

The sounds of words, understood or not, coming from the mouth of a lion set upon the proportions of a man was beyond unsettling. Unsettling or not, the fate of the woman cried out to me.

The other Lion Man on the ground was even now tearing at the clothing of

the woman as she twisted about on the ground in a desperate attempt to be free. Her terror was so great that I couldn't leave. I just couldn't.

I forsook my attempt at a stealthy retreat and ran towards the unnatural aberration of a man now bent on corrupting the defenseless woman with an unholy seed of demonic manifestation. I was beyond scared, but I was who Kuri had taught me to be. To have left the woman would have been cowardice, and yet to attempt to save her surely must be suicidal on my part.

I rammed my sword blade clear through the back of the creature's neck and on a choked roar of agony the creature ceased from ravaging the helpless woman who lay bloody and half bare beneath him and turned on me as I

withdrew the sword.

The Lion Man fell over on his side still staring up at me with a look of such loathing hatred that I felt my blood chill. His eyes were decidedly not human just as little else about him was.

To my horror I realized that, though it had been but seconds since I had killed this one, there had also been a second one to deal with, which I had forgotten in my rush to the woman's aid. I wheeled around only to see the second individual pounce from the wagon with teeth bared.

I tried to bring my sword up but it was too late and I was driven into the ground by the weight of the Lion Man. I rolled off to the side and scrambled up to my feet only to be sent reeling backward through the air and slammed into the side of the wagon.

Blood ran down my chest beneath my torn shirt. How had I been wounded?

My eyes took in the hands of the creature across from me and saw that the fingers of the creature had the talons of its feline heritage. Everything I knew or thought I had known of the world was being redefined in this moment.

I'd lost my sword and I watched as, with talons spread and jaws open, he came at me on two legs with a roar of rage that sounded darker than the night.

The wagon behind me was ablaze with flame. Blindly I reached up and grabbed hold of the awning cover of the wagon and pulled. Flames kissed my skin as the burning canvas tore free of the wagon. I slung it toward the charging Lion Man and miraculously I saw it envelop him like a flaming curtain.

He shrieked and tore at his burning prison, but that wasn't what my ears picked up on. I turned to peer over the side of the wagon to behold a baby squalling in abject fear as the heat of the flames started to get close to it.

I reached over the side of the wagon and lifted the baby out. One glance told me enough to see that the baby's mother was dead and that her tormentor was about to be free of his fiery diversion. Looking farther down the line of wagons I saw that the scuffle had attracted the attention of even more of the Lion Men. Upwards of 20 of the hideous creatures were bounding towards me on all fours.

I turned and ran for my horse as if I was once more being chased by a monster in the valley of the Holy Mountains. The mare had stayed where I

had left her and that alone had to be an act of El Elyon, because I could clearly see the crazed look in her eyes as she saw what was chasing after me.

I vaulted upwards into the saddle, my mind awash with the panicked need to get away. I urged the mare around with my knees and she lurched forward into a hard gallop.

I prayed I wasn't killing the young life held fast in my left arm from the hardness of the ride. How did one even hold a baby?

I looked behind and despaired. Lion Men chased after us on all fours with the speed of their feline counterparts.

Who had wrought such evil? Despite the fear and panic of the moment I felt extreme anger take hold over me. I turned forward and as I came abreast of

the last wagon, which was burning, I thrust the reins of the horse between my teeth and, reaching out with my right hand, I tore free one of the wooden side struts that formed the support for the awning cover.

Half of the shaft of wood in my hand was ablaze with fire and leaning low over the side of the horse I touched it to the dry grass which took flame; but it wasn't going to be enough!

“El Elyon, I need help!”

A wind of unexpected force blasted past me and left me blinking in its wake. I heard the roar of flames crackle to life behind me like a gust of wind blowing through a narrow corridor. I glanced behind only to behold a wall of fire as wide as the horizon departing quickly behind me in the shape of an outward V.

There was no sign of my pursuers, but I did not slow the mare down. El Elyon had saved us. He'd answered my call for help just as Kuri had said that He would.

I looked down and met the silent stare of the baby in my arms. A little hand, stained with blood from the open gashes on my chest, rose to squeeze playfully at my lips. Despite everything I felt myself smiling. How was such innocence as this baby's stare possible after all I had just seen and experienced?

I turned from the baby's playful fingers at my lips to look up towards Shamayim. "Now what?" I asked.

Instead of an answer falling from the skies above I instead felt an indwelling voice say within me, "**The way lies before you.**"

Feeling shaken by the response I

continued to ease the mare forward at an easier pace. I really hadn't had my question answered, but questioning further seemed wrong.

As I rode the enormity of my situation became more and more heavy to bear. I didn't know where I was. I didn't really know where I was headed other than north. And I didn't have a clue as to what to do to care for a baby.

The baby had started to cry and feeling distraught at the noise I whispered, "Creator help me!"

"Trust and patience. I will keep you."

Hours went by during which I looked back many times, but there were no signs

of pursuit. The baby was crying incessantly now and it was destroying what little calm I'd been able to instill in myself during the past two hours.

It was getting dark when I topped another rise and saw more smoke, but this time the source was from a chimney. A tidy looking homestead lay in a cul-de-sac of the prairie. Studying it closely I felt peace upon seeing the orderliness of its upkeep.

By the time I reached the buildings heavy shadows had fallen over the land and the air had turned chill. The baby needed care and the old mare was on the verge of collapse.

I wasn't doing too well either, but I could have gone on. In fact I could ride for days on end if it meant never encountering creatures such as the Lion

Men ever again. Somehow the world was a dirtier and more decrepit place for knowing that they existed.

I walked the old mare through the barnyard and up to the house. I stopped and waited as I sensed my arrival had not gone unnoticed. It was hard waiting because the baby only continued to wail piteously, its voice hoarse with its need for milk.

A man separated away from the dark shadows at the barn and came closer. He had a large bow in his hand and I watched as he tucked an arrow into his belt. He was a capable looking sort and I had no doubt as to how proficient he might be at putting an arrow where he wanted it.

A tall boy stepped away from the corner of the house toting a wicked

looking pitchfork. As aware of danger as these people were I couldn't help but wonder how they hoped to stand up to a pack of lion hybrids.

The man came to a stop beside the house and laid his bow against the wall. "You best be getting down off that horse lad. Yuh look about done in."

As if on cue with the man's words the door of the house opened letting out a golden array of color into the gloom of the barnyard. Two women hustled out in a rustle of skirts. I instantly trusted both of them and handed the squalling child down to them.

They took the baby and instantly it seemed that there was order to the night. The baby still screamed, but I knew it would be all right and I felt relief wash over me.

I started to dismount only to half slide off the horse. I gripped onto the saddle horn, but two strong hands were already ushering me the rest of the way to the ground.

“Easy lad,” came the voice of the farmer and I let go of the saddle. I hadn’t realized that I was so tired.

The process of walking felt strange, but I resolutely headed toward the golden light still coming from the open doorway. I stepped inside and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the brighter light in the house.

I felt myself blush at the sight of one of the women breast-feeding the baby. I almost turned to leave the room, but the farmer pushed me from behind further into the house.

The second woman, who I took to be

the farmer's wife, came forward and touched my chest and pulled the shreds of my shirt apart. I watched her face cringe and then she was leading me over to a chair and pushing on my shoulders to make me sit down.

I didn't like the way my legs collapsed under me at the slight insistence of her hands. I'd thought I was stronger than this.

Numbly I felt myself stripped of my upper clothes and then the woman was washing at my chest with a warm rag. Her hands were shaking. Not really wanting to look, I did anyway and in turn was shaken by what I saw.

Were those jaded gouges across my chest for real?

They had to be and yet I had not thought my injuries were so extensive. I

had been so intent on just escaping. I could've died!

Feeling a little more aware, I sat up a little and gripped the sides of the chair as I began to feel the pain I had been numb to in the past few hours. In one spot I could see the white of my ribs showing. The sight of that made me queasy and I had to look away quickly.

The old farmer's face was grim as he asked, "How far from here?"

"A little better than two hours hard ride. I don't think I was followed, but I can't be sure of it."

He nodded and headed for the door, followed by the tall boy. The boy looked a lot like the nursing woman and I surmised it must be her son. The older woman noticed my gaze on the younger woman and said, "A survivor."

My eyes rose to the woman before me and she went on, “The Lion Men are coming more often. They are venturing further into the Kingdom of Thyana than ever before. They killed her husband and younger children about two days ago. They lived on a farm 2 miles from here. Such a nice young family they were and now..... it’s just her and the boy.” As she finished her voice cracked with emotion.

My hand closed over her fingers and her eyes met mine and with my mind full of the imagery of the massacred caravan I said, “You’re not safe here!”

Her lips quivered as she said, “I know.”

She reclaimed her hand and picking up a needle and thread she said, “I’m sorry, but this is going to hurt.”

I nodded and gritted my teeth as she started to pull the torn flesh back together.

I stared at the woman nursing the baby that I'd saved from the burning wagon. Somehow the sight of the two of them helped to take my mind off the pain.

Endless tears flowed down the woman's cheeks as she held the baby to her. So much grief and sorrow. It hurt to see the look of loss on her face as she endlessly stroked the baby's head while she cooed softly to it.

I could see her reliving over and over the experience that had taken her own family from her. Then I saw her give a watery smile and I looked down to see the baby cooing back up at her as its hunger was finally abated. Of all of us right now, the baby looked the most

content.

It knew nothing of the world or the danger that we were all in. All it knew was the comfort of the warm milk in its belly and the loving attentions that were being given to it in endless supply. In an instant I found myself envying the blissful ignorance of the baby.

For me the world was opening up to be a place of heartbreak and sorrow. I felt anger course through me at the knowledge that this innocent baby would someday know for itself the fears and pestilences of the times that we lived in. It wasn't right. It would never be right!

“Where do you come from?”

Blinking, I gazed back up to the older woman before me and answered, “The Kingdom of Smirnaz.”

“My you've traveled far! What has

brought you to Thyana?”

The woman was trying to distract me, which I found mildly annoying at the moment, but I let her as it was only polite, “I’m not sure why. I just found my way here.”

“Well, I know why you’re here.”

Surprised I looked at the woman, “You do?”

She nodded and said, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because El Elyon sent you to us.”

I stared at her for a moment then looked over at the baby, once again hungry for more milk. I conceded that it was apparent that I had been of some good, but did that constitute my presence here as being divinely inspired?

The baby had all but fallen asleep and I watched where its little blood stained

fingers lay against the woman's throat. My blood. I found the nursing mother looking at me only to see her mouth out quietly, "Thank you!"

I nodded, happy in the knowledge that I had been instrumental in bringing some measure of comfort to this grieving mother. I was being tugged to my feet and several steps later was pushed down onto a warm mat by the fire. My eyes closed as if drugged and I drifted off into a dreamless sleep. I was too tired to even wonder as to what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter Eight

Freedom Lost

The familiar feel of the saddle was the same, but the horse wasn't. I'd run the old mare too hard. She'd died sometime in the night and when I'd left the house this morning it had been to find my saddle on this horse. I had felt a moment of remorse for the old girl as she'd given me her all, but this horse was definitely an upgrade.

Would it be fast enough, though, if the abhorrent strain of lion people suddenly came over the plain towards us?

I started to turn to look back, but abruptly stopped as the stitches across my chest pulled painfully. White knuckled, I held onto the saddle horn as I saw stars for a moment. It really didn't matter how fast the horse could go, because the small caravan of people I was accompanying were slow, painfully slow.

I wasn't leaving them. I looked ahead to the old Farmer's wagon only to see the baby that I'd saved happily grabbing at its adoptive mother's hair. I smiled for a moment as I watched the two.

It was nice to know that I had helped bring about such a moment. It made the pain I felt across my chest every time I took a breath worth it somehow.

I turned the horse sideways in a wiser nod to my limitations in order to look

back over the way we had come. A column of smoke was even now rising into the late morning sky.

I glanced to the side at the old farmer who had pulled his mount up as I had done. I saw it all there on his face. The pain and even bitterness caused from suffering great loss.

“It can be rebuilt. Crops can be planted again,” I said in an attempt to lift the despair from the other man’s eyes.

Slowly the old man shook his head, “Not this time I fear. There’s no going back and there’s nothing worth going ahead for. It’s over. I’m done.”

“You’re only done if you quit. You don’t strike me as the type of man to let a plant perish from lack of water.”

The old man’s eyes turned to me and almost angrily he asked, “What’s that got

to do with it?”

“Just as you wouldn’t let new transplant seedlings die from the shock of moving, I know also that if you put your will to this that you will survive and prosper even as a plant would have under your care. Consider this day your transplant to a new location. It will only get better from here.”

Ruefully the old man shook his head, “You’re strange boy. You’ll go far with confidence like that.”

I shook my head, “I don’t have much confidence sir. I only said what I did to help you feel better.”

The farmer nodded and said, “Well it worked. Now let’s be getting on with making the future a better place.”

We rode on and it wasn’t long before I saw a long line of cavalry headed our

way.

I watched the column of soldiers from the Kingdom of Thyana come nearer. They were too little and too late.

Farms all over this southernmost plain of Thyana must be ablaze and only now was the army coming to investigate. It didn't say much for the management of the kingdom or its love for its people.

The column of riders drew to a halt and the old farmer did most of the talking. I endeavored to keep a low profile, but it was apparent that I was the subject of a lot of speculative interest.

I didn't want a lot of questions so I drifted away to face back over the way we had just come. I could still hear what was being said though. Apparently we were the last group of survivors that the column had come across.

Farms ahead and behind were ablaze with most of the inhabitants dead or wishing that they were. It was agreed that there was little to be gained by going on, so the military contingent would tag along as an escort with the old farmer and two other farmers that we had met up with this morning.

Fools! Here was a formidable force of soldiers and their commander was turning back to serve as an escort instead of chasing after the demonic individuals responsible for the loss that was everywhere to be seen. Was this the actions of just one captain of a troop or was the whole kingdom like this when faced with a threat?

If so, then the Kingdom of Thyana didn't have much to look forward to. They would be backed up to their cities

before they knew it, with the wealth of their once great nation burnt to ashes all around them.

I fell into the column and headed north. North was where my destiny led, but if I had been a son of this land my place would be back there hunting down the murderers from Itarga.

I'd rather face a pack of Saber Cats any day than being in the presence of just one Lion Man. That didn't change the fact that I wanted to kill every last one of them.

That desire remained a steady passion that burned brightly on the inside, but meekly I followed along with the column. Perhaps I was learning the art of diplomacy after all.

The capital city of Thyana was far larger than any I had ever encountered.

In fact I'd say it was three times the size of the capital of Smirnaz that I had seen only briefly as a boy. It was far wealthier too.

Everyone seemed to be a person of greater means than I. What was I to do in such a place?

I had no money and no clear path as to how to accomplish the mission with which Kuri had tasked me. It had taken us eleven days to reach the capital city of Thyana and, while I was impressed with everything I saw, I also felt a keen yearning to be away from it.

So many people. It was hard to tell in such a pressed throng as to who was friend or enemy.

It seemed there was to be a briefing before a higher court official as to what had happened in the south. I wanted no

part of that, but I had no choice in the matter.

We stopped before buildings that had giant columns rising up all around. The building had pretentiousness written all over it. This must be the government then.

I dismounted and headed for the steps of the building only to see the old farmer keep moving on with the column. Hey, what was the deal here?

They were taking my horse with them!

The old farmer saw my look of consternation and shrugged bitterly, "It's you they want to talk with. As for the horse, it's mine anyway and I'll need the money that it will fetch me here at market in order to start over."

What the old man was failing to state, however, was the fact that he was also

cavalierly leading away my saddle, along with what few belongings I had in the world. I made to go after him, but four guardsmen stepped into my path.

Was I supposed to do? Let the old man steal from me?

As I saw it, I had two options before me. Fight my way through the guards and end up in the dungeon, if I proved unsuccessful, or see to whatever they wanted of me first and then track down the ungrateful old man I had helped escort to safety.

I stepped away from the guardsmen and made my way up the steps as I moved with reluctance into the pretentious surroundings of this foreign kingdom. I was led past several grand halls that were filled with people, who appeared to be embroiled in legal work

of some kind.

I doubted that Smirnaz had anything like this to boast of, but then again Smirnaz was the poorest of all the Kingdome Nations.

Just where was I being taken?

The sounds of people and heated conversations grew distant, until they were but a faint murmur in the background. In contrast, the finery of the massive building that I was walking through only grew finer in appearance. The better question might be, who was I to be meeting with?

At last the entourage of guardsmen around me came to a halt. A pair of oaken doors opened to reveal a suite that looked out on a terrace garden overlooking the city. I looked around uncertainly, only to see one of the guards

gesture for me to enter into the room.

I went forward, but they stayed where they were. I moved on into a room decked out with vibrant colors and gilded tapestries. A servant girl appeared out of nowhere and gestured for me to follow her.

We moved out onto the terrace that seemed to run the length of this side of the building. I saw an older man standing at the railing that overlooked the city. The girl gestured to him and I got the picture that this man was to be my questioner.

I had no knowledge as to why I was being questioned further like this. I'd had very little to report. I'd come across a caravan and saved a baby. That was all. Why was I here in the presence of someone who was obviously very

important?

I drew within six feet of the man before I stopped. Distantly I heard the servant girl leaving. We were now alone on the terrace except for the bees hard at work on the flowers that were in pots and planter beds all about us.

“It would seem, stranger to our lands, that you are quite the hero. I must thank you for that. There are few left in all the world who give a care over whether or not a Thyanian baby lives or not.”

“It was nothing sir. I just did what I could to save a baby’s life.”

The man’s regally held shoulders turned as he faced me and said in a voice that brooked no arguing, “On the contrary it is of great importance, what you have accomplished.”

For a moment I was mesmerized by

the sight of the man's face. The whole right side of the man's face was marred by the scars of what looked to have been made by the swipe of a big cat. Apparently this man at some point in time must have had his own run-in with a Lion Man.

“The report I received said that you killed one of the cursed beasts.”

I nodded, not sure as to where this was going.

The man's face broke into a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he saw me gazing at the scars on his face, which twisted his smile off to one side. The fingers of his one hand rose to briefly feel along the furrow of the scar only for him to then say as his fingers trailed away, “I killed the beast that did this. I was close enough to smell his rotten lion

breath as I drove my blade through him again and again. Looking into his eyes was like receiving a glimpse of Sheol. You and I are the only men I'm aware of who have ever managed to kill one and walk away from the experience. What do you think of that?"

Not having an answer to his question, I just shrugged expressively.

The man looked away, his face appearing pensive as he stared out over the bustling city below us. "I am a prince of this nation. Not a Crown Prince, but rather one of lower birth. I love my country and it saddens me to see it being slowly destroyed by poor leadership. Tell me, what you would have done if you were in charge of the expedition that met up with your caravan of farmers?"

Not wanting to stick my neck out, but

also wanting to be truthful I said, “I would have pursued after them. The lion men have no horses as far as I can tell and they could’ve easily been chased down.”

“Then what?” he interjected, as he turned to face me.

“Well then, I would’ve done my best to kill them. Little is to be gained for your kingdom by letting them destroy your outlying countryside without even putting up a fight.”

The Prince nodded. He gazed at me for a moment before saying, “You’re young and not of my people’s birth, but of Kingdomer blood no less I think. I want you to take charge of part of the army that’s under my command and head back down south. In specific, I want you to lead the very regiment that was led so

cowardly in the south and which failed to do its task of protecting the nation.”

“Sir, I regret that I must reject your offer. I mean no offense, but I’ve been tasked with a mission and I can’t commit to anything else until that’s done.”

The Prince eyed me up speculatively before saying, “Honesty and loyalty. Those are two more ideals you possess which I very much admire. Tell me Benaiah, what are you going to do in a foreign city without money, with no horse, no sword, and no references by which to gain employment?”

Those were all valid questions, but I didn’t like the way he was forcing me into a corner without choice. An answer came to mind and I confidently responded with, “El Elyon will make a way for me. If my mission is true He

cannot fail but to provide to make a way for me.”

I was proud of myself, but also a bit apprehensive as I watched the prince's smile turn sour. “Faith too, I see. You are a rare man indeed, but I have no need of faith. I've found that the proper leverage of both wealth and power can accomplish all that is needed. Outdated beliefs in a Creator are just that, outdated. You will soon learn that for yourself Benaiah. Unfortunately, along with that lesson you will also have to learn that a Prince of Thyana is not to be denied. A couple of weeks in the dungeons of the palace should be a sufficient learning experience for you to come to the realization that my offer is a good one as opposed to the alternative. Take him away!”

Several pairs of hands seized hold of me from behind and began to lead me roughly away.

I had to admit to a certain degree of profound shock as I was being led back down the ornately decorated halls of the palace. I had done the work of a hero and I was being rewarded for it by being thrown into the dungeons. Where was the justice in this?

The stench coming up from the hole in the floor was awful. Hands pushed and I felt myself launched forward into the dark abyss. I screamed as I fell through darkness to only moments later land hard with an ‘umphhh’ as the air was knocked from me.

Hacking on stirred up dust, I tried to recover my breath while at the same time I tried to grapple with my dark surroundings and perhaps the need to defend myself.

I had heard stories of these dungeons. It was said that those thrown into them were often consumed whole by the other residents of the darkness that had been driven mad by hunger deprivation.

I heard the skitter of feet towards me from behind and I reacted by kicking out with both of my feet. My boots connected hard with something and one dungeon resident went wailing backward from me, but there was the sound of more feet coming.

I got to my feet and did my best to take stock of the situation in a hurry. In the dim glow of light given off from the

lantern at the top of the dungeon enclosure I could make out at least 20 or more individuals closing in on me.

It was possible that I could fend them all off given their weakened state, but could I stay awake forever in order to avoid being jumped? Would I not become like these crazed creatures if I was to be left down here?

No, I preferred death now, if that was the future I could expect down here.

I ran toward the dungeon wall away from the mob and began to climb. There wasn't much to grab hold of and from the polished condition of the stones I could tell that the attempt to climb out of this pit of Sheol was an often repeated practice over the years.

Despair filled me at the impossibility of my escape. I'd made it 10 or more

feet up from the dungeon floor, but now it was hard to find a purchase by which to climb further.

I could hear those gathered below, who wished to feed on me, cackle with glee. I glanced down only to see that they were making no attempt to follow. And why should they, as no doubt this scenario was an often repeated event, with a likely often repeated outcome.

I clutched onto the slippery rocks with desperation. If I jumped off and fought I might be victorious in the short term, but not in the long run. The longer I spent in this pit the weaker and more delusional I would become.

No, as impossible as it was I had to keep climbing. I rested my head against the cold rocks for a moment and said, "El Elyon..... Kuri..... You told me

that you would be here for me! I need you!”

“Do what I taught you.”

“What?” I asked in disbelief.

“You heard me.”

I thought for a moment and then I realized something. Kuri had made me scale far worse cliffs than this, but somehow, in the darkness and the pressure inspired by the hungry watchers below, I had forgotten how well I had been trained for such a challenge as this.

Through force of will and remembered experience I forced my breathing to calm down. My fingers unglued and I began to climb upward again. Growls broke out from below and from the sounds of it a few of them had begun to climb. I didn't overly care.

My hands were finding rocks not so

polished now and with that came more confidence. Every once in a while I allowed myself to look up to the open portal from which the only source of light came. I was getting close, but I'd have to be a spider in order to walk across the ceiling to get to the opening in the floor above.

In the span of a few more minutes I was faced with that very problem. I'd reached the top and I hung there, completely drenched in sweat, as I debated about what to do next.

There was only one thing I could do. I'd have to jump for it.

Slowly I began to turn from hugging the rocky side of the dungeon wall to facing the portal that lay in the floor above. It was at least 8 feet away. If I missed, I'd go plummeting back into the

depths and the murderous throng would be on me in seconds, but I was out of options. There was only one path and that was forward.

My leg muscles bunched tight and I sprang outward over the abyss as I let all my nerved up tension loose. One hand slipped off the frame of the trapdoor, but my other caught the side lip of the dungeon portal.

I lifted up at the elbow and got my other hand on the portal ledge and then, to the tune of a collective groan from below, I pulled myself up and out of the dungeon. I lay gasping for air on the floor, grateful that there were no guards present. I could hear voices though.

I'd gotten this far, now what?

I needed a distraction if I was to get out of the palace. With a grin I kicked my

foot out and a pile of rope laying near the portal fell into the darkness of the dungeon. There were exclamations from those below and then the rope grew taut as the dungeon dwellers began to climb free of their prison.

I got shakily to my feet and looked for a suitable place to hide. As I went along the corridor I couldn't but debate with myself as to what the difference was between that of a Lion Man and that of the cannibalistic dungeon dwellers coming up the rope behind me. They were both the creation of dark actions.

Just who were the good guys anymore?

I ducked into a room and closed the door and barred it. The single lantern within the room revealed that I had struck it rich. I was in an armory.

Quickly I went to the sword racks. Although the swords were roughly made and without much beauty or finesse they were nevertheless fully functional. I grabbed one up, but then put it aside as another idea took hold.

I stripped off my torn clothes and donned the clothes and leather armor of a soldier, complete with helmet. I sorted through some knives and took a few. A war ax struck my fancy and I slipped it into my belt along with some knives. I took up my sword and then grabbed another.

From the sounds of it, all pandemonium was breaking loose outside. I opened the door and began pushing my way through the press of soldiers as if I was one of them.

The freedom of my dungeon companions was short-lived as they were hacked down by panicked guards terror-stricken at the thought of being fed upon. At least in death they were now free from the living torment that had taken over their lives. I could only wonder as to how many of them had been as innocent as I had of any wrongdoing.

I was among the press of court officials that was spilling out onto the street. Nothing like the threat of cannibals on the loose to clear a building. I saw the Prince striding about angrily, calling out orders, and I had to fight against the capricious urge to slip up next to him and bury a dagger in

deeply.

He no doubt deserved it, but today was not the day.

I found myself in the palace stable yard quite by accident. It wasn't in me to be a thief and steal another man's horse, so I did the only thing I felt comfortable to do.

I strode up to what appeared to be the chief attendant of the stables and barked out, "The Prince requires his horse! Now!"

The stable master fidgeted nervously, as he split his attention between me and the general hubbub taking place in the palace, "Which one?" he asked distractedly.

"The red one," I said on a hunch.

"But it's not been properly broke in yet!"

“Bring it now man!” I yelled out forcefully.

The stable master ran off and I waited impatiently for his return. He came back moments later with a beautiful red stallion that pawed aggressively at the ground. Now this was a horse!

Of all the people in this kingdom, the Prince owed me the most and I was willing to call us even, for the most part, in exchange for this horse. I slid into the saddle, chuckling to myself as to how angry the Prince would be when he found out about this.

The Prince would be wise to be grateful that he was still alive, but I doubted that he would be. His kind carried a grudge to the end. With this act I'd made an enemy today.

The stallion did a hop, skip, step in

preparation to buck, but I had no time for that. I spurred him out of the stable lot and into the hustle and bustle of the city. I had no wish to ever return here and I doubted that I would be made welcome anyway.

I stopped at a merchant's business and I traded my second sword for a purplish traveling cloak and some provisions and then I was off again. The stallion seemed as eager as I was to be free of the city. I named him Urgallon on the spot.

I'd had a pig named that as a boy and the horse beneath me reminded me of him. It was a strange name I had to admit, but it was a familiar one and it came from back in my early childhood, when things really hadn't needed to make much sense.

Chapter Nine

Man of Respect

I made it to the edge of the city when my conscience couldn't take it anymore. Skewed reasoning aside, I was essentially stealing this horse. I wasn't a horse thief. My real father no doubt had been, but I was not.

I dismounted in a deserted street and slapped the stallion's rump hard. It took off with a snort for the inner-city, no doubt already missing its royal oats.

“So long Urgallon. It was a short ride.”

I turned away and made my way back out onto a populated avenue. One of the city gates was ahead and I instantly noticed the heightened security. I kept one handle on my sword beneath the cloak, as I slipped into the pressed throng of a passing caravan.

I kept my head up, as I relied on the stolen helmet to shield my features from view. Yes, it was quite ironic. Too noble to steal a horse, but apparel and weaponry were free game. What could I say, other than I wasn't as bothered by the latter as I had been by the former. It didn't make much sense, but that was the way of it.

“Has anyone seen the Prince's horse?” called out a soldier on horseback near the gate.

I felt relief wash over me. It had been

wise to listen to my conscience. It paid to do the right thing and this was a great example of that and I marked it well.

I was abreast of the gate when a voice rang out, “Hey you! What’s your business?”

Instinctively I knew they were referring to me and my hands started to pull my sword free from under the cloak, when all action was arrested by a feminine voice that spoke confidently and with authority, “Why, he’s one of my guards. Move on and pay no attention to these paranoid Thyanians.”

“Hey, watch what you say Lancossian Mistress or we’ll impound your goods and you can return home devoid of wealth!”

“Impound my wealth! What wealth is there to be found trading with you

Thyanians? You talk more than you're willing to trade and you have even less worth talking about. I practically operate at a loss as it is to even come here!"

"Enough! Get on with you!" The gate guardsman said, with an angry gesture towards the open country beyond the city wall.

The caravan continued on past the gate and I slowly turned my head to regard the woman riding the camel behind me. She was watching me cattily and I sensed trouble. Trouble or not, she had saved me a bunch of it, but what did she require in return?

Her eyes turned merry and it seemed as she spoke that she was able to read minds along with lying convincingly, "I always have need of an extra sword hand to ensure the safety of my caravan's

travel. Not to mention the joy I receive having pulled one over on a Thyanian. Tell me, what is it you did to bring the paranoid lot of them down upon you so hard?”

“I refused to honor a Prince's command.”

She whistled softly in a very unladylike fashion. She was an attractive woman, but easily 20 years my senior. She looked me over thoroughly as she drew abreast of me on her camel. “Safe passage in return for safety. Is it a deal?”

“Deal,” I said, having to give it little thought.

She smiled smugly and I immediately regretted the hastiness of agreeing to the assignment of being a caravan guard. My benefactor looked ahead and gestured to me as she said, “Bruton, see that the

young man has a tent allotted to him when we camp.”

“Yes, my Mistress Siryian,” said a man of black skin color that would’ve easily made three of me.

The man was far from fat though. Quite simply, he was the strongest looking man I’d ever encountered. The camel he rode on was larger than the rest and for good reason.

Bruton gestured to me and then to the rear of the caravan and the meaning was clear. He wanted me to fall back to the rear of the column and join the rearguard.

Obediently I did as commanded. All along the way there I couldn’t help but think I had just signed by life away. If we were attacked I would most likely be the first to go, positioned at the rear of

the caravan. Such was the price of freedom.

I reached the rear of the caravan and joined the ranks of the rearguard. It was readily apparent that I might find my death by way of choking on dust before the blade of an enemy.

“What did you do to get put back here?” asked one of my fellow guardsman disinterestedly, as he made a pass with the sleeve of his tunic to wipe the sweaty grime off his face.

“I’m not quite sure.”

“Well, you’re here now. Welcome to the south end of a camel. The name’s Thanuel and this is Jarcken.” Thanuel finished by gesturing to a short but powerfully built man, who was also sweating profusely from the heat of the day and the exertion of walking.

Jarken gave me a congenial enough word of welcome and I attempted to do the same, but found myself hacking on the dust. “Pleased to meet you,” I said hoarsely after a moment.

“The pleasure is all mine,” the man said formally and then both he and Thanuel laughed uproariously.

Thanuel asked after a moment, “Where’d you learn to talk all proper like that?”

I shrugged, “I guess some of the mannerisms of my teacher of the past few years have rubbed off on me.”

“And who would that be, young man?” Jarken asked.

“He was called Kurios, but I called him Kuri. I’m not aware of him having a last name.”

Jarken and Thanuel shared a

meaningful glance with each other before Jarken said as an aside, “The first name's enough. If I was you I'd keep it to yourself as to who your teacher was.”

“Aye, I'd do as he says,” Thaniel said, glancing around to see if we'd been overheard by the other men around us.

“Why?” I asked, but both men would say no more.

I walked on in the dust pondering as to what their hints could mean. Kuri apparently had a reputation within the seven kingdoms. If they only knew. The problem was that they should know, yet it seemed that, if anything, Kuri was regarded by some as a nuisance instead of what he was, the King.

Thaniel was handing a rag to me and gesturing at my face. I took it and tied it

across the lower half of my face. It helped with the dust, but not the heat. My new job was thoroughly miserable, but at least I wasn't on the menu.

The water wasn't cold, but at least it had a cooling effect, if only for the moment. I stopped splashing my face with it and instead I rubbed at my eyes. They still felt gritty, but I had to have gotten all the sand and dust washed out of them by now.

Of all the occupations on Ayenathurim this had to be the worst. I put it just a step above slavery, but just barely.

A shadow fell across me and I looked up to see my benefactor standing there. Her eyes roamed over my bare torso

staying the longest upon the scars that ran across my chest.

Her eyes rose to mine and I could see curiosity reflected within the depths of her green eyes. I saw lust as well. I felt the need to put my shirt on, but I stayed as I was.

“You look as if you have quite the story to tell,” she said softly, as her eyes fell back down to the scars.

I said nothing. Her eyes rose to mine, curiosity seemed to vanish from them as it was replaced with magnetic sensuality. Now I felt the need to run away, but I stayed still.

She shook her head slowly, “My, you are a shy one. I could help you with that. My tent is right over there.” She pointed to the largest tent that lay beneath the tree fronds of the oasis.

“If you should choose to drop by, perhaps you can tell me how you came about those scars,” she said and then turned away and moved off toward her tent.

I swallowed with the relief of not having her green eyes on me. It was hard to look away from her retreating form, but I made myself do it. She was older, but still extremely desirable.

Desirable or not, I felt nothing but distrust for her. She struck me as the type that used others for her own purposes and desires, in order to fulfill her need for control.

I knew all that and more about this strange woman and yet some part of me ached to even now be lifting the flap of her tent and joining her inside. It made no sense!

She was nothing but a path to destruction. What was wrong with me; that any part of me still longed for what she offered?

I had to be better than my weakest parts though and looking upward I said, “El Elyon, I’m sorry. I know better and yet you know how close I am to going over there. Please help me.”

I put my shirt on before I weakened any further and then I hurried out of the trees and into the surrounding desert, upon which the shadows of night had already begun to fall.

Jarken looked over to Thanuel, who was lying back against a boulder. They had been silent witnesses to the whole

scene.

Thanuel looked thoughtful as he watched Benaiah disappear into the dunes, “Rare man.”

Jarken nodded sharply and then asked, “You think he’s the one?”

Thanuel shook his head looking undecided, “Perhaps. Time will tell. Not such a boring trip after all, hey?”

Jarken looked thoughtfully out at the surrounding desert scape, upon which night was fast approaching and asked, “Do you think we should alert the caravan to the presence of bandits out there?”

Thanuel shook his head, “No, let Benaiah do it. We’ve had our glory in the sun. Time to help a rising star reach the zenith of his potential.”

Jarken nodded resolutely and said

pragmatically, "He's the one. I feel it."

"I hope you're right my friend. El Elyon knows we're not getting any younger," Thaniel said, still thoughtfully gazing after Benaiah.

I stared out across the scene of sand and moonlight. Here in the borderlands of the Kingdomer Nation of Lancandia it was sand and sun. There was beauty to be found, but I preferred the sight of green grass and cool breezes. The nights were at least cool here. The cold air was a relief on my impassioned senses.

I looked up. The sky was bright and every star seemed to stand out in stark relief against the black backdrop of the sky. It was an awe-inspiring moment of

quiet reflection.

I felt small. The created universe was so huge and here I was stressing about the completion of one assignment. An assignment that I had already been told wouldn't be accomplished for several years. What was I going to do in the meantime?

I looked back to the oasis and the temptation that beckoned there. If El Elyon had done all that I saw in the sky above, then He could help strengthen me in my weaknesses to do something that surely wasn't as major of an event as things that He'd already performed in creation's past.

Movement caught my eye and my head swiveled from its view of the oasis to the fast approaching rider coming towards me with a lowered lance.

Alarmed, my mind seized up for a second.

No doubt the rider expected me to run and so I did, only I ran toward him instead of the other way. My actions seemed to jar the rider's confidence and in the dim light I saw the rider's head move side to side in search of what was giving me the confidence to attack instead of run.

I added to the unrest by waving my arms up and down and screaming out a nonsensical garble of sounds. His horse wanted no part of it and started to stutter out of its headlong gallop and turn off to the side.

The rider regained control, but in the moment of lost concentration the lance point dipped out of the way slightly and I seized on the opportunity and stepped off

to the side and jerked it hard. The rider came along with the lance.

The rider had only just begun to rise up out of the dust when I crashed a rock down on his head. There were more riders coming and I wasted no time, but vaulted up into the saddle of the fallen bandit's horse and turned tail for the oasis.

I did my best to give out a warning, but something about a rider coming full tilt down a sand dune closely followed by a half-dozen others had a way of galvanizing a restful camp into action more than words alone. I saw guards and camel riders grab for weapons and arrows were soon whistling by my head in the direction of my pursuers.

I streamed into the trees and pulled the horse up sharply. Looking back I saw

three pursuers were down and that the other three were retreating. There were shouts of triumph to be heard throughout the oasis. It only lasted for a moment though.

All laughter abruptly died at the sight of about 200 moon outlined forms against the horizon. The caravan only had 45 people in total and only 30 of them were trained fighters. I heard Bruton calling out commandingly and before I could believe it over half of the caravan's camels were saddled with cargo and moving out of the oasis at a fast clip.

What were they doing?

Almost half of the caravan's cargo still lay upon the sand of the oasis, unloaded. I saw my benefactor on a fast looking horse up by the caravan's master

and it was suddenly obvious to me what their plan of action was. She was sacrificing the guards, who had no means of escape other than their feet, along with what looked to be the less expensive items of cargo, on the wild chance that it would give her the time needed to escape with at least half the caravan's cargo intact.

Her plan seemed to be working, because the large body of riders was converging on the oasis and not on the fast disappearing line of camels. The men who remained abandoned by their mistress were running about in evident panic as it became clear to them what was about to take place. The enemy riders were closing in.

I rode into the midst of a panicked bunch of men and called out

authoritatively, “Get into the water! Get into it now!”

I got blank stares in return, but my audience was then brutally shoved along by Jarken and Thanuel, who seemed to know what I was about to do.

I spurred the horse I rode onward and, leaning out of the saddle, I snatched up a burning torch from near the caravan mistress’s tent and wasted no time firing it and all the cargo I could find. Arrows zipped about me, but none landed.

The cargo ablaze, as well as many of the tents, I dropped the torch and wheeled the horse toward the central waterhole. The horse gave out from beneath me as a javelin plunged deeply into its side, but a few inches from my leg.

I kicked my legs free of the stirrups

and bolted from the saddle in a head first tumble. I somersaulted up to my feet and just kept running. Flames had already spread from the tents to the overhead canopy that was as dry as tinder.

I heard the sound of a horse's neigh of terror from behind me as burning embers from the overhead canopy fell to the ground. A lance thrust past me by the barest of margins and I reacted aggressively. I dodged to the left and slammed into the horse's shoulder, whose rider had just about gored me through.

The unexpected shove sent the horse into a tumble of horse and man. I launched into the shallow water and sloshed my way to the tight formed group of men near the pool's center. None of the marauding raiders were as

interested in attacking the men in the pool as they were with escaping the blazing inferno that was erupting all around us.

The cargo was beyond salvaging and with angered shouts the raiders fought free of the blazing oasis, leaving us alone. Through the smoke we watched as they regrouped and threw their mounts into hot pursuit after the departed caravan.

My plan had worked. Now all we had to do was survive the fire.

Coughing on smoke, I kept low in the water and watched for opportunities to escape, but the entire oasis was well ablaze. We were alive, but still, this smoke wasn't good for anyone.

I gestured to the others when I saw a route open up and reluctantly they left

the shelter of the water to follow after me. Being completely soaked helped combat against the heat of the flames, but it was still hot!

Finally a way opened up to where we were breathing fresher air and then suddenly we were free of the oasis. Gasping in relief, we pressed on until we were entirely free of the smoke and breathing the cleaner air of the desert.

Beating at the burning embers in my hair I watched the almost comical antics of the others, still fully clothed, beating at themselves and rolling around in the sand. I'd used my shirt to filter out smoke in order to breathe while still in the water, but I'd lost it at some point in the escape through the flames. I hugged my arms to my bare chest. The burning oasis was warm at my back, but the

desert night air was cold.

A cloak fell about my shoulders and I glanced to the side to see that it was Thanuel who had done it. He was laughing as if it was all a big joke instead of being the dire circumstance it had been. We had just nearly all been burned alive.

Thanuel's arm came around my shoulder and he shook me good-naturedly, "Ahhh what a good head you have on your shoulders Benaiah! If it wasn't for that stunt, even now we would all be dead or being roasted alive over a bandit's fire. Well done!"

"I just about got you killed and yet you're thanking me for saving you?"

"I was but singed. It's nothing! Now what are your orders?"

"Orders?" I responded back blankly.

“Yes! Orders! We are yours to lead. You saved our lives and we are now indebted to you. Aren’t we boys?” Thaniel called out. Roars of approval echoed out from the men gathered, the loudest of which being Jarken.

I separated away from Thaniel and turned to face the group, “I’m not your leader! I’m the youngest of you all to be sure!”

Thaniel pointed a big finger at me, “Ahhh but you are the smartest!”

Giving him a direct look I said, “I very much doubt that Thaniel.”

Thaniel shrugged his shoulders and smiled ruefully before then kneeling down on one knee and saying authoritatively, “It does not matter! You are a man. A good man. A man worth helping and I for one want to be a part of

what you get yourself into. Here is my sword and my hand is ready to wield it, but it lacks direction as does the course of my life. Now, what are your orders?”

The others echoed much the same and I found myself staring down into the expectant faces of 14 battle hardened men who stared at me as if I was the source of their purpose for being. How had this come about?

Feeling unsure of what was expected of me as a leader I said by way of an order, “I’m headed north.”

Thanuel clapped his hands and rose to his feet, “North it is then!”

I shook my head as a sudden thought came to me, “We should see if anything remains of the cargo and catch up those camels grazing over there. I have no money. I can’t pay you anything, but if

we complete the journey then maybe we'll have something.”

Jarken nodded and walked toward the grazing camels slapping me on the back as he passed by. Half of the group followed, while the other half headed toward several piles of cargo that had gone untouched by the flames.

I stood there with Thanuel as I watched the others move off to accomplish the orders that I had just given.

“Why?” I asked aloud.

“Why not?” Thanuel responded.

I shook my head, at a loss for the way things were changing. I felt overwhelmed and excited all at the same time. Panic seized me all of a sudden. What if I messed up and got these men killed?

Thanuel stepped beside me to view the burning oasis. The mistress's tent was gone and yet when he spoke I instantly knew what he was referring to, "That was special, what you did. I have seen few men, and none of your age, resist temptation such as that. You've already succeeded in one area where most have failed."

"I'm nothing special, Thanuel, so don't build me up as such."

Thanuel smiled, "And yet, I believe that you are."

He started to walk off to where they were loading cargo up and I said, "What if I get us all killed?"

Thanuel turned and shrugged, "Death comes to all of us at some point. The difference, though, is in how one faces it. You have a choice Benaiah, live in

fear of death or live life fully and do what needs done. I think you're the latter and that's enough, as it's better to go out like a lion then choked off like an old hound on a leash.”

He continued on and I shook my head at his twisted logic. He did have a point though. What good did worrying get me right now?

Now was the time for action, with the future being a new surprise around each corner of life's path. I wanted to see what lay ahead and now I had a company of men to go along for the journey. I wasn't alone anymore and I had the respect of others. That was a rather nice feeling.

I saw some more camels and I headed off to help Jarcken round them up. My life had just jumped once again in a way I

hadn't expected. Would I ever be ready for what life threw at me next?

Reversely, what did it matter if I wasn't ready? I had purpose in the belief in El Elyon and He directed my steps and provided the abilities that I lacked. Should death find me it would not be an end, but rather the start of another journey.

At peace, at the realization of the slack hold of the fear of dying, I headed back toward the oasis tugging on the lead strap of the string of wide-eyed camels. They didn't like the flames, but oddly for me as I gazed at the fire consuming the oasis, I had a vision of seeing the sight again, only it would be houses on fire and not palm trees.

A day into our journey we found what was left of the caravan. There wasn't much.

The bandits had been thorough and merciless in their cleanup of the forward caravan. Buzzards lifted off the ground from the scattered corpses that littered the desert.

The caravan had been caught strung out and on the move, with no chance of mounting a defense. Strangely I felt no sympathy for the dead as they, by their own actions, had sold us down the river to die in their place. It hadn't worked out that way though.

A pair of jackals broke away from the carcass of a camel and sped off a distance to wait for us to pass by. It was a large camel and instantly I knew it to

be that of the caravan master.

The big man had impressed me and it didn't surprise me that I didn't see him lying on the ground. Bruton would have taken out a lot of the enemy and yet I saw no sign of a struggle. I did see spots of blood though, leading up a dune.

I paused and the caravan stopped. While the others waited behind me I debated about what to do.

I owed the man nothing. He'd had little to say to me and yet I had respected him. He'd run a tight ship when it came down to doing his job. Somehow, leaving him behind to bleed out or die of dehydration in the desert didn't seem a fitting end for such a man.

I dropped the rope of my camel and headed toward the dune. Without saying anything, several of the others followed

along.

I crested the dune and saw more blood. Following the trail, I came to the gully bottom between two dunes and the trail of blood abruptly ended. The hair on the back of my neck lifted. How did a blood trail just disappear like that?

The only possible solution was that he.....I jumped to the side as a blade thrust up out of the sand directly at me. I felt the breeze of it pass by and had instant reflection on just how short life could be. I seized hold of the black wrist that was easily twice the size of mine and held on for dear life.

The man was desperate to survive and sickeningly I saw him bringing up his other fist to smash into my head. Jarken seized hold of the incoming hand and together we immobilized the weakened

man, who at full power would've smashed our heads together and pulped our brains.

“Bruton it's us! Friends!” Thanuel yelled out, trying to reach into the caravan master's panicked consciousness.

Some part of me couldn't believe what the man had done. Wounded, he'd buried himself here in the sand and waited patiently for a chance to either kill one of his hunters or buy the time needed to survive. The broken off haft of a javelin still protruded from the man's left side. He'd been smart not to remove it as he would have bled out by now, but it was doing him no favors to leave it in.

Sand clung to Bruton's sweaty body as evidence of the fever that now gripped him. His eyes traced from one to

the other of us in disbelief as he breathed hard.

“You should kill me, for that was what I did to you by leaving you at the oasis!”

“And yet we’re not. Jarcken, go get some wood. That spear needs to come out and the wound's going to need to be cauterized or he’ll bleed out,” I said matter-of-factly.

We let Bruton settle back to the ground as the majority of those who had followed rushed off to get supplies and wood. Bruton’s bloodshot eyes had never left me and he continued to probe for an answer, “Why?”

I shrugged, “Why not.”

He snorted sharply and I could tell he wasn’t content with my answer so I gave him the truth, as much as I knew of it, “It wouldn’t have been right to just ride on

and let you die out here in the sand.”

“I did just the same to you!” he barked out.

“But you see, I’m not you. I’m me.”

He was silent then and the others were back with the supplies and enough wood to make a fire. I watched as those more skilled in the art of caring for wounds took over.

The big man didn’t even so much as flinch as the spear shaft was removed. Not even when the hot knives were pressed against the wounds. I flinched.

I hoped I’d done the right thing by saving this man, but I wasn’t sure. For whatever reason, he seemed angry at me for saving him. I hoped he’d get over it because as an enemy I never wanted to face him.

We passed through several Lancandian towns until we reached the mistress's home city of Fortoran, the capital of the Kingdomeer Nation of Lancandia. It's appearance was even more garish and well-off than Thyana's had been.

That was kind of a surprise. Thyana was already showing the stress of the constant raids along her southern border and yet I saw none of that here and Lancandia actually bordered the Itarga Mountains from where the lion men came.

Lancandia was a much closer target to be raided than Thyana. Lancandia had always been known as the most peaceful of the seven kingdoms and as a result

they fielded the smallest of the seven armies. What was protecting them from invasion?

Looking about at all the expensive wares and how well-off everyone seemed to be, I couldn't quite get out of my head that perhaps the invasion had come from a different means. Had they sold their soul?

We soon found out, from asking some questions, that the mistress had surprisingly survived the attack on the caravan and had arrived within the city several days before. We headed with what remained of the caravan toward the mansion that we were told was hers.

With everything we'd been able to salvage we'd come up with about a third of the original value of the caravan. Even though there had been so much lost,

the caravan was still going to pay for itself.

I just hoped that we were paid.

I mentally reined myself in as I did not want to anger another of the seven kingdoms, but still it was with the expectation of being cheated that I traveled down the marble hallway in the wake of the finely dressed servant.

The journey through the mistress's mansion brought me through numerous groups of jabbering people, whose conversations came to a halt as I passed by before starting back up again. Just who were all these people anyway?

They appeared, for lack of better words, to simply be the idle rich. I did

not care for them, as they seemed blind to any familiar reality in the way they talked and dressed.

At last the servant brought me to a room that contained only one individual. She had played my temptress in the desert, but today the temptress side was gone, much to my relief. She was staring pensively out a large window at the streets of the city beyond. I stopped at a respectful distance from her desk and waited.

Finally she spoke, "How much did you manage to save?"

"You're not asking the right question," I responded evenly.

Her head swung to me sharply, "What?" she asked, surprised.

"I said you're not asking the right question," I repeated firmly.

Something about my tone seemed to shake her up and in a meek voice she asked, “What should I be asking?”

“How many of us that you left behind managed to survive. That’s what you’re not asking. Here you are, safely back in your rich surroundings and your only concern seems to be the wealth you lost. Over two thirds of your retainers are dead and yet the first thing you want to know is how much cargo there still is!”

She’d drawn back from me and for good reason. I was angry and spitting out my words through clenched teeth. I said, “To answer your first question, you have roughly one third of your cargo and before you ask me, I’ll tell you. I don’t want any of your money! I don’t speak for the other survivors though. They deserve to be paid richly and I expect to

hear that they have been or I'll be back here to pay you a visit personally!"

Satisfied, based on her shaken appearance, that she would pay the salaries of the others, I left the room, eager to be rid of the distasteful trappings of luxury with which she was surrounded.

I was broke. Maybe I shouldn't have let my pride do the talking back there for me, but a man had to do what he had to do and accepting money from her was the last thing that I ever wanted to do. All that said, I was so going to look like an idiot to the men who had adopted me as their leader.

What kind of a leader walked while

his men rode horses?

It looked like I was about to find that out. I felt my face flush as I drew closer to the men who for some odd reason looked to me as a leader.

My stomach grumbled hungrily. It had been a long night. I'd spent it curled up in a door stoop, because I'd had no money for a room much less food.

I should have taken my money. I'd earned it after all, but it had been a matter of principle not to be beholden to that woman to whom I had almost lost far more than just my wages.

Jarken was walking toward me with a bag. He thrust it into my arms, "Missed you last night. Here's some food."

My hands closed over the bag reflexively and Jarken moved on after imparting his trademark shoulder slap.

Sar'ran approached leading a big mottled gelding that impressed instantly in terms of size and composition. Blankly, I stared for a moment at the reins that he pressed into my hand. Smiling he said, "For you boss. I picked him out myself. This one will go far and has real stamina to him."

Numbly I nodded and turned under the premise of studying the horse further. Sar'ran headed back towards a hitched horse that must have been his. Of all those in the group, I perhaps had the most in common with him as by blood he was Rollanic.

A shadow fell across me and looking up I saw that it was Thaniel. He slid a pair of saddlebags that looked stuffed with contents on behind the saddle and cinched them down tightly.

I continued to stand there numbly as one by one members of the group added to the growing collection of an outfit that a Kingdomeer Knight would've been proud to have had. There were only eight of us now. Jarken, Thanuel, Sar'ran, Philuke, Tarn, Cruso, Seluke, and myself.

The other survivors had thought better of staying with me and had taken off with their money to have a good time in the city before hiring on with another caravan. These men, instead of having a good time on the town, had pledged their lives, most likely to a short, pain ridden future, and had spent most, if not all, of their money on outfitting themselves and me for an unpaid venture northward.

I'd die for any of these men and looking at them now as they watched me

I think they sensed that. They'd given me respect and in return I'd give them my best as a leader.

I nodded my head in acceptance of the gifts as I felt too choked up with emotion to dare speak words. I turned and mounted my horse.

I heard the creak of leather and the jingle of harness as the others mounted up and some part of me still couldn't stop marveling at the fact that there were people who wanted me to lead them. The big gelding headed out with a will and I found myself liking the feel of my new mount very much.

In the length of a single night I'd gone from being penniless to a man of great worth. My hand dug into the bag and came back out with a hunk of bread that was still warm. As I bit into it with

relish I acknowledged that, in a way, I now had a family of sorts. A rough looking family perhaps, but a good one for sure. El Elyon's goodwill was beyond any comprehension.

Chapter Ten

Training Exercise

We topped out on a rise and saw the commotion we'd been hearing for several minutes now playing out in the valley below us. A troop of Kingdomers was being attacked by a larger contingent of foreign troops. The fighting was hard-pressed with both sides doing their best to eliminate the other, but the advantage was clearly on the foreigner's side.

I was impressed immediately with the skill by which the attacking force had

managed to ambush the Kingdomers. The enemy was well disciplined and if left to their own devices they would come out of the skirmish the victors.

I couldn't allow that as I yet favored the side of the seven kingdoms over that of any Nicationer Kingdom. It seemed that I kept forgetting that, as a half breed, I had my foot on both sides of the divide.

“Shall we intervene Benaiah?”
Thanuel asked.

I nodded, drew my sword, and urged my mount down the slope as fast as it could carry me as the others followed along, doing the same. We screamed our cries of war and the sound registered on some of the attacking force who turned in their saddles to see the cause of the disturbance.

The light forest through which we

were charging downhill made it hard to gauge how many of us there were, but apparently our war cries made it seem like there were more of us than there actually were.

Enemy swordsmen who had dismounted to fight in the melee quickly remounted or were pulled up behind warriors still mounted. The enemy force peeled away from the engagement, escaping down the valley in an orderly retreat.

Even though they had given up the battle easily and were on the retreat, it was obvious that it wasn't from an act of cowardice. They were well-trained and had good leadership. They were out to win the war and not sacrifice everything for one skirmish. A worthy adversary.

We stopped our mad charge and

pulled up in front of the puzzled Kingdomer force. One who appeared to be in authority asked in a quizzical tone, “There are just eight of you?”

“Yes,” I answered simply, as I re-sheathed my sword.

There was the blare of horns then and the sound of onrushing horses. At first I thought the enemy had returned, but the approaching host was filing into the scene of conflict from the opposite direction. They wore the blue and white tunics of the Kingdom of Philanthia as did the scouting party we had just rescued.

Philanthia was by far the strongest of all the seven Kingdomer Nations and many said that they were also the most noble. Time would tell.

I turned my mount to face the

onrushing host and to learn what our fate as sojourners through their land would be. I heard Jarken exclaim something under his breath, only to then be followed by Philuke saying something unintelligible as well. I turned in the saddle to look at them, wanting to know what they did, but they had fallen silent.

Thanuel's face was watchfully cautious and I looked to him to explain what was going on.

"It's the King of Philanthia himself. I'd advise treading softly, Benaiah. Kings have a fickleness to their hearts which isn't wise to upset."

I nodded and turned forward in the saddle again. I suddenly felt very nervous and uncertain as I watched the fast approaching King and his entourage of knights.

As was becoming increasingly habitual of me, I asked in a prayer to El Elyon, “What should I say?”

I hadn't been expecting an answer but when one came I felt rocked to the core.

“Go with the King and do all that he requires, until peace is achieved in his lands.”

Sitting straight as a board in the saddle, I felt my heart all aflutter as I dealt with the reality that I had just received a Divine dictate. Somehow, knowing what my role in life was to be for the next little while caused stress to increase within me as never before.

Before, when I hadn't known what to do next, I hadn't felt overly responsible for what resulted, but now I had to make what was asked of me come to reality.

If this new mission was of El Elyon

then He would bring it to fruition and open the doors that needed opened and shut those not needed. My experience in the Wasteland as to the Divine placement and order of all creation came back to serve me well now.

I sat still as the King drew to a halt not a horse length away from me. Energetically the King spoke, "I saw the whole thing! Tell me brave strangers, where are you bound?"

Something within me seemed to bind any disclosing about the High Priestess of Vella, whom Kuri had tasked me with bringing to him sometime in the future.

Trying to make positive that I didn't stumble in my words I said, "We've come from Lancandia most recently. The future, as far as I know, is open before us. We are honest men and we beg

permission to make our way through Philanthia.”

“You have it, but I pray that you will instead stay on in my employ. I have need of more fearless men such as you.”

More and more I was learning not to question the ways of El Elyon. What He willed would come to pass.

I inclined my head forward in a deferential bow, “You do us a great honor. I think I speak for all my men in that we would be honored to serve with the forces of Philanthia for a time. How long a time I cannot say, as by right of allegiance I owe El Elyon my first oath of allegiance over any King of the seven kingdoms and if He should require it of me I will leave to do His bidding.”

I heard Thanuel groan slightly, but I’d said what I had in good conscience and

the King seemed to receive it so.

“Neither do I ask any man to go beyond what El Elyon should ask of him, in terms of allegiance to me as King. For now I am glad to have you and your men. Come, let’s be off to the capital! But first, your name sir?”

“Benaiah,” I responded, slightly embarrassed that I had no last name to add to it. Such an admonition was clear evidence of my position forever within the lower echelons of society.

The King didn’t seem to mind though, “You will ride up front with me. Now, let’s be off for Ranfor!”

I did as ordered, only I tried to keep my horse slightly back from the King’s horse out of deference to his high rank, but it was clear that he wanted me to talk further so reluctantly I drew close to

him.

“Tell me, a man who serves El Elyon such as you do, how do you so willingly make a commitment of time to me?”

A moment of decision passed, but there was no substitute for honesty, “El Elyon told me to serve with you for a while even before you made mention of it.”

The King nodded, but said nothing more.

Several miles went by before the King spoke, “It’s good to be in the presence of an honest man again. Not only one who is honest, but one who obeys the Most High as well. It has been a long time since I met such a man, a young one at that. Such wisdom does not usually follow those of your age.”

“I had a good teacher,” I said simply,

as I did not want the King's praise of me to continue. I already felt embarrassed enough by what he had said.

By way of trying to change the conversation I asked, "Who was the enemy that we stopped from attacking your men?"

The King smiled briefly and glanced over at me, "Humility, another worthy aspect of character. I have a feeling that you are nothing short of a blessing sent straight from El Elyon to help me in these troubling days."

Nothing more was said for several minutes until the king answered my question, "The attacking force was that of the Nicationer Nation of Crona."

Now that was a surprise even to me. Ever since I was a child I had heard of the strong and prosperous peace

between the Kingdom of Philanthia and the Nicationer Kingdom of Crona. I expressed as much, “I thought Crona was a longtime friend of Philanthia’s?”

The King nodded grimly, “They were, but that’s all changed now. Three months ago they seized our trade delegations and our interests within their nation. Soon thereafter came the border raids. It’s nothing of the severity that the Kingdom of Thyana is experiencing, but it’s been getting worse. More and more have died on both sides and to this day I am clueless as to what is the cause of all this unprovoked aggression on the part of the Cronians.”

Silence stretched on for a moment before the King asked, “Where do you originate from Benaiah?”

I’d known that question was

forthcoming, but answering it was made no better by having the foreknowledge of it being asked.

“My mother is of the Kingdom of Smirnaz. My father was a Rollanic tribesman.”

The King said nothing and I waited, expecting him to tell me to leave because of my mixed parentage. Instead I heard him say, “I’ve heard it said that the Rollanic Knights are great horsemen. Is that true?”

“That much is true Sire,” I said and to my surprise that was as far as the questioning went. I continued to ride beside the King, who seemed content to just have me by his side.

Four years later

Yet one more patrol through scorched farm fields and abandoned homesteads. It was depressing and clear evidence that the latest peace agreement with the Nicationer Nation of Crona had failed once more.

There was a lot that reminded me of the low lands of Thyana, but the enemy we faced here was different. They weren't hybrid lion men engineered by the fallen messengers of El Elyon to terrorize and corrupt mankind.

No, this was an entirely different kind of war. One that made no sense as it seemed Crona had no stomach for the war that they continually provoked.

The enemy had, on multiple occasions, allowed farming families to

flee instead of outright killing them. The attacks had been getting worse, but still Crona seemed to lack a killer instinct when it came down to it.

It was perplexing and yet the damage and loss of lives to the Kingdom of Philanthia was substantial. The King was on the verge of ordering a full out invasion of Crona. Such an action was not wise I thought, but there was little other option given the continued breaking of peace agreements and the many border raids.

I looked around me at the soldiers that I led. This was a training exercise and not so much a real patrol mission. All of them were new recruits being put through their paces in preparation for increasing the size of the army in order to invade Crona and yet remain secure

on Philanthia's other borders. All the young men of Philanthia that could be spared from industry and the farms had been called up for active duty as soldiers.

The city and farm boys around me, although ironically some of them were as old as me, knew absolutely nothing when it came to fighting in a war. If they didn't learn fast though they'd soon find out the hard way.

I'd worked tirelessly to teach them what I knew in hopes that some of them would pick up on it and thus more of them would have a greater chance of survival when open conflict occurred. Each of my friends were likewise in command of a batch of young recruits, facing the same uphill battle as I was in terms of turning men of peace into men

of war.

Philanthia was a kingdom long at peace and, while they fielded an impressive army, there were few with much, if any, battle experience within the ranks. The last five months of my life had consisted of turning raw recruits into fighters, who were then transferred into more regular divisions of the army.

It had been both a rewarding experience and a horrendous one. Some recruits had excelled, while others just weren't cut out to be soldiers. The case in point for the latter were the two scouts that were even now approaching the column.

I came to a stop and the column halted behind me in expectation of the scouts' report. The two scouts pulled up and the favored spokesperson of the two rattled

off, “Not a thing to be seen Sir.”

Slightly aggravated I asked, “Where did you look?”

Both scouts looked back at me blankly and then one pointed over towards the Nicationer Nation of Halifaz, across which Cronian Raiders had been slipping in order to raid Philanthia. “Over there,” he said, looking at me as if I was stupid.

I fought hard against the urge to scream. Neither of the boys were old enough to even grow a beard worth shaving, so what was the use in yelling at them. I called on a hidden reserve of patience as I sought to be constructive in my criticism, “As scouts you are the eyes and ears of the force you are attached to. You are the front line. The safety of all these men behind me

depends on you two doing your job. Now, tell me why it takes two of you to ride along the border?”

Both recruits looked at me in nervousness and I guessed that some of the anger I had been restraining was visible. Haltingly the one asked, “What should we have done?”

“This column is riding parallel with the border. Every soldier in this command is craning their head towards the border in order to be the first to see the enemy coming. Should a greater force than our own attack from the border the option remains to us to simply retreat into Philanthia if..... if we've not been cut off by a force already within Philanthia! One of you should have rode to the rear and the other to the front. Once 2 miles out from

the column you should have angled back, one along the borderlands and the other along the homeward side of Philanthia, but as of right now we are blind to what lays behind us, ahead of us, and towards Philanthia proper! This is unacceptable!”

“We’re sorry sir. We weren’t thinking.”

“No, you weren’t listening, because I just reiterated everything I told you both this morning before we left camp!”

Both soldiers winced visibly, but I wasn’t done with them. I was so intent on the pair of scouts before me I almost tuned out the exclamation of alarm in the ranks behind me. In sudden dread I looked toward Philanthia and saw my nightmare become reality, as a mounted force bearing the standard of Crona

separated out from a patch of forest.

Drawing my sword I used it to point to the oncoming line of cavalry, “Case in point! Fall into the line!” The two scouts hop skipped their mounts quickly away from me, only wanting to disappear from my view forever.

I watched the approaching cavalry closely. They were moving too slow in my opinion and there were too few of them. We were almost even numbers, but the Cronians were smarter than that.

I looked to the sides of the border we patrolled and I thought I saw a bit of movement off to the one side on Philanthia’s side. So that was the game. They wanted us to charge the force before us and then two flanking forces, still hidden, would converge on us from along the border, while we were locked

immobile with the first attack.

If I attacked the force before us a lot of boys would die this day as few yet had the stomach or abilities needed to power through the force of soldiers that stood between us and home, in order to avoid the trap of the two flanking forces. The only place the enemy probably wasn't was over the border, because they knew that was where we would be looking for them.

I swung my horse to the side and pointed with my sword to the Halifaz border, "We ride over the border and head north and make an all-out run for it! There are more of our patrols to the north. We reach one of those patrols, then we can turn and fight, but not before then! Now ride hard if you ever want to see your girls again!"

The column broke rank and took off at a hard gallop toward the Halifaz border. I stayed to the rear and watched as three enemy forces became visible. The game was up and all three enemy units charged for us.

The enemy force was easily three times our size in number. They weren't raw recruits either.

I charged after the column as a grim undertone overwhelmed the day. A mile over the border we headed north and by now every one of the soldiers I commanded fully comprehended the gravity of the situation. We either outran the enemy or we all died. It was as simple as that.

We were in grave danger of being overtaken by the northern flanking force as they, of the three enemy units, had the

least amount of ground to cover in order to reach us. Arrows zinged out through the air and riders all over the column ahead of me fell off their horses.

The column was in disarray as boys, suddenly forced to be men, watched their childhood friends pitch over the sides of their horses to be trampled under by more friends, even as for many it was the first sight of blood they had ever seen in life.

“Onward! Don’t stop!!!” I yelled, but it wasn’t needed. They’d seen enough of war and all they wanted now was to be back in the safety of their homes.

More riders fell under a fresh wave of arrows. One boy landed on his feet after his horse pitched over head first and I reached down and grabbed him up. The chances of making it riding double

weren't good, but for me it wasn't right not to try.

A hill was fast approaching and the horses ahead of me scrambled up it quickly. I was confident that the bulk of the force would make it back to safety and in a way that was a victory.

My horse hit the slope and lurched off to the side. Glancing back I saw at least three arrows lodged deep in the horses rump. I pulled the reins hard and swerved into another of the rearmost riders and shoved the trembling rider I had picked up across the saddle horn of the other soldier's mount.

His horse nearly went down, but then regained itself and went on up the slope, but mine didn't. I kicked my feet free of the stirrups as it went tumbling off to the side. I landed in a ball of motion and

rolled up to my feet in hopeful expectation of seeing a riderless horse nearby.

Instead, I watched a rider peel off from the back of the pack and head back for me. It was one of the scouts that I'd chastised. As if in slow motion I watched the arrow slam into his shoulder and knock him free from the saddle.

I rushed forward and swatted his hand away from pulling the arrow out that was lodged deep in his shoulder, "No, don't do that! You'll bleed out in seconds!"

The boy was crying and blubbering out, "I'm sorry sir! This is all my fault!" Over and over and over.

I pulled him back against me as he shuddered from both the pain of the

arrow and his own anguish.

“Now you know what war is all about,” I said, at a loss for anything else to say.

He passed out after a few more brief moments of struggle as he kept trying to pull the arrow out and kill himself in a suicidal bent of mind. I let go of my hold on him and let him ease down to the ground.

Raising back up, I turned to face the encircling column of enemy riders. What happened now was anyone’s guess.

A Cronian Knight on a splendid coal black stallion separated out from the encircling riders and approached. He sheathed his sword and then, to my surprise, he removed his helmet. I watched him look about the scene of dead horses and fallen youth, until his

eyes came back to mine and I acknowledged the ready intelligence to be found there.

His face was etched in regret as he said, "It is a sad thing to kill so many so young. You did well to deliver so many of them from certain death, but then I would expect no less from a warrior of your skill. I will take your sword now in surrender. There has been enough killing today."

Wordlessly I pulled my sword free and, turning it end for end, I handed it up to my captor and potential executioner. The man accepted my sword with a nod and then gesturing to the fallen scout he said, "Men, see to him and any other wounded that you find. We ride for the city of Orwa within the hour."

Turning to me once more, he

dismounted. Approaching, he removed his gauntlet and offered me his hand. Feeling unsure of what was going on I left his hand untaken. His head moved to the side, “Surely there can be honor between fellow warriors?”

“There can be,” I said slowly before finishing with, “as long as my wounded are cared for.”

“Even as we speak!” he said, gesturing expansively, and incredibly, I saw it was true. Cronian soldiers were caring for the fallen recruits.

I shook his hand and asked, “To whom do I have the pleasure of being prisoner?”

The man’s face split to reveal a pearly white smile, “Emir Artaxis Zurin at your service!”

“Well Artaxis, what happens now?”

“I take you to my home and perhaps manage to ensure some meaningful conversation for myself to help offset this terrible war.”

The man and the actions of his men were a complete mystery to me and I quite docilely accepted my lot for the time being as a prisoner of war.

Chapter Eleven

Hidden Realms

The breeze was quite refreshing. It carried with it the tangy scent of salt. All in all it was my first experience of seeing a large body of water. I'd only seen ponds and lakes up till now, but the Orgallion Sea was much more.

It hinted at freedom to look upon its wide-open expanses, but freedom was far from me at the moment. However, so were the expected hardships of being a prisoner of war.

I gazed around the opulently furnished

room in a sense of continual puzzlement. I felt more like an honored guest than I did a prisoner.

I knew there were guards outside the door, but there was little in the way of making me feel like an impoverished prisoner whose life was easily forfeit. It felt odd. Somehow I think I'd have been more at home with the sounds of water dripping off the ceiling of a dungeon and the sound of rats gnawing on a bone in a darkened corner.

The opulence of this room in comparison to that dark reality was unsettling. It would have been easier to hate my foe, if I had been suffering under the other reality. As it was I almost felt indebted to the man who had taken me prisoner. I might actually have to leave a note of apology when I made my attempt

to escape out the window tonight.

“I want you to stay,” spoke an indwelling voice from within, which I recognized instantly as that of Ruach, the Spirit of El Elyon.

Stunned, I stared out the window. I wasn't supposed to try to escape?

“No,” came the affirming answer from within.

Time passed and then, as before, came words from within, **“Do not be in fear. If you wish to understand you have but to ask.”**

I went with the obvious, “You want me to be a prisoner?”

Silence met my question. I thought about my question and I decided that it had been a flawed one. The matter-of-fact truth was that I was a prisoner. But what was more than that was that the

Ruach not only knew my situation, but had asked me to stay in it. My question had been a denial of what was obviously El Elyon's will.

With my tongue thick in my mouth I tried to rephrase the question, but I found it difficult to do so. I really didn't like being a prisoner and embracing it was hard, but there was no other way.

“Ruach, could you help me understand what it is I am to do for El Elyon in my current situation of being held against my will? I will do El Elyon's will, even if it is to remain a prisoner.”

“Go to the window Benaiah.”

Blankly I stared at the window in front of which I already stood. Only a foot separated me from touching the glass. However, not wanting to anger the Ruach, I stepped forward.

Blinking, I realized that I was suddenly no longer in my room. I was on the street of a foreign looking city and yet I wasn't. Looking up towards the hill of the city I saw the very palace that I had been led to earlier in the day. I even thought I could see the window out of which I had been looking just moments before.

All the activities of city life were taking place around me and yet it felt as if I walked in a dream. People went about their business all around me and yet none of them seemed to be aware of me. In fact one walked right through me.

Alarmed, I dodged off to the side of another unseeing man's approach. This made no sense!

Was I dead?

Just as I had that thought came an

answer, “No. Your spirit is in a realm outside of the physical. Your body remains within the palace.”

The words had not come from within, and I felt very sure that I had heard them as actual spoken words. I turned about and caught sight of someone watching me.

The individual wore a cloak and had the appearance of a man, but somehow I knew he wasn't. I stood my ground as he approached, even as I had the awful feeling that I was no match for this being.

Uncertain that I even wanted to ask the question I asked, “Can you help me?”

The man smiled and nodded, “That is my purpose. I am here upon the express will of El Elyon to assist you. My name is Urtholan. I am of the Malachim.”

My heart had sped up within me until I feared that it was making an audible sound. What was going on?

Urtholan reached out and touched my arm, “Peace Benaiah. I mean you no harm.”

Unsteadily I asked, “You’re not a fallen one are you?”

“No, I remain faithful to the Creator of my kind and yours, and indeed of all creation. I have been appointed to help you Benaiah.”

“Why me? I’m just a man. Why would you be brought into the service of helping me?”

Urtholan touched his chest and said, “I serve the Father as do you, so it is to Him that all glory from any action of mine or yours goes. Your Creator loves you very much and the faithfulness of

your path is not one often traveled among men. It is an honor to serve alongside of you for the furtherance of the kingdom of Shamayim.”

It was very hard to digest and yet, not wanting to be deceived, I said, “El Elyon if this is not of you then wake me up now!”

Nothing happened. Nothing but a sudden infilling of peace, which assured me of the source of this encounter.

Swallowing, as I tried to come to grips with this situation that was yet far beyond me, I said, “El Elyon’s Spirit was going to show me my purpose for being here in Crona I think. Do you know anything about that?”

Urtholan nodded and gestured for me to walk. I started out and he came alongside of me. Glancing

surreptitiously over at him I studied him and then quite honestly I said, “I don’t understand any of this or why it’s happening, much less what’s going on all around me.”

Urtholan nodded and began to speak, “There are two sides to any reality, the physical which you have lived in up till now and the spiritual. Within the spiritual realm there are many levels. The highest of which is Shamayim, but what you see here is a much lower spiritual level. The spiritual world in general goes largely unseen by that which is physical, but it exists nonetheless. Sometimes the two merge and that which is spiritual is seen in the physical. Reversely, that which is prayed for by believers in the physical manifests over into the spiritual realm.”

“So I’m existing in both realms right now?”

Urtholan smiled, “No, you exist in the flesh and the reality of this created world and yet you bear within you the Ruach, the Spirit of El Elyon, which is eternal. You as an individual, because of your free choice of will have become spiritual and yet you remain physical for this present time. You have ushered in a new life beyond just the physical life you exhibit now. You have chosen wisely.”

“So I’m alive, but being shown through a reality apart from my own, but which one day I could belong to, like you?”

“Yes, but when that day comes it will occur in Shamayim and not this level that I show you now. Look around you

Benaiah. Look closely. Tell me what you see.”

We'd come to a stop in a busy street and obediently I did as Urtholan commanded me. Looking around I studied the people that moved about on the scene.

A merchant was talking earnestly with a woman who wasn't showing much interest in his available wares. Despite his efforts the woman moved on. Then, surprisingly, the man looked from her to me and I found myself on the verge of backing away as I was instantly smacked in the face by an evil presence.

Complete evil was the best description I could muster to describe what I felt. The man reminded me of the Itarga lion people all over again and yet this evil was cloaked invisibly within

the body of a normally appearing man.

“A demon possessed individual,” Urtholan commented softly and despite the merchant's wrathful stare I felt myself comforted by being in the presence of Urtholan. Urtholan's arm came around me and he urged me to keep walking on down the street. I felt the comfort of being with Urtholan as if he was a lifeline pulling me out of deep water.

I soon saw that the merchant wasn't alone. There were more men and even women that stared at me outside of any ability within the physical realm.

“Demons. What are they exactly?” I asked, feeling the weight of the gazes of those I had just mentioned upon me.

“They are the result of disobedience. They are the progeny of those of my kind

that fell from grace and worked evil with the creations of my Master. They are abominable in the eyes of El Elyon and without any hope of a future resurrection, as their spirit was not given birth by the Most High.”

“Why are we here with them? I’m pretty sure they want to do terrible things to me, the least of which would be to simply kill me.”

“It is as you said. They wish to torment and kill all of humanity and put an end to all that El Elyon has purposed for mankind, but they will fail, for it is the will of the Father to draw all mankind to Himself.”

“When will He do that?”

Urtholan gave me a sad look, “He already has, but few have listened. I believe you know of whom I speak.”

“Yes. I know,” his words brought the loss of Kuri’s presence with me all the closer to my soul. There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t miss how it used to be, but Kuri had not left me without comfort and now, looking at Urtholan, I could see that he had not left me without a guide either.

“Take comfort. One day those who believe will be gathered to Him again in time without end,” Urtholan said warmly to me before starting to walk again.

I followed along looking around as I did. I was learning so much! It was like a fountain of wisdom had been opened up within me and was spilling out and enriching every corner of my existence.

My eyes fell upon a woman. She was dressed in the attire of a prostitute and she had the affected mannerisms to

match. She also stared at me with evil intent and yet I felt that the apathy I saw went deeper than those who had come before.

I glanced to see Urtholan also regarding the woman closely. Unlike the others with evil in their eyes the woman began to approach us brazenly. At her approach I began to feel extremely vulnerable..... no, that wasn't the word for it. I felt naked!

Naked of any ability to stop whatever harm she intended to do to me. Before my eyes the woman transformed into a being of Sheol and I instantly wanted to start backing away, even running to get away from the sight of what lay before me.

Urtholan's hand on my back remained steady though and seemed to anchor me

to the spot. I remembered that he was my guide into this realm. Surely if El Elyon had purposed this, and I knew He had, then He would also keep me safe. I felt an answering pulse of peace from within and I stood rooted in my place before the face of incarnate evil before me.

“So Urtholan, I see you have a new protégé to keep watch over. I do hope this one turns out better than the last one.” The being of Sheol laughed uproariously.

Urtholan said nothing but only continued to watch the approach of the fallen one of his kind. Fallen wasn't the name for it! Everything that I felt in the calm securing presence of Urtholan was mimicked in the opposite extreme in the firebreather before me.

“Well, how about it boy? Do you have

a name or does your guardian not allow you to speak for yourself? There are so many rules after all.”

Words seemed to come to me as the being wreathed in flame came to a stop within reach of me, “I imagine you already know my name and as far as that goes, I do not wish to know yours in return. It is enough for me to know that I have chosen my eternity wisely, while you chose poorly.”

I really tried not to flinch as the fallen Malachim screamed in fury and made to strike at me. Urtholan’s hand was in front of me and some force beyond my comprehension drove the fallen one backward from us a short distance.

Urtholan’s actions only seemed to incense my antagonist the more, but it made no attempt to draw closer again.

“Very well boy. Enjoy the day, but remember you’re only as strong as your last choice, which for you pathetic humans changes daily if not hourly. When you mess up, and you will, I and my offspring will be waiting to claim what is ours! Your soul will roast with us in Sheol forever! Don’t believe me? Ask your protector what happened to the last one he helped.”

“Be on your way Sisakar and trouble him no further as I fear you have begun to believe the lies of your master. This man is near in the eyes of El Elyon and any attack by you is not one fended off by me, but rather by El Elyon. Tell me Sisakar, are you yet so foolish to believe that you can prevail against the Most High and the things which He has purposed to come to pass?”

Sisakar did not answer and quickly moved away from view, but I still felt his foul presence in the city at large. The entire city seemed oppressed by the evil thoughts and prayers of those who walked around unseen by the masses.

It was suddenly as if I could see through all the buildings and structures of the city and only see the evil ones that walked about. The messengers of evil were everywhere and I saw no joy in the faces of their victims that moved about as if rehearsing a play called life.

Noticing the general despondency of almost everyone, something that I hadn't picked up on before, I asked, "Is it just the presence of all these evil ones that oppresses the people or is there something more?"

Urtholan looked upon the city with

quiet reflection in his gaze as he spoke, “By their own actions they have distanced themselves from El Elyon until He is but a vague memory in their thoughts. In the houses of some every foul image of idolatry and sacrament of Sheol has been celebrated and welcomed until the freedom that was theirs by right is no more. They are a people in bondage and now their self-elected masters of darkness demand a sacrifice of them.”

“What are they sacrificing?”

“The only thing that still retains innocence.”

“I don’t understand. I.....” Abrupt knocking on the door behind me made me suddenly aware of the fact that I was back in my room and that my strange spiritual encounter on the streets below

was over.

The door opened and in walked Artaxis with a bright smile, “I see you’re admiring the view of our fair city. Tell me, what do you think of it?”

Turning briefly, I glanced back out the window before saying to Artaxis, “I think your city is beautiful and yet I wish I did not see so many temples dedicated to the fallen ones. You would do well to remember El Elyon as a people and forsake those you serve instead.

Then I added, “I can’t also help but see that I think Crona would be a more prosperous nation if there was once again peace between it and Philanthia.”

To my surprise Artaxis nodded and said, “I agree with both points, but you do not understand the situation with which my people are faced.”

“No, I do not, but I very much would like to. What stands in the way of changing your faith and once again embracing peace?”

“Let us not speak of that now. Suffice it to say that the war will go on.”

Before I could speak, Artaxis held his hand up and with a piercing stare said, “No more questions about war or faith. Tonight you are my guest and I wish, if but for a moment, to separate away from the grim reality that both our peoples are caught up in, with a fellow warrior that I have long wished to meet.”

I bit my tongue against what I wanted to say. Angering my generous captor probably wasn't for the best. I would have to bide my time and ask questions later in order to figure out the puzzle of why a nation such as Crona was at war,

when it was not in their heart to be so.

Obediently I followed Artaxis out of the room. The guards followed behind, but the distance was such that I could've easily overpowered Artaxis and had him at my mercy, but I was under orders not to escape and I intended to listen to them.

Chapter Twelve

Chained

I gazed out at the banquet hall in some astonishment. Just whose captive was I?

I knew little of Cronian government structure, but Artaxis must be extremely high up in it. The unwanted thought came to me that I should probably kill him. The loss of such an important official, if not royalty, would deal the Cronian war effort a savage blow, but it wasn't within me to be a murderer. I had done so once in anger, but never again.

Besides all that, I liked the man and

found him very easy to get along with. He was talking, “So you are not a Philanthian by birth?”

“I shook my head, “No, I’m from Smirnaz.”

“And there you come from a family of high standing?” he asked probingly.

The man liked directness so, looking him straight in the eye, I said, “I’m the bastard offspring of a Rollanic raider and a Smirnaz woman, lower than the dirt in terms of importance.”

Instead of being put off, Artaxis leaned closer and said, “Fascinating! Such a humble beginning and yet look at you now, one of the highest knights of the realm and a personal friend to the strongest of the seven Kingdomer Nations.”

Smoothly I interjected, “Odd how you

picked the strongest of the seven Kingdomer Nations to go to war with. The odds are far from being in your favor. Philanthia's army must be twice the size of Crona's. I can only wonder why you have gone to war with them in such an unprovoked fashion?"

Artaxis shook his head good-naturedly and said, "You don't give up, do you my friend."

I smiled and then began sampling the excellent food that was arrayed out before me in an endless buffet. Leaning forward from my seated back rest of pillows I claimed a tray of food that had the best tasting creations of meat combined with other delicacies that I had ever sampled in my life.

The culture of these people was far different than any I had ever encountered

before. It was far more relaxed and it displayed opulence in almost everything.

I had never tasted better food, seen such bright hues of silk, or seen so many beautiful women arrayed in practically nothing. I really tried to not let my eyes wander, but it was impossible not to notice the exotic beauty of the women.

Within this lavish banquet hall there was anywhere from 2 to 7 or more women in attendance at every head of state's side. I took most of the women to be slaves, but I wasn't entirely sure. Perhaps they were wives. The Nicationers did such things.

I still couldn't fathom how I, a prisoner, was here at this banquet, let alone as the guest of honor. It made no sense to treat a prisoner so, even a highly respected one.

I was downing a scrumptious bite of something that had the flavor of summer decadence with a hint of spicy warmth when Artaxis almost made me choke on it by saying, “For your information, Philanthia’s army is more than three times the size of ours.”

Swallowing, I looked at him in surprise. Why would he tell me, a prisoner, such vital information as that?

Artaxis wasn’t done yet though. He gestured to the banquet hall before us and said, “All this you see before you will be wiped out should Philanthia decide to invade, but then it was never intended that we should win the war. It leaves a bad taste in one’s mouth to know one has lost from the beginning of a conflict. Drink up, great warrior, before all the warmth and life is drained

out of Ayenathurim and what we are left with is a wasteland of shattered dreams and roving monsters!” Artaxis picked up his cup of wine and drank heavily from it.

I looked back out upon the banquet hall full of bright lights and the glitter of jewels draped against the warm skin of beautiful women. There were easy smiles and laughs from almost everyone enjoying the performance of a jester in the banquet hall’s center floor.

Suddenly it seemed, at the words of Artaxis, that I too saw the doomed future that my companion beside me did. All of what I saw before me was going to leave and be no more.

If Artaxis could see all that, then what was keeping him from drawing the most obvious conclusion of what should be

done? What could be causing these people to enact such insanity upon themselves by attacking the strongest of the seven Kingdomer Nations?

I began to see the room full of guests in a different light. These were people who were celebrating while there was still time to celebrate and enjoy life. In fact they seemed to be desperately trying to have a good time. Why were they trying so hard to pretend nothing was wrong? The mystery of Urtholan's words came back to me, 'the only thing that still retains innocence'."

Artaxis's hand slapping the back of my shoulder jarred me from my melancholy study of the people in the room. Peering forward to look at my face he said, "Such concern I see on your face for the intent of trying to

discover the truth of the puzzle that lays before you. A puzzle which you seek to solve on behalf of that of an enemy! You are a rare man to sit here and be concerned for our fate. Truly you exhibit the precepts of your Kingdomer faith far better than most full blood Kingdomer's do! I wish we had met under better circumstances, as it is we have to make the best of this while we still can. Now, enough of this grim speculation over the future! I have something in mind that I think you will enjoy," with that said, he clapped his hands loudly and the jester disappeared from the banquet hall's center floor, even as a row of curtains parted on a stage that lay above it and directly across from where I and Artaxis sat.

Hypnotic music, with a beat of its

own, came to life from some unseen corner of the banquet hall as a group of dancers, whose fluid movements were even more hypnotic than the music, came down the stairs of the stage to the center floor of the banquet hall.

The food before me, the war, even my captivity was all forgotten. I stared as if in a trance at the woman before me. She wasn't the only woman performing the moves of the dance on the floor, but it was as if she and I were the only ones in the room.

I acknowledged, in some deep recess of my mind that could still perform cognitive thought, that as a whole I had completely lost it. Never before in life had I witnessed any woman who could compare with the lead dancer of the group, whom it seemed to me was

performing just for me.

She wasn't shy about it and yet she wasn't overt about it either. Watching her watch me, I beheld a confusing mix of feminine curiosity and bold confidence. She spun and twirled and moved fluidly with the dance, but her eyes always came back to mine.

It felt to me that she had even assumed control of my heartbeat so complete was her erotic entrapment of me and my senses. I blinked and tried to look away, but it was impossible.

She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met and she was looking at me and performing before me, as if she was in the presence of her King. My mouth dry and my eyes in rapt focus upon every smooth curved line of her form, I watched until the dance at long last was

over.

She gazed up at me over the tops of her folded hands, poised in the final move of the dance with such a look of confident pride in the achievement of her enslavement of me that I felt at a loss as to what to do. She turned then and glided away with the grace and dignity of a Queen to the heavy applause of all those within the room.

The curtain closed after her and I knew a moment of swift depression the likes of which I had never known. It was as if I'd been drugged and then had the source of my contentment ripped from me. I felt embarrassed by it all and glancing to the side I caught Artaxis watching me closely.

Thickly I said, "They were very good. I doubt they have their equal anywhere

else in the world.”

Artaxis smiled knowingly and said with obvious implication, “Yes, she is very good. Finish your meal and then I wish for you to tell me the entire story of how a boy born in the least of all the seven kingdoms rises to be the right hand man of the strongest King of the seven.”

“It’s a long story,” I said uncomfortably.

He shrugged, “We have nothing but time my friend.”

Not wanting to begrudge his hospitality I did as he asked and told him of my whole journey through life, leaving nothing out.

“I would very much like to meet this

friend of yours, Kuri. Perhaps one day I shall. To become such a man as you, your teacher must be quite the man as well.”

I nodded in complete agreement and said with absolute honesty, “I wouldn’t be the man that I am today if it weren’t for him.”

Artaxis nodded his head before looking around at the mellowing atmosphere of the banquet that was drawing to a close for the night. “Come, my valiant knight. The night is young and yet full of excitement to be had!”

Reluctantly I followed my benefactor from the banquet, even as I mentally girded myself against my fear of what was coming next. I wasn’t to be disappointed.

We entered into a suite of rooms of

opulence the likes of which I had never seen. Up ahead I heard the sound of feminine laughter ring out gaily and I braced myself for what I had been dreading.

We passed through the last entryway and entered into a large room that contained a crystal-clear pool at its center. Beautiful women were gathered about the room lying on cushions, while others stood and even a few swam within the pool. Everything I had heard in the barracks of Philanthia about these far western lands was correct if not even more so.

Artaxis came to a halt within the room of smiling and utterly beguiling women and broadly gestured to one and all of them, “Choose any that you wish and as many as you want and they are yours to

enjoy.”

I'd known what he'd been going to say, but the answer I had to deliver was hard to utter as I stared at temptations around me too numerous to count. In this moment, more than any other, I felt in need of the art of diplomacy. What would Kuri say?

I turned my eyes from the women so freely offered to me, to Artaxis and said, “You are a man of great hospitality to offer me, a prisoner in your court, your own wives for my enjoyment. I must, however, decline your offer. Not because I do not wish to enjoy what you have offered, but rather because I am bound by the words of my teacher to share my body with only one woman. A woman who will be mine and certainly not the wife of another. These are your

wives and they should have no man other than you as a lover. “

There was silence within the room and I briefly wondered how far I was from getting my head chopped off.

Artaxis raised his hand and pointed to me as if witnessing before a larger audience than just the 30 or so women within the room, “Now I believe your God is real! No man without true conviction of faith would have the strength to turn away from the tempting delights held within this room that I so freely offered to you. Likewise, even a man of conviction, who was at heart a coward, would not have turned my offer down out of the fear of offending me. Truly you are no coward just as you are a man of faith! Come! You shall have your reward!”

Artaxis took my hand and led me back out the way we had come and to my surprise we were soon at the door of my room. Pushing the door wide, Artaxis ushered me in with a shove to my back and my breath left me as the lead dancer from the banquet hall rose from the bed to stand on the floor barefoot, even as she had danced.

“She, who you longed for most, is now yours as is fitting for the greatest man I have yet to have ever met!”

I started to object, but found myself quite speechless as the woman of my desire approached to stand before me. Her gaze was direct and her voice compelling as she asked, “Can it be that you do not want me Master?”

The only way out of that question was to lie. To lie was something I’d pledged

myself against ever doing. “Yes, I want you, but.....”

“It’s settled then! Chain her to him!” Artaxis said jovially.

In complete consternation I turned to see two servants quietly enter the room with chains in tow. They fixed a manacle around my left wrist, which had a light chain attached to it of about 4 feet in length. Incredibly, I watched the two servants lock a much wider manacle about the waste of my dancer.

The end of my chain was linked to the polished iron ring that encircled her bare waist. My manacle wasn’t tight and neither was hers, but neither of them were coming off. I turned to protest to Artaxis, but he was already holding up a hand, forestalling me.

“I have no doubt that our Western

ways are strange to you, but this is not a matter of any custom of ours. The chains are quite simply a necessity on my part to keep you within this room for the night. I have no doubt you could overpower any guard I set against you or that you would risk your life to climb down the face of the cliff beyond that window to the city below. Just as I am sure of that, I know you would not risk the life of this woman by either fighting guards or trying to climb down with her attached to you.”

Tongue tied for lack of an answer to such logic, I watched as Artaxis stepped forward towards my chained companion only to lean his forehead against hers in a movement that reflected great emotional connection. To my surprise, I saw a tear slip down the woman’s face

only to be quickly wiped away by one of Artaxis's fingers.

They both closed their eyes and then, both drawing apart, I heard Artaxis say, "This is for the best Susori."

She nodded quickly and the vulnerable side of this woman that I'd just gotten a glimpse at disappeared, to be replaced with the persona of confidence that I'd seen on the dance floor earlier tonight.

Drawing back from her further, Artaxis looked toward the door, then quickly went through it and disappeared from view. The guards closed the door and I was left alone within the darkened room, my sole companion being the girl chained to me.

This was all too much to take in! I felt the need to sit and gather some

semblance of order to the situation as the world seemed to be spinning beneath my feet. I saw a chair and stepped out toward it.

Almost immediately I was brought up short by the chain about my wrist. "I'm sorry!" I said in embarrassment, as I turned to the vision of beauty standing quietly in the room behind me.

She, however, was already stepping out toward me and, for lack of knowing anything better to do, I completed my path to the chair and sat down. She moved so quietly that I was startled to feel her hands begin to knead my shoulders.

I sat there awkwardly, as her skillful fingers squeezed first at my shoulders before then moving to my neck and rhythmically working on the tension she

found there in great supply. Through it all she was silent and yet my breathing sounded loud in the room as my desperation mounted.

I was trapped! El Elyon, what am I supposed to do?

Any resistance that I could mount against this woman was shaky at best from the start, but I found even more of my resolve draining away at the touch of her fingers working away at the tension that her presence caused.

I caught her one hand with my unshackled hand and said, "Please stop."

She stopped.

Time passed as I stared at the graceful fingers of the hand I had captured. This amazing woman was mine for the taking. This was not the way I had wanted this day to come, but in my heart I knew she

was the one. I'd known it from the first moment I'd seen her and yet now, here in this setting, all seemed drowned out by my physical desire for her, but if she truly was the one, then she deserved so much more than just the weakest part of me in our first interactions together.

I let go of her hand and it disappeared back over my shoulder and to my surprise her hands once again began to knead rhythmically.

“You don't have to do that, but it feels good and I thank you,” I spoke out huskily.

Her hands stopped briefly, but then started up again, only this time she started running the tips of her fingers through my hair in a massage of my head that felt overwhelmingly good.

“Your name is Susori?”

“Yes,” she said, and even on that one word her voice echoed with all the rich sensuality that there was to her as a whole.

Trying to find the words I asked, “Do you want to be here Susori? I need to know, so please answer me honestly.”

There was a telling pause before she spoke, “I think my master has given me to a good man. You are a good man, are you not?”

I'd never really had the question posed to me in this way before and it caused me to go into an honest self-analysis. To do so could be to reach a flawed outcome however. What would my friends say of me?

Armed with the confidence of what I knew they would say and what I thought of myself, I said, “I always try to be, but

I've known only one truly good man in my life and I'm not him."

"I am glad to be yours," came her words in reply and I could only marvel as to how one could surrender one's entire life to a stranger with so little to go on, but her words echoed of honesty.

I needed to confirm something but found myself not wanting to ask for fear of the truth, "Were you one of Artaxis's wives?"

"No," came her soft response as her fingers massaged my scalp.

She was making it very hard to think. The feel of her hands was amazing and I almost came out of my skin at the feel of her lips lightly grazing against my ear as she spoke softly, "I have never known a man."

Firmly gripping the sides of the chair,

I nodded. She'd certainly cleared that question up and with it she'd made my torment all the greater.

Strangely, in the darkened room I could sense that she was smiling. I hadn't seen her smile yet, but I wanted to.

"Your hands must be getting tired."

"They are. Do you wish me to stop?"

To say yes was to lie. Her hands didn't stop and feeling compelled to be noble I rose to my feet and her hands slid off me.

I didn't know what to do!

"What do I do, El Elyon?" I spoke out loud without really meaning to.

Softly she spoke out from behind me, her voice tinged with curiosity, "Your God speaks to you?"

"Yes."

“What’s He saying to you?”

“I don’t know what He’s saying. I fear I crave a certain answer too greatly in order to hear Him at all, for fear He may say no to my desire.”

“This God of yours, has He ever said no to your desires?”

“Well..... no.”

“This desire that you speak of, is it me?”

“You know it is!” I said with passion, as I turned to face the woman.

She was smiling with her head tilted to the side as she regarded me as if I was a curious puzzle to be taken apart. The smile, just plain everything about her was perfect. I turned back to the window feeling sweat pop out of every pore on my body.

“Does your God look down upon the

physical union between men and women?”

Bringing a shaking hand to my forehead I wiped at the sweat there, as my fireside conversation with Kuri years before came vividly to mind, “No, He created it.”

“Then why are you resisting your desire for me?” came the response that echoed now of real humor. The woman was deliberately tormenting me!

Just then there was a scream beyond the window in the city below and I hurried over to it dragging her along after me. It sounded like the wail of a mother expressing the ultimate grief over a lost one.

I looked down towards the city, but night had fallen and there was little to be seen. I heard the cries of a sobbing child

and then utter and complete silence as if someone had just dropped a veil over the whole city.

That moment of silence was split apart by a noise of such utterly dark origin that it sounded as if it was a combination of enraged bull and thunder all rolled into one. The cry chilled me to the bone and with its sounding on the midnight air came a gasp from Susori who rushed up and pressed against my back as if seeking shelter from a storm.

I half turned and pulled her around into my arms and hers immediately latched around my middle tightly. There was another cry of rage out in the night and I thought Susori was going to fall apart from fear in my arms.

I already knew Susori to be a brave woman, but the fear of whatever monster

lurked on the streets below had completely unhinged her. I held her face to me and rubbed at her back and eventually she stopped shaking.

I watched her face by moonlight as she tipped it back to look at me. She stared at me deeply for a long moment. I'd never felt so intensely studied by another person, other than Kuri.

She broke the silence by asking slowly, "Can your God do anything against such evil?"

"Yes!" I said unequivocally and with my answer I felt the tension drain out of her, until it was just her and me again.

With bodies pressed up together in a way that seemed designed to fit naturally, it wasn't any great surprise that I found myself completing the picture by lowering my head until my

lips were kissing hers. The kiss went on and on and I made a decision. A binding one.

The events of this night were crazy. The situation of this city and of this land was deplorable, but right now all my desire was engaged by this woman in a way that I had never experienced before.

No words were said as she pulled away from me and led me to the bed. I was surprised to see a light flare up as she lit several candles which quickly illuminated the room in a soft glow.

“Why did you do that?” I asked softly.

She smiled, as she turned back to me and started to take off what little clothing she did wear. “I thought you might like to see.”

“Susori I..... you’re beautiful!”

Still smiling she said, “I know.” She

began to pull in the chain that linked us together and I went willingly.

Chapter Thirteen

Ask and Receive

I watched as the sun steadily made its way up into the morning sky. It was a beautiful sunrise, but not half as beautiful as her. My gaze left the window to gaze into the face of my sleeping lover.

She was much more than that. Much more. Having her along from now on would change a lot of things, but things had needed to change. I didn't regret last night or this day that was beginning, instead I was thanking El Elyon

profusely for both.

El Elyon had brought me to this place and I had received far more than I could've ever expected. A treasure without equal.

Susori began to stir and with interest I watched as her eyes opened hesitantly for the first time and then as she came to an abrupt awareness. Her head lifted as she looked me in the face. I think we both smiled at each other at the same moment.

We barely knew each other's names and yet we were a pair. I couldn't refrain from anything when it came to her and seeing the same reflected in her eyes I kissed her with all the passion that I felt for her even as she likewise did to me. Beyond the touch of our lips there was a link already between us that no

words could define. All my hesitations of the night before were gone, now replaced with a reality I scarcely believed was possible.

We drew back from the kiss, but our eyes remained locked with each other.

“What are you thinking master?” she asked, with a curious quirk to her one eyebrow.

“Benaiah,” I said in return, by way of an answer.

Her eyes sparkled as she rephrased her question, “Benaiah, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that I want to spend forever in this room with you.”

Her smile grew richer and she said, “I agree, but now is all we have.”

My finger caressed her cheek, “You’re a philosopher.”

She smiled and pressed her face against my hand, “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Our lips had but joined passionately again when there was a knock at the door. Startled, I jumped upright and Susori slid off to the side with a sigh of regret. I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and just looked at her laying there, bare except for the encircling band of metal.

Modesty was not of the same importance in this culture for sure and yet she had not lied to me of her innocence. I took the cover of the bed and tossed it over her as the door opened.

It was Artaxis again. He smiled genially at me and then at Susori before saying, “Still here I see.”

I didn't say anything. He tossed something at me and I caught it out of the air. It was the key to the manacles.

There seemed to be a greater symbolism at play here than just simply handing me a key to get out of a temporary restraint. I glanced up to him and he confirmed my thought by saying, "You are free to go. Most of your men were not injured severely and they are now ready to travel. Those still yet unable to travel I will send to Philanthia at a later date when they are ready."

I shook my head and glanced from him to Susori and said, "None of this makes any sense! What are you two up to?"

Artaxis's cheery demeanor completely left as he said, "I am ensuring that the future of my beloved sister is a good one. You are a man that I have studied

from afar for some time. I had a dream that showed you and my sister together as a couple and now I have done my part to fulfill that dream. Now, get my sister out of here to some place where she will be safe! That is all I ask of you. Other than that, I pray that you make her happy all the days of her life.”

Artaxis backed away towards the door and glancing at Susori he winked and said, “I don’t think the others will be ready to leave for at least another hour or so.” With that said, he clanged the door shut.

“I’ve been set up!” I exclaimed into the silence of the room.

Susori’s fingers squeezed ovetop my shoulders consolingly as her face appeared off to the side of my shoulder, “You’re not mad are you?”

I glanced at her. I should be mad, but one look at her intriguing brown eyes and how could anyone be mad.

“Why have you gone along with all this? You must be a princess or at least something close to it!”

Susori shrugged in indication that I had scored right on my guess of her being a princess but all she said was, “I trust my brother. He said I was happy in his dream. That said, I wasn’t entirely sure about it, but last night at the banquet..... the way you looked at me..... it was not a hard decision to become yours. I have no regrets.”

I looked forward again and said, “Neither do I.”

A slim brown arm reached down over my shoulder, “Could I please have the key?”

I caught the outreaching arm. Our eyes met and again there was that sense of deep pairing that went beyond the fleshly side of mutual attraction which we were both reveling in right now.

“I’ll let you go in an hour or so.”

Her easy smile was back and she giggled softly, as I pushed her to fall back on the bed. My life had radically changed for the better. I wasn’t so lonely now. Sure, I had many friends, some of which were very close, but none could brighten my world the way just one of this woman’s smiles could.

I leaned forward to pat the shoulder of the mount I rode. The term mount was by far too humble of a word to describe the

stallion beneath me, a gift from Susori's brother. Susori pulled her mount up alongside of me to look at me curiously before asking, "Why have you stopped? The border is just ahead." She pointed ahead of us.

"Uh huh," I said laconically, in agreement with her. My gaze never left her and she soon grew uncomfortable under it.

"What?" Susori asked hesitantly.

"What's going on in Crona, Susori? I want explanations. Why this war? Why does your brother have his sister masquerading as a harem dancer? Last, but not least, why have I seen hardly any children running free among your people?"

Susori had long since looked down at where her hands twisted the leather

cords of her reins into kinks. She shook her head negatively, but I wasn't going to take no for an answer. My hand closed over her fidgeting ones and gripping firmly I forestalled any further movement. She wouldn't look at me.

“I made a choice five days ago. A choice to have you as my bride and companion for the rest of my life. Now, you have a choice before you. You either keep your brother's allegiance or.....” I paused as her teary eyes lifted, “or you start out your new life with me by respectfully not holding back any secrets from me. What's it going to be Susori?”

She gazed at me for a moment and then looked away to the borderlands before us. Subconsciously her one hand slipped free of mine and rose to her

waist. The band of iron which had encircled her was long gone, but I knew what she felt with the placement of her hand. A bond. She wasn't among her people anymore, instead she was here with me.

Her eyes came back to me and I saw acceptance of my headship over her reflected in the depths of her amazing eyes. "That monster that I heard the first night we were together.....it has something to do with the reason the children are hid?"

She nodded, "We call them Gargons. They are a twisted creation of complete evil. They are half giant and half bull."

"What are they doing to the children?"

Her lips quivered and a tear fell as she brokenly said, "Some have been sacrificed to the fallen Malachim we

once called gods and eaten, but.....
but we hope that many are yet still alive.
At least that is what we have been told.”

“Alive for as long as your kingdom makes war on the Kingdom of Philanthia,” I said knowingly, on a hunch, and she nodded.

“What has been done to get the children back?”

She shrugged, despondently throwing her arms wide in a gesture of hopelessness, “Everything! The more that we have resisted the higher the cost has been. We’ve had no choice but to do the bidding of these monsters. My people.....without children.....are finished and yet we dare not risk their lives by stopping this war! But this coming war will kill all of us and thus the future is hopeless. What would you

do if faced with such a loss?" she asked passionately, as she looked at me imploringly before gazing at the 15 recruits recovered enough to sit on a horse and make the journey back to Philanthia.

To a man they stared at her in wide-eyed wonder at what she was revealing. For them it had been easy to hate her nation for its unprovoked attacks, but now another side of the story had been unveiled and they were left without an answer as to what to think. Susori's head sank down and her body heaved on a sob as waves of clamped down emotions swept through her.

I nudged my stallion closer to her horse and pulled her to me with one arm and she sank against my shoulder, still crying. Softly she said, "We are a people

without hope. We have lost all our honor to do the bidding of demons.”

“These demons, Gargons, I believe you called them?”

She nodded and I asked, “Why don’t you just kill them?”

“We’ve tried!” she said in frustration as she pulled away from me.

I captured her hand before she could move her horse away, “I need to know. How have you tried to defeat these Gargons?”

She looked at me, but I could see that I wasn’t what she saw at the moment, “Once we had one cornered in an alleyway and we had the forces to overwhelm even its formidable strength, but it just disappeared. They come and they go as they wish. One moment you see them and then they’re gone and

another child is missing. They've seized well over half the children of the nobility and many commoner children as well. My brother's sons and daughters are all gone. One daughter was left at the gateway of the Palace. She'd been gored through by one of them and then trampled to the point of not being recognizable!"

I stared at her out of a keen sense of empathy for the extreme emotions playing across this stranger, turned lover, turned companion for life that I was blessed to have. Nothing I could say was going to make her feel any better so I said nothing at all.

I gestured to one of the recruits to come up and help Susori dismount. That done, I rode off alone toward a promontory point after having given the order for the others to wait.

Susori wiped at her eyes and asked the recruit near her, "What is he doing?"

The recruit looked from his retreating commander to the otherworldly beautiful woman before him. The sight of her did strange things to confuse his tongue in saying the simplest of things, "He's.....ah..... praying. He always prays when..... when it's bad." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "And when things go well too. He prays a lot."

Susori blinked several times in apparent confusion, "You have seen his gods answer him?"

"Oh, just one God ma'am. His name

is El Elyon and I'm convinced it works!"

Susori looked puzzled by the last statement and the recruit added hurriedly, "The praying. I'm convinced the praying works. A lot of us picked training under him not only because he's the best, but because, well, the Creator just seems to really like him and more people survive under his leadership than other recruitment commanders."

Susori looked from the recruit to the back of the man she now belonged to. In many ways Benaiah was still a mystery to her. An increasingly wonderful mystery. A mystery that she wanted to unravel and better understand.

He was a man of prayer and strong

faith, but what else was he?

Could he also be the deliverer of her people? Somehow just looking at him gave her a burst of hope that perhaps the impossible could be achieved. She wanted to be with him to hear what he was praying to his God, but she sensed that he wanted to be alone so she stayed where she was.

I stared out over the promontory down to the rocky valley below. I felt like I'd arrived at the invisible pathway of divine direction.

I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to go cut up monsters, but there were problems to that simplistic approach.

“Problems indeed,” came a voice off

to the side of me.

It was Urtholan. I glanced over to where the group waited and Urtholan answered my question before I could speak it, “Only you can see me at present.”

Nodding, I turned to stare back over the promontory. “How do I fix this?” I asked slowly.

Urtholan responded with, “Your problem is multidimensional.”

“How so?”

“The Gargons have traits of my kind that fell from Grace. They have abilities, although limited, to move between the lower dimensions and this is how they avoid detection and capture. Gargons as a whole are rather stupid, but when motivated and controlled by one of the fallen ones they can be quite

formidable.”

“What do I have to do to keep them from escaping by entering into another dimension? Can I win a fight one-on-one with one of them?”

Urtholan smiled, “Those are two questions best prayed about, I think. The Father is always listening. You should pray to him as nothing is impossible for the Creator of everything to accomplish.”

Urtholan began to walk and I knew he was about to disappear, “Why Urtholan?”

Urtholan stopped.

“Why would the Creator allow members of your kind to do such evil as the creation of things such as the lion men and these Gargons?”

“We all have choices Benaiah. Some

choose poorly. Very poorly. Yet for your kind there is special favor shown.”

“How so?” I asked, puzzled.

“Man was made in the image of El Elyon. Your potential is endless and yet how few of you there are who choose to live up to your potential. Do not be so quick to judge the faults of others Benaiah. It is a matter better left in the hands of El Elyon.” Urtholan disappeared then and I was alone with my thoughts.

I hadn't been ready, without Urtholan's help, on the streets of the city against the powers of darkness. What made me think that I was ready to go against them now?

I looked off in the distance towards the group as I felt the weight of Susori's gaze on me. At a lack of a better way of

expressing my extreme lack of knowledge and experience I asked, “El Elyon help me.”

That didn't seem like enough, but I didn't know what to ask specifically and yet El Elyon must already know what I needed. El Elyon did know.

So then what was left for me to do?

The answer seemed unbelievably simple. Children needed to be saved and while I was but one man against superior forces, if I was in El Elyon's will it didn't matter. If I wasn't in El Elyon's will then I would die at the hands of these Gargons.

I really didn't want to die now. In fact, since meeting Susori I'd never been looking forward to continued life more than I was now.

It was very tempting to just take my

wife and escape the predicament of this situation and let the people of Crona cope with their own mess, but I very much felt that such an action would be against the will of El Elyon. Such an action would be against the loving nature that El Elyon had instilled in my heart.

The only way from here was to go forward. Forward meant to do battle and not retreat, which would be akin to heading back to Philanthia right now.

Philanthia was out. So then, that left these child snatching monsters to deal with.

“El Elyon, if it is Your will for me to save these children and stop this war before it truly begins, then I pray that You would help me to find these monsters and destroy them.”

No answer came, but even in the

absence of confirmation of my expected actions I knew what I wasn't going to do. I wasn't leaving this place until I did have an answer as to how to overcome the enemy. To leave now would be to go to war without the weapons I needed to ensure victory.

I still sat on the boulder staring out into the darkness. I could hear the dim sound of the voices of those gathered about the fire in the distance.

By now, they all must surely think I was insane. I hadn't left the spot of my earlier prayer for many hours now.

At some point one of the recruits had come and gotten my horse. About an hour ago they had made a small fire.

Before darkness had descended though, I had noticed the deployment of several night guards. That was good. At least one of them was learning to take initiative.

Hopefully they didn't lose all respect for me sitting out here alone in the dark, an action that was endangering all of us as we still were in enemy territory.

I was mildly shocked that Susori had not come to visit me yet. Susori, it was a strange and yet beautiful name. Memories of the last several days flooded through me and I was gripped by the raw need to leave this self-imposed spot of isolation and go and find her in the dark and make love with her again.

Groaning I dug my hands into my eyes and stayed where I was.

An hour went by and then another and

another. It was a fight to stay awake. I kept looking off to the East in hopes of seeing the first hint of dawn, but so far all was still blackness.

I felt his presence then, all of a sudden. I lunged forward at where I thought he was and I was rewarded with the feel of cloth and a bodily form. We both hit the ground.

“Let go!” Urtholan said sharply.

“Not until you tell me what I need to know!” I grunted back, as I exerted all my force against the cloak covered Malachim.

“You know I could kill you, right?” Urtholan asked.

“Aren’t you my guardian? Or was that a lie?” I stormed back in reply.

The cloaked individual I wrestled with on the ground freed an elbow and

smashed it viciously back into my side. Grunting with the pain of the blow I changed my hold and body slammed Urtholan into a stone slab. It seemed to have no effect on him.

This was crazy, to be wrestling with one of El Elyon's Malachim! But Kuri had once told me a story of such an occurrence happening so I knew it was possible to achieve a favorable result out of this night.

Urtholan's head smashed back into me and I saw stars in the darkness. I almost let go, but one fist remained gripped fast in Urtholan's cloak. It was all I could do to manage to hold on as punches and kicks of a much greater power than my own rained down upon me with deadening impact.

I managed to jerk him forward against

me with my grasp on his cloak and I punched him as hard as I could. Having said that, it was hard to manage any kind of an attack as every one of my ribs felt broken.

He broke off from hitting me and my incoming swing met with empty air before then slamming into a rock. I felt the bones in my hand snap and I cried out in agony. I fell backward and the desire to let go and nurse my busted up hand was a palpable emotion to be warred against.

I was drug forward across the ground for a distance of several feet, the pain of which was excruciating, as I jostled over the rough terrain of rocks beneath me. I was on the verge of blacking out when Urtholan finally stopped dragging me.

“Let go Benaiah.”

“No,” I gritted out into the dust.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“But I choose not to!”

There was silence for a moment.

“What is it that you want to know?”

“How do I defeat the Gargons?”

“I don’t think that is a question that needs asked.”

My mind fuzzy with pain I asked in confusion, “What?”

“The question, Benaiah, is what won’t be held back from you now?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Things are different now, because of your insistence on receiving the promises of El Elyon. To those who ask of El Elyon, even shall they receive their

desire of Him.”

“Receive what?”

There was no answer and suddenly I gripped hold of nothing. I lay there in the dirt, completely spent, and for a moment I was at a loss as to what, if anything, I had achieved out of this fight.

My hand hurt and gingerly I felt at it. It wasn't broken!

That was strange as I could've sworn that it had been. Wheezing slightly I got up to my knees and felt at my ribs. Not broken. Not possible and yet reality.

I'd wrestled with a Malachim. I shouldn't be alive, yet I was. Not only alive but mended of my injuries. I flexed the fingers of my hand that had been broken, but now didn't even hurt. With every passing moment I felt better and better.

Soft fingers were suddenly feeling at my face as Susori's voice rang out with concern, "Who was that? How are you even alive?"

There was enough grey light of early dawn to see by now and I stared into Susori's face etched tight with concern. "You saw the fight?"

"Yes, I've been in the rocks watching for hours!" she said in a shaken tone and then sounding even more shaken she said, "Your beard..... it has white hair in it!"

I hadn't really heard what she'd just said as my mind was too consumed with what she'd said at first. "Hours?" I asked uncertainly. To me the fight had only lasted but a few minutes.

"Yes! You've been fighting with an invisible being for hours and now your

beard has white hair in it! You should be dead and you're not! This isn't possible! None of what I've seen is possible! How did you hold on to that which can't be seen? I.....I don't understand! I'm scared by this! It's impossible!"

Smiling I cupped her face with both of my hands, "Susori, with El Elyon all things are possible. Even saving the children and rescuing your kingdom from destruction. El Elyon cares. He doesn't just care about Kingdomer's, but He has a heart for the lost. I tell you now that it was no accident that I was brought to your brother's palace just as it's no accident that I'm here with you now, the other half of my soul. You have but to see and you too will believe, even as I do, in El Elyon."

Tears touched my hands in abandon as

she shook her head and she said, “I still don’t understand!”

In a tone of comfort I said, “It’s all right, you will, I promise. Do you believe me?”

Slowly her head nodded yes in the enclosure of my hands. My desires of earlier, coupled with the joy of still being alive, returned with full force and I found myself kissing her with all the passion that I felt for her. She responded to my kiss with equal abandon, which only drove our shared passion for each other higher.

Pulling back and huffing for breath I said, “Susori.....I.....”

“I want the same!” she breathed out as her lips were back on mine cutting off any need for further words. Her hands gripped hold of my shoulders and she

pushed.

“Ouch!” I said, clutching at my head that had just bounced off a rock.

“Sorry! I’ll make it up to you, I promise,” Susori said breathlessly, as she leaned down over me to kiss me again.

I couldn’t help it, I started laughing.

In the early light of dawn I caught both the indignation and humor portrayed across her face above me, “What is it that you find so funny, master?”

“Not much actually,” I said, still chuckling.

“Why the laughter then?”

“I’m happy. It’s sort of a new experience for me.”

A look came into her eyes then that both captivated me and stole my breath at the same time. Smiling slowly, even

as a tear made its way down her cheek she said, “I will make it my job in life to see that this joy you have never lessens. Benaiah I..... I’m just so glad you’re alive!”

“Me too!” I said, before pulling her face down to mine.

Chapter Fourteen

Divine Empowerment

As we rode along I debated endlessly with myself over what I should name my stallion. I mumbled countless ideas to myself, but to no avail.

“Should I be concerned that my husband talks to himself? Susori asked with a playful tone to her voice.

I explained my predicament and she laughed out softly, “But he already has a

name.”

“He does! Well, what is it?”

“Phalon.”

“Phalon. What does it mean?”

“First to the fight and the last to leave.”

“Really!” I exclaimed.

She nodded, but there was a slight tilt to the side of her mouth that hinted at mirth. I was being had again!

“That’s not what it means! Out with it. Be truthful now!”

She smiled and shrugged, “It sounded good.”

I gave her a stern look and she rolled her eyes and said, “Phalon means, ‘point of the spear.’”

Now that, I had to admit, was quite anti-climatic.

“Depending on the interpretation it

can also mean, ‘the point of no return.’”

I nodded. That fit better. In a way that described the current situation. Just up ahead of us lay the border of the northernmost nation of Ayenathurim, the Kingdom of Martz.

Little was known of it, even by Susori. It was said to be sparsely populated with virtually no regimented order to it. It was also where the headwaters of the Gargon River were located. The little that the Cronians had been able to discern as to where the monsters hid the children was that they went north, far north. The name of the river we headed for now suggested the area was known for its share of monsters in the earlier days of antiquity. It wasn't much of a lead, but it was something.

As we rode through the sparse high country of Martz, I wished fervently that Susori was not along on this mission. Things might not end well and if we met with significant force our chances were slim at best. It wasn't to be helped though.

Twenty miles into the Kingdom of Martz, I called the order to make camp on a rocky promontory that looked like it could be defended. There would be no fire tonight.

A night without a fire at this altitude was not an easy thing to suffer through. As hard as I tried to produce extra heat and shelter from the chill wind that blew across these high plateaus at night, I couldn't manage to get Susori warm

enough to stop shaking.

My arms already wrapped tightly around her, I whispered into her ear, "I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," she chattered back to me.

"Don't lie."

"I can handle it," she insisted.

"I know you can, but I'm still sorry."

She pressed her cold nose into my forearm and I heard her mumble out, "How I have been blessed to have been given to a man that worries so much about my comfort. You are so unlike the men of my people, even my brother. To them, women are nothing but a pleasurable diversion and a source of children and yet I sense respect for me in every action of yours. How is it that you are so different?"

“I had a good teacher,” I said simply.

I tried to hold her a little closer if possible, but she was as close as she could get. She was wrapped up in my blanket, but it was still obvious to me what a delight of feminine craftsmanship she was. “I wish.....”

She turned her head to me slightly, “You wish what?”

“I wish it was warmer and that there was nothing between us and nowhere to go tomorrow.”

I felt her smile against my arm and say, “There will be other days for that, my love.”

I hoped so. I wasn't really sure what would happen tomorrow. I held her a little closer.

The rocks rose up impressively to either side. Soon we wouldn't be able to take the horses any further and we would have to go on by foot.

I knew we were at the right place as I'd never seen so many bones before. The ground was literally covered with them. It was sickening to hear the steady crunch of bones, now brittle with age and weakened by the elements, being pulverized under the hooves of our horses.

Darkness had been allowed to rein in this forgotten corner of the world for far too long!

The deeper we went into the canyon the more it seemed as if we were immersing ourselves in a vat of black dye as the spirit of the place was so

oppressive. I dismounted and was followed by the others.

The recruits were all visibly shaken by our surroundings. Who wouldn't be?

They were getting quite the training exercise this time out. So was I for that matter.

I looked from the group to the steep gorge before us that got steadily narrower. The Gargons knew we were here. I could just sense it. I could sense a lot more things than I used to.

Turning to the group I asked them directly, "Which of you know that, if you were to die right now, El Elyon would allow your spirit to enter Shamayim?"

Slowly at first, but then quickening with speed, five of the group of 15 men raised their hands.

I nodded, appreciating the honesty of

all of them. “Okay, you five over here,” I said, motioning off to my right.

The five moved to my right as assigned by me and I addressed all of them again by asking, “Now which of all of you thinks we have a chance of overcoming the enemy today? Those of you who feel that’s possible I want you to move into a group over here on my left.”

I waited patiently, but none of the young men moved. I nodded after a moment and said, “There is both a unifying factor apparent in all of you and a division. You all believe defeat is certain and yet only five of you believe you’re destined for life after this brief existence we share is over. There’s a big problem here. What do you think it is?”

One man in the larger group asked by

way of answering, “That we’re not all ready to die?”

“That is a problem, but not the main one. Anyone else?”

Silence dragged out for a moment, then one of the scouts I had harangued harshly for his ineptitude on the job spoke up hesitantly, “That we’re not confident that El Elyon’s power is greater than the evil before us.”

“That’s it! That’s the problem. While continued life isn’t guaranteed to any of us, eternity is guaranteed to those of us who have chosen to believe as the Holy Scrolls have taught, but all that aside, what happens now is how we are defined in our mortal existences on this planet. None of us possesses any special ability to overcome forces greater than our own strength. Five of you are ready

to die, but none of you are ready to live in a spirit of power and the freedom that comes with it! No one wants to die and yet the only faith you are all exhibiting is that you will die if we take one step further. We are deep in enemy territory far darker than I believe any of us have ever experienced. Who here wants to approach this situation outside of a spirit of fear?”

Instantly all of them raised their hands plus one. My gaze shifted to Susori who had timidly lifted her hand as well.

“All right, come here everyone.”

They all drew close to me. I stooped down and picked up a rock and asked, “Who made this?”

“El Elyon,” several of them said.

I nodded. Then I drew my sword free and held it up to the sky and asked, “The

metals used to forge this blade, who put them in the hills and deep places of Ayenathurim to be found and made thus into this creation of man?”

“El Elyon!” they all responded confidently.

I nodded, “I could go on and on and say that about everything around us and I’d get the same answer wouldn’t I?”

They all nodded affirmatively.

“Now, can one of you tell me of the existence of something that El Elyon did not create?”

With surprise on their faces they, to a man, looked toward the forbidding gorge ahead of us.

“That’s right. The Creator didn’t make the Gargons did He?”

“No sir!” the recruits responded firmly.

“So then, who do you believe is the stronger force to be reckoned with in this gorge right now, monsters without hope of a resurrection or living spirits such as ours who find our right and position of authority in the Master who formed and spoke into existence all that we see around us?” I had them now and I pressed forward all the way, “In the Holy Scrolls it was us humans, created in the image of El Elyon, that were given the right of dominion over this world! Those monsters laying in wait over there are usurpers of our promise! They have no right to be here! They gain power only through fear and we lose authority through our lack of knowledge of what El Elyon crafted within us from the beginning! Who here wants to start over?”

They all pressed closer as I knelt down. They followed suit and I did what I had become increasingly known for, I prayed. “El Elyon, I pray that you would make us men and this woman grounded in the authority that you gifted to our kind in the beginning of this world. You have not been overwhelmed. You have not been surpassed, but You have been largely forgotten along with Your most excellent ways. I pray that would change in the hearts of all of us gathered here. Craft in us the Spirit of power You promised was ours for the asking when You gave Your words to us, recorded down in the Holy Scrolls, by which You told us that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that has come out of Your mouth! Take far from us the self-imposed ignorance of our

generations of neglectful thoughts and open in each of us a will to be in Your will alone and no other. Make us conform to Your words and give us the gifts that You've held in store for those who would simply ask for them. Out of a contrite and humble heart we kneel here, dependent on You and You alone to do what we could never do on our own, for in You all things are possible! We give You the glory, the honor, and all the praise for the victory we are about to claim through the power of Your Name, El Elyon! Amen.”

“Amen!” echoed out strongly from all those gathered.

I stood up and pointed with my sword up the gorge as the Spirit of El Elyon, that I so willingly gave myself over to, swelled within me the ability to do far

greater than I had ever done before, “To victory!”

“To victory!” echoed out behind me.

I spent no more time on them, but began to run up the gorge. The very atmosphere of this place had changed within a microcosm of time. Where before there was darkness, now there was the light that we introduced to it by the unfettered desire of our hearts to overcome that which is evil.

The very rocks that towered above us seemed to snap and crack with the sound of the joy of seeing creation in order once more. A cavernous tunnel was suddenly before us across the river and so were the monsters.

I ran into the raging river and smacked it hard with my sword, “Whom do you serve? The destroyers of appointed

order or we who walk in the Divinely appointed dominion of this world?”

With a throaty roar the river peeled back and mounted up into a wall across the length of the gorge until it overflowed overtop of us and formed a watery tunnel that glistened brightly with the refracted rays of the sun that had come out of hiding on this cloudy day.

I strode across the dry riverbed toward the line of monsters who spoke among themselves in their dark tongue. Anxiety was deeply etched upon their beastly features as they watched us come closer.

“Your existence is an abomination! Your actions worthy of the worst of Sheol! Your future is no more! We’ve come for that which was stolen in the night and by the might of El Elyon we

claim victory as is ours by right! Cut them down now!”

Like the dumb beasts of twisted perversion that they were, they stood in stupefaction as they were unable to access their ability to flee through dimensional time and thus they were left to face our wrath, which was far greater than any mortal could manifest on its own. It was El Elyon moving through us that drove us to leap forward and hack down the monsters whose mere image had stopped the hearts of other men in fear.

In reality the unredeemable spirits they possessed were nothing short of cowards that had boasted themselves into loftiness, because of genetic leftover abilities gifted to them from their fallen fathers. They were no match

for us and their anguished bullish roars sounded loud as we cut off their existence in the lands of the living.

I pressed on into the dark cavern that's stench echoed loudly of the uncleanness of its occupants. I called out while dragging my blade down the wall of rock, "Rocks, were you formed by the Master of all glory to house darkness? No! So why then the sheltering of darkness when the light of the Almighty pierces to the innermost depths of this world and sees all?"

As if on command the rocks overhead split apart, but not a rock fell as light pierced down from above and lit the way before us. The tunnel ended as it opened up into a great cavern, the top of which peeled away with a rumble of stone.

The entire one side of the cavern was formed into a stockade made out of the bones of past victims of monstrous appetites. At the sight of me at the opening of the cavern and of the piercing daylight overhead I watched those Gargons not yet slain by me and my companions head as one for the stockade and I knew that they intended to kill as many of the children as possible.

In the hierarchy of evil, if victory can't be obtained then the order of the day is to attain as much destruction as possible. Seething rage overtook me and I reached out with the hand with which I had clung onto Urtholan and said, "Hold where you are in the name of El Elyon and proceed no further!"

As one the Gargons fell to their knees and grabbed at their bullish throats in

response for the severe need of air. Wheezed roars of fright erupted from their clamped throats, as I felt the Spirit of Ruach, that was heavy upon me, clamp off the ability of these monsters to perform any more evil than they had already done.

The Gargons fell to their faces dead and the bones holding the children back dissolved into nothing. Susori ran past me, screaming out in her native tongue, and the children came to her as if she was a mother to them all.

She grabbed up the littlest of them as the older children helped to carry the other young children. They streamed out around me in the direction of freedom, each of them seeking to outdistance the other in their hurry to exodus the cave.

The last child ran past me and the

cavern before me, filled with the fallen forms of strangled monsters, erupted in fire as the floor cracked up and vomited forth magma into the room. I made my way after the children and as I walked rocks fell and the tunnel was filled.

Reaching the mouth of the tunnel I proceeded into the water tunnel, surrounded by the men who had overcome themselves and become seasoned warriors of righteousness. Not one of them had fallen and not one of them would ever be the same again.

We all now knew, if we had not before, that there was a God in Shamayim, who yet cared for the predicaments of those who entrusted their lives into His safekeeping. No words were said as we cleared the other bank of the river. We turned and watched

the river crash down on itself and engulf the riverbed once more with its turbulence.

I raised my sword, “To El Elyon be the glory!”

The others raised their swords and echoed the same. Now, as life is full of obstacles and challenges, I now turned to the task of dealing with several hundred children.

Susori stood surrounded by a solid mass of them. As I approached her a little girl stepped forward and lifted her arms to me and I picked her up. She pointed upwards into the air and said something I couldn't make out.

I turned to Susori whose face was awash with tears. Susori spoke, “She wants to know if the God you serve would love her too?”

I turned back to the little girl and nodded emphatically and said, “The promise of the new covenant is to all.”

I knew she didn't understand my words, but her face split wide in a grin, as she read the emotion of my answer and she hugged me with all the strength that she had, as seemingly all the days of her harsh captivity melted away as if they had never been.

As we came out of the gorge and back onto the plain I was greeted with an unseasonably warm wind. I started the journey to the south that would return these children home. I prayed this day would be the changing point for the nation of Crona, to stop their fallen ways and instead usher in an age of grace.

Whether they chose to change or not, I thanked El Elyon for the lives of these

children and the new steps of the faith I had taken in my life. Susori, holding a child in one arm, took my freehand with hers and looking to her I saw a joy that made her only more beautiful than before.

“I understand now. I worship Him too.”

Feeling a tear course down my cheek I said, “I’m glad!” And together, hand in hand, we walked south with the innocence of an entire nation following behind.

Chapter Fifteen

Kings and Fools

Three weeks later

The rises of Philanthia's towers were coming more and more into view. At my back was a full delegation of Crona's highest officials. The news of what had happened in Crona had already traveled far and wide.

Our arrival at the city was expected and I hoped it would be a civil one. Crona had come to beg peace and the cessation of a war they had begun. They

had not come empty-handed either. Crona had emptied their considerable treasuries of wealth in order to, in part, repay the damages caused and the lives lost.

I hoped it went well and that peace was restored. For myself, I was content in the moment.

I glanced to the side and caught Susori already watching me. She smiled infectiously and I couldn't help but return her smile. She was such a joy.

She filled my life with a security of emotion the likes of which I had never experienced. It was as if I had gone through life up till now only half a man, only to find my completion in her. I was still in shock by it all.

Looking forward toward the city once more, I inwardly acknowledged all over

again how my life was different. Different! I'd forgotten something in all this and an expression of expectant dread fell over my face.

“What is it my husband?” Susori asked, reaching out in concern to touch my arm.

I glanced at her and winced. I took in her exotic sensual appeal and my imagination ran wild with the confrontation that was likely already brewing ahead. I ran my hand through my hair in sudden anxiety.

“What is it Benaiah?” Susori asked softly, as her look of question began to turn to one of alarm.

“Um..... things could get heated soon. You see, over the past several years I've become a very good friend of the King, and well.....”

“Well what?” Susori asked uncertainly.

“The King has a daughter. There was much talk of me taking her for my wife. I never agreed to anything, but in the minds of some I fear they saw it as an already accomplished thing. I don’t think the King will mind too much, but his daughter has been the source of most of the talk. She’s not going to like what’s happened between you and me. There are those in the court who will feel our union is an insult to the Princess. It could cause trouble.”

“I do not understand why?” Susori said.

I shrugged, “Even so, I believe it will. Once this peace delegation is over I think my time in Philanthia will also be over.”

Susori didn't say anything for a while, but I sensed there were questions she wanted to ask. Finally she gave voice to them, "You would leave your high position in the court, as friend of the King, for me?"

"Absolutely!" I said unequivocally.

She shook her head, "Surely that is not necessary. This whole situation is quite easily resolved."

"How so?" I asked, in complete puzzlement as to what she saw that I didn't.

"Simply take the hand of the Princess in marriage and we shall both serve you as wives."

I about fell off my horse but recovering I said, "I would never do that!"

"Why not?" she asked in genuine

puzzlement.

I stared at her askance, but then I quickly realized I was dealing with a war of cultures. In her culture such things were done. Her brother was living proof of it.

“Things aren’t like that in the seven kingdoms as they are among your people, but that aside I would never take another wife so long as you are alive.”

She glanced down and was quiet for a moment before asking, “I still don’t understand why? Isn’t this Princess pretty? Why would you not want two women of beauty to call you husband and share your bed?”

I sent off a quick prayer for help as to what to say and inspiration came instantly, “Yes, the Princess is very pretty. Yes, it is a temptation to consider

having you both as my wives, but.....”

“But?” she prompted when I’d fallen silent.

“I am not a man ruled by my fleshly desires. I am a man that seeks El Elyon’s way for my life first and the way to do that is found in the Holy Scrolls written down and left for us by the prophets of old. Those scrolls are El Elyon’s words to us. Those words form the context by which I seek to govern my life and in the holy words there is a passage of Scripture that says it is good for a man to be the husband of one wife. It doesn’t forbid what you propose, but it gives me the knowledge of what El Elyon desires of me.”

“I see,” she said in a small voice.

My hand reached out to caress the soft line of her jaw and I raised her head

back up to look at me, “My faith is not the only reason that I would deny the temptation of your proposal in order to have you solely to myself.”

She seemed to be hanging on every word that I spoke and I asked, “Tell me Susori, in your heart would it bring you pleasure to share me with another woman?”

She instantly shook her head.

Staring deeply into her eyes then I said, with all the feeling I felt for her, “Then how, as the caretaker of your heart, do you think I could agree to something that would cause you hurt? You are my wife. My only wife. Understand?”

Tears were wetting the skin of my hand still caressing her face and I watched something fiercely passionate

give birth in the stormy depths of her eyes. Her hands rose to hold mine and she pressed a kiss to the palm of my hand.

She spoke, “You are not a man as other men are! Truly I am blessed of women to be your wife! Benaiah.....”

“Yes?” I softly prompted, as I stared at her in deep appreciation of her in every way.

“I love you and I’m so glad that I don’t have to share you with anyone!” she said passionately, as she leaned toward me and I leaned toward her to complete the path of our lips meeting in the connection of a kiss that went far deeper than just the physical.

Artaxis, who was riding behind the kissing couple, looked to the side at his young son who had been restored to him. The boy looked from the kissing couple to his father, who looked pained at a sudden realized knowledge. They'd both been overhearing the couple's conversation.

“Son.....” Artaxis said, gesturing to Benaiah, “he is a better man to emulate in life than I am. You would do well to follow his example even as I will try to do the same.”

The boy nodded and looked forward to the couple who were still kissing as their horses moved forward in synchronized unison. He grinned when his aunt's husband deepened the kiss by pulling his aunt from her saddle to sit before him on his horse. They were

completely oblivious to everything going on around them.

The boy had never seen his aunt so happy before or a man so in control of another's joy. Perhaps his father was right, but would there be any woman such as his aunt around when he became of age to take a wife? He certainly hoped so.

I cleared the last flight of steps that lead to my quarters. The peace between the two nations at war was firmly cemented and growing more so by the moment as the King's pursers counted the newfound wealth that had entered their storehouses.

Peace was what I had wanted, but I

had the taste of bitterness in my mouth at how it had come about. Any true King of merit should have forgiven another realm of trespasses based on the grounds of how the nation of Crona had been forced to go to war.

The King had not been the man I thought him to be and it was now true, as I had expected, that he had no love for me anymore, because of his daughter's crushed aspirations. It was no fault of mine for her built-up fantasies of make-believe to come to an end, but as I had expected I was the villain in it all.

I paused by a window to stare out at a city still loud with a joyous uproar at the news of peace. All I felt was anger.

People were rejoicing in the Kingdomer Nation of Philanthia, not for the victory over great evil that had been

achieved or the fact that Crona was even now being made over into a nation that was hearkening in droves to the voice of El Elyon and redefining their lives by His statutes. No, they celebrated because peace meant the return of prosperity.

No doubt there were mothers supremely grateful of their sons not going off to war, I understood that. But even as they were justified I also felt that they were of the minority of those glad at the sound of peace ringing out in the streets.

I stared bitterly at the city that I had helped serve and keep safe for four years now. What was worth protecting in a city so filled with selfishness and the pursuit of riches?

Truly, I felt more at home in Crona than I now did in this kingdom. I'd had

good times here, but the people and the King were not what I had built them up to be. I felt sure that if it had not been for the gratuitous gifting of all of Crona's riches that there would have been no peace accord hammered out today in the king's court.

For months the King had said how peace was all he wanted, but that had been a lie as, when faced with a generous peace proposal, he had gone on to demand a heavy tribute to be paid annually by Crona to Philanthia as well as a reduction of profits by Crona merchants on all products traded between the two countries.

I would have objected outright, but Artaxis had held me back and agreed to each item of what I felt to be egregious insults to any nation. How could peace

last into the next generation when the current generation of Crona was going to live without what every nation needed in terms of respect?

It did not bode well for the future. I turned from the window and continued on to my room.

I slipped the bolts on the door shut as I closed it behind me. The room was dark and Susori was no doubt asleep. Leaning back against the door I felt peace for the first time today.

The world and its issues were outside. Inside this room was the warm comfort of my wife and all that the future had to offer us.

In my mind I was already imagining how peaceful it would be to crawl into the bed and nestle up to the warmth of my sleeping wife and be safe from the

tantrums and crazed actions of the world outside, if for only a little while. I stopped my approach to the bed as a light flared and a candle was lit.

In relief I let go of my sword handle at the sight of Susori busy lighting more candles. She came to me then, the temptress that she was, and pressed her forehead against mine as she whispered, “It’s time to leave the affairs of the world behind my love and enjoy what we have instead.”

I reached for her, but she glided away toward the bed. Seeing her and the expectation of what was to follow easily stole all my former hard thoughts of the day away. She smiled and I knew she knew just how successful she had been.

“Come closer my lover and I will show you my love till the dawn’s early

rays after all the candles have burned out.”

Her invitation was as erotica as she was and I wondered how I had been so blessed. I would gladly lose kingdoms for this woman and yet all she asked in return was the love I already felt for her.

It was early. The dawn of a new day had just begun and yet I was no farther along in figuring out what to do with my life now. I stared out over the city before me that still lay asleep. Was it time to go to the Kingdom of Vella and confront the high priestess that Kuri had tasked me with doing? I didn't think so.

I also felt, though, that my time here at the side of the King was over. I'd prayed

repeatedly through the night, but still I was no farther in knowing what to do.

“Why is it that you worry about what to do?” asked the voice of Urtholan into the quietness of the room and some part of me relaxed.

I glanced over at him, “Foolish of me, isn’t it.”

Urtholan shrugged, “What has worrying ever accomplished a man? In regards to yourself, here you are alone, cold, and removed from the comfort of your mate.”

I nodded. He had a very good point.

I glanced back into the darkened interior of the room and sensed that Urtholan was already gone, his message delivered. In short, I needed to trust more and worry less. I turned away from the railing of the balcony, content to let

the uncertainty of the future rest in El Elyon's hands.

“So boss, where are we going?”

I glanced up from cinching my saddle to see the distraught features of Thanuel.

“What worries you Thanuel?”

He shrugged expressively and said, “You don't know?”

I stayed silent and he soon exploded out with, “You have everything here! You are the King's friend! You're a national hero! You could accomplish so much! Why leave?”

“Because it's time to old friend, but you can stay if you want.”

“Hmmphhh! My place is with you! I think you're making a mistake, but I'm

with you to the end. You must know that by now!”

I gripped his forearm tightly, “I do know that. Thanuel, as you put such trust in me to go wherever I lead, then you must also trust in El Elyon’s plans for our lives. Our time here is over and to stay would be against the urging I feel in my spirit to leave and begin what El Elyon has next for me to accomplish.”

Thanuel nodded, “When you put it like that.....how can I say otherwise.”

I slapped him on the back and mounted up onto Phalon. Thanuel mounted up and the group of eight riders, who had first adopted me as their own, followed me out of the courtyard even as Susori rode beside me.

We began to make our way through the city. Glancing back I saw several

Cronian Knights ride up fast to only then keep pace with my friends. I glanced at Susori and smiling she said, “They asked if they could come along. I did not think you would mind.”

Not in any way did I mind. Cronian Knights were some of the best in the world and I was glad to have them.

I headed for the Eastern gate. I’d come from the South, had my share of escapades to the West, and I felt that it was not yet time to head to Vella in the north. That left me the East. I’d leave it to El Elyon to show me otherwise if I was flawed in my choice of direction.

The clip clop of our horses hooves sounded loud as we made our way down the stone paved byways and thoroughfares of Philanthia’s grandest city. I hadn’t expected to see the

reactions that our entourage of riders received from those on the street.

They cleared a way up before us as if we were royalty, but more than that they took the time to regard us with waves and salutes to which I responded in kind. I had not known the news of my departure had traveled so far within the city already.

There seemed to be a mournful quality to the moment of our passage through the city. Beyond being mournful it was loud. I glanced back to see why there was such a loud noise, only to behold at least 40 riders in addition to my own band and the 10 or so Cronian Knights that had joined us.

Had the King sent these riders to detain me from leaving? They were certainly making no move to do so,

seemingly content to be a part of my column of riders.

The men were all Knights of the Kingdom of Philanthia and their horses were laid down with supplies as if packed for a journey. Surely not.....

I glanced to Susori to see her coyly regarding me with a knowing smile, “Why is it husband, that you are so blind to the obvious?”

I glanced from her to the way ahead of us, even as I saw five more Knights drawn up waiting to join into the column as we rode past. I shook my head in consternation as three more Knights trotted out from an adjoining alleyway. Why was this happening? What could I have ever done to warrant this?

Susori’s cool touch on my arm had my troubled gaze going to her in search of

wisdom.

“You are too humble by far, my husband, of your own notoriety and yet that no doubt plays heavily into why so many men wish to be led by you. You are a great man! Don’t think it strange that others have noticed what El Elyon has done in you or that they would not want to be a part of what He will do next through you.”

I nodded, taking her words to heart, but the disbelieving part of me broke free and gave voice to disparagement that didn’t seem to fit into the moment, “Why so many would follow me, a bastard, despite what El Elyon has done through me is still beyond me.”

Immediately I expected to be scolded for my self-deprecating words, but none came for my statement of weakness.

Glancing at her was to see the loving nature of a mate that had only my best interests at heart. I relaxed in the knowledge that I didn't always have to be impressive in terms of confidence and self-respect to still retain her respect for me. She believed in me and it never showed more than it did now and I loved her the more for it.

The sound of our passage through the city had grown to a roar of pounding hooves. Subconsciously I had increased the pace as if to somehow escape from my sudden newfound notoriety. It did no good, as the riders at my back kept pace easily.

Phalon kicked out his feet as if he was at the head of an army of several thousand. Glancing back, I ascertained that the host at my back hadn't obtained

that status yet, but there were several hundred riders now.

My friends wore the hugest of grins and I shook my head as Thanuel shouted out, “It’s great to be leaving sire!”

Turning forward once more in the saddle I heard Susori’s voice speak but now dimly discernible over the roar of hooves, “You may be but a bastard by way of origin, but now El Elyon has made you a king over men.”

I shouted back to her, “What is a king without a kingdom?”

She leaned toward me and said, “What need is there of a physical realm to call your own when the Kingdom of Shamayim is so close at hand?”

I gazed at her in astonishment.

She simply smiled and said, “I’ve been listening to you my love. You speak

often of the Kingdom to come. Thank you for showing me the way there!”

I reached my hand out to hers and gripped hers tightly when it slipped into mine. El Elyon had not only given me an army with which to do His bidding, but also the comforting passion of having my soul equally yoked with a woman whose growing faith rivaled my own.

The Eastern gate creaked open before we reached it and we streamed through it, out from the city into the open plains, as if eager to leave the city behind and embrace what the future held.

Chapter Sixteen

A King's Request

Four years later

The night was ablaze with fire even as arrows rained down all around. Despite the stiffness of the continued aerial defense, I could tell that the city was weakening in the face of our siege against it. Still, I held off from commencing the final assault.

The longer the fire had to work on the enemy's defenses, the weaker their defense against us would be. I was for

anything that conserved the lives of the men under my command.

My hand rose to grasp at my armor encrusted chest. Beneath the armor lay the necklace that Susori had given me. It had been over five months since I had last seen her and my daughter Lavaya. Even now Susori was pregnant and would soon deliver what we both felt sure would be a son.

There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of them or wish that I was with them. Once this city fell then I would be free to go to them.

The last of my obligations to the peoples of Ayenathurim would be complete, when this last city of the giants of Sapan fell. At least that's what I told myself. Without fail, some new crisis would rise to clamor for the

attention of me and my men.

I didn't care. I'd been too long from my family. I was going to them no matter what.

It was time for this city to fall!

I turned from the glittering lights of the city on fire to mount up onto Phalon. Once in the saddle I drew my sword and pointed to the East, "Tell the King of Smirnaz to begin his assault on the city and we will do the same from here!"

The aide to the King saluted and galloped off into the night. Pointing again I yelled out, "Advance the ramps!"

At my command, large elongated ramps began to trundle out toward the battered walls of the city that had been under siege for close to four months. Tonight was the night it would finally fall.

Arrows rained down upon the siege ramps, but to no avail. Even though the arrows had rags soaked in a combination of oil and pitch and flamed brightly, the ramps did not catch fire. I had utilized an old trick to keep wood from burning. Although the smell almost made me regret using it, except for the fact that it was working.

The seven ponderous ramps were well saturated with sewage water. I wasn't quite sure of the science behind it, but the sewage waste was better at repelling flame than water alone.

“Benaiah, you should not go on the first assault into the city. It's too dangerous. An arrow may strike you.”

I smiled and turned to look at Jarken, “Where my men go, so do I.”

Jarken sighed heavily, but remained

silent. I turned forward once more. The ramps were getting close. A Knight stepped close to Phalon and handed my helmet up to me.

I felt an eagerness rise up in me as the action of the coming battle drew close. Win this battle and then I would see my family. My beautiful wife's face came into view, along with that of my daughter, and for a moment they were all I saw in place of the burning city.

“Sir, the ramps are almost there!”

I snapped out of my fantasy and became once again the warrior leader of a host of several thousand men devoted as I was to the cause of justice. I took in the position of the ramps and then I urged Phalon out to skirt along the side of the front ranks of double pressed cavalry behind me.

The burning fires of the city glinted dully off their armor even as a slight drizzle of rain began to fall to our favor. The army was ready.

“Men, you know what is before us. A city full of hybrids! Men and women who have forsaken the bloodlines of their ancestors and combined themselves with the seed of the fallen ones! They are an abomination before El Elyon and if they were allowed to remain they would continue to corrupt the bloodline of our kind! They make war with us out of eternal hatred, but now is the time to give them their eternal reward which they so richly deserve! Not one of them is to be left alive! Are my orders clear?”

“Yes sir!!!” bellowed back the host before me.

“Then to war!!!” I yelled, as I

wheeled Phalon toward the city of giants. The Kingdom of Sapan had ever been at war with the Kingdom of Smirnaz. The giants of Sapan had often feasted on the flesh of the people of my birth and although there were many wars between the two kingdoms, never had the Kingdom of Smirnaz claimed a victory before this last war that had gone on for two years now.

This was the last city of giants left in Sapan. The reclusive giants that called these high peaks home would soon be no more.

I had lost good men in this war and I would lose more tonight, but our cause was righteous and the need for victory was great. The other Kingdomer Nations had never come to the aid of the poorest of the seven kingdoms, but now, after

this fight, the Kingdom of Smirnaz would be at peace on all its borders, while the rest of the world toward the south and west fell apart as the tide of evil rose worldwide. It was that same evil we fought tonight, only we would win where other Kingdomer Nations were failing.

Phalon, in full battle regalia, plunged across the blood soaked ground littered with arrows and the debris of past days' engagements. We drew ever closer to the wall formed of gigantic boulders, precision placed by the offspring of the fallen Malachim.

The city was a formidable fortress, but greater than this last holdout had already fallen prey to the will of the men, still pure in their bloodline, that charged at my back. Size didn't make the man and this war against giants proved

it.

Arrows, from giant sized bows that were twice the length of our own arrows, flew by me to slam into others in the unbroken line of surging heavy cavalry. Where one horse and rider went down another soon took his place.

Swords forward, we broke our fixed line to angle for each of the seven ramps that had just now clamped against the base of the city wall. I dodged Phalon to the left and a giant sized spear plowed into the ground where we had just been. Another passed by my head so close that I felt the whisper touch of its staff against my helmet.

I heard the scream of a horse falling behind me, which no doubt heralded the death of yet one more of my treasured men, and the knowledge of that drove me

on harder. Phalon leapt onto the ramp's back and chewed up the wood slatted slope that still stank of the refuse of men and animals.

Within moments the battered wall top was before us and a giant that topped my own height by four feet stabbed at me with a spear. I ducked under the jab of the spear even as I swung my blade for the giant's head. As Phalon's iron shod hooves let off sparks upon landing on the wide wall top, even so did the giant's helmeted head as it fell with a dull clatter onto the stones.

On foot these giants of Sapan dwarfed us, but on horseback we were their equal for height. With a spike affixed to his head plate, Phalon gored into another giant guard. The giant was driven backward as he let out a roar of pain.

I drew my second sword clear, even as both of the giant's grasping six fingered hands reached to break my horse's neck. Both hands fell to the ground from a forward swishing downstroke of my blades and screeching the giant fell down before us, only to be clambered up and over by Phalon.

More and more of my Knights had streamed up and over the wall and the giants, for all their size, could not match our numbers or the force of our will. Still, the fighting was intense and it was with relief that I saw the main gate to the city burst inward from the force of a siege ram under the command of the King of Smirnaz.

Soon the King's forces were backing us up in the tight melee of conflict, which was to our advantage when facing

giants. The less room a giant had to fight with, the more easily they fell to our blades. In close conflict their giant spears and swords were of no help to them, even as our quicker blades flashed repeatedly into their tough hides and bled them dry.

The walls overrun and all the gates open to our combined forces, our complete annihilation of the city began. Not one of the mixed bloods was permitted to live. Neither were their livestock, which they often copulated with, allowed to live. There would be no spoil taken of this city either. Instead, the fire would cleanse all until only the rocks remained.

My swords dripping with blood, I found my way past the few remaining scenes of open conflict to an area

relatively free of the bodies of the fallen. Shoving my swords into the ground I knelt and as was my custom I prayed. I prayed a prayer of thankfulness to El Elyon that the city had fallen at the loss of far fewer men than I had expected.

There were reports from many of how, on the approach to the city, the enemy's arrow shafts had been blown off course by sudden breezes and how, once inside, the giants had seemed to be sluggish and far from the berserking wrath that legends were full of.

It was a miracle and the knowledge that I could now go to my family eased the built up tension surrounding my heart.

“Sir!”

Glancing up, I saw a high ranking Knight of our allies of Smirnaz. He

looked very shaken and for a moment I thought the battle had taken a turn for the worse in my brief absence. One quick look confirmed otherwise though.

The Knight was speaking, “The King has fallen! He bids you come quickly!”

I got up, leaving my swords in my haste to follow the other man. Near where the gate had been broken in was a tight pressed knot of Knights, which made way before me as I came closer.

The King had indeed fallen. He was transfixed to the ground by a giant spear that gored him completely through his middle. The only way he was still alive was that the shaft of the spear must’ve formed a tight seal to help hold in his blood. Even so he was near death.

I knelt down beside him and his hand reached up to grip the back of my head,

my helmet having fallen off some time previously in the fight for the city.

“We did it! You and I! We are men of a generation that I never expected to live to see this glorious day when our enemies of old stand defeated on all sides!”

I nodded, as I gripped his other hand. There was a fierce joy to behold in his eyes as he gaspingly said, with all the force he could muster, “Smirnaz is free!”

“Yes my King,” I said.

His hand let go of my head to thrust at my chest, “And you are the one who has made it possible! You and the men you lead.”

I shook my head, “I would not have gotten far without a king such as you, willing to risk all in the pursuit of freedom. In truth, the glory is El Elyon’s

because the victory we have achieved together is greater than either of us could have ever brought about by our own devices.”

Blood trickling from his mouth the King spoke, “Well said. Spoken like a King. Truly there has never been a more nobler bastard born to woman than you!”

I smiled, not taking offense in the slightest. The King coughed and I thought he was on the verge of passing out, when he suddenly gripped hold of my chest plate armor hard enough to pull me closer and say, “Truly there is no one better qualified than you to be king in my absence!”

Stunned, I stared at him in shock as he moved his intensely staring eyes from me to those that were around us, “Hail your new King!”

As one the Knights bowed low to the ground, even as I began to object, but the King would have none of it, “Benaiah, you and I both know how late the hour is. Without a strong leader the victories that we have achieved will all be for naught.”

How to tell him?

“Your highness, even as the prophetic hour is late, there will soon be no more kingdoms to be ruled over by Kings. You do me too great an honor in these last days to make me King.”

The King’s hold on me relaxed as he shook his head, “Truly, granting you kingship is not honor enough for your exploits these past four years on behalf of the seven kingdoms. Yes, the times of kingdoms will soon be no more I fear, but there will be a Kingdom! A Kingdom

not built by men, but rather of El Elyon himself. Benaiah, I need you to lead the people into that Kingdom that even now draws nigh. Will you do it?"

At a loss for what else to do I nodded, wanting the King's last few moments in life to be those of peace and not of concern. He smiled and gave me a faraway look as he said, "I can see it now Benaiah. I can see what we've been fighting for!"

I looked into his eyes, hoping to see a glimpse of whatever he was seeing of the realms of Shamayim but it was to no avail. His eyes refocused onto seeing only me and he said with a soft smile, "Thank you for teaching me and showing me the way back to the beliefs of my fathers', long since passed." And with that said he was gone from the land of

the living, the smile still on his face but his crushed body devoid of its soul.

I laid his hand to rest on his chest and rose up to my feet. Everyone was looking at me. I had a nation at my feet, but I was a man without desire for such a responsibility and yet it had always been that way. Ever since my days with Kuri, more and more had been asked of me.

“See to removing the King’s body from the city and the withdrawal of our troops before the fires become too great.”

The Knights leapt to obedience, even as I made my way away from them.

I climbed up the battlements that I had taken an hour or so before and stared out

into the night. I was now the king of an entire nation. What did that really mean?

Why was I so little enthused by the prospect of being a king? Susori would be ecstatic. She was forever about my advancement, but all I really hungered for was a simple life far from the maddening crowd where I could live and raise my children in peace.

Now the responsibility of not only the men who pledged themselves to me, but that of an entire nation, weighed on the decisions I made. El Elyon give me strength as this was all just too much to bear!

My attention was gained by light given off by torches that flared brightly in the darkened valley below the city. Who was this rushing in the night towards the scene of conflict and war?

The group of riders boldly approached the city and I made my way down off the battlements. The party of riders was put to a halt by surprised Knights not expecting the appearance of a third-party.

As I approached the riders I pondered on who they could be. As near as I could tell they were all warriors of which several were women. I came to a halt before the lead rider, a woman.

There was something familiar about her and then she spoke and opened up old memories to me, “Kuri sends his regards.”

She smiled as I exclaimed, “Mayrin?”

She nodded, still smiling, but then her face sobered, “It’s time. Kuri wants you to face the witch of Vella in his stead and convince her to let the Yesathurim

people under her control go. They are the last of the tribes to be gathered.”

I looked at her blankly as everything happening this night was all just too much for me to continue comprehending clearly. “Gathered?” I asked.

She nodded her head quickly, “The Targon Mountains are overrun by every vile creation of the fallen ones imaginable! The Yesathurim have been gathered together in the valley that you helped clear in the Holy Mountains years ago. We have built a city, along with a great wall, to hold our enemies out. It has been our only task since Kuri has drawn us all back together from the nations. The only clan that remains abroad is that which the Witch at Vella controls. You will help us won’t you?” she asked, suddenly looking uncertain

for the first time.

I was the King of a people who needed a leader. I was the husband and father of a family that needed me. But I was first and foremost the trusted servant of the man who'd made me to be the man that everyone seemed to think was impossible to do without.

How could I betray that first and most sacred trust? I couldn't.

“I will do as Kuri asks and go to confront the Witch at Vella.”

There was a general stir in the Knights around me and focusing on them I said, “And then, if El Elyon permits, I will bring my wife and children back here in order to rule as your King, but this I must do first. If this is not to your liking then elect another king to rule over you.”

“No!!! We will wait. We will have you and no other as king, as ruler over us!” one Knight said.

Another Knight stepped forward and said, “As our king the army should go with you to Vella.”

I shook my head, “The army stays here to protect Smirnaz. The men under my command will also stay in order to ensure that the people are safe from attack by anyone emboldened by your leaderless state in my absence.”

Strong objections began to be raised, but I shut them off, “I am the King and I have spoken, even so do as I have commanded!”

In the silence that followed I turned to Thanuel, who'd come up to the scene, “I place you in command in my absence.” To his credit, Thanuel voiced no

objections before the others, but I knew it would have been far different should I have given him the order in a more private setting.

Then turning to the crowd of Knights I said, "I have long awaited the call of this mission to Vella. Years have gone by since it was given to me by my master and I shall not fail him, even as I know you will not fail me in doing what I have asked of you. I believe this mission heralds in the end of our time as we know it. It is my strong belief that the time of kingdoms is at an end and that the Kingdom of Shamayim is close at hand. Prepare your hearts and look closely to your lives to make sure that you are right with El Elyon. I would also caution you to put your houses in order and to be ready to leave the lands that we have

fought so hard for these past few years and be ready to go to the East, even as prophecy would have us believe such will be the way to the Kingdom. I leave you now as there is no time to be wasted, but know that you will be in my prayers.”

Sar’ran had brought Phalon up to the back of the crowd and I made my way through them and mounted up. Sar’ran had already lightened the load by taking off Phalon’s battle armor and I thanked him for it.

Sar’ran gripped my arm and looking down to his face I saw tears make their way through the soot that caked all our faces. Meeting his eyes I said, “I will be back and I will ride with all my friends again. We have yet more battles to face together, of this I am sure.”

He gave a firm nod and let go, even as Jarken handed both of my swords up to me. I waved farewell and took off for the broken gate of the city, not waiting for Mayrin and her band of warriors.

As I streamed down the mountain valley I heard Mayrin and the others catch up. Vella was before me in the distance across the length of Ayenathurim, but my mind was filled with the sad reality that I still could not go to my family that I had left in Crona, even though I had won this last battle.

The battle of this night was just to be the first of many, even now I rode towards a battle of the spiritual. I was committed to the task of freeing Kuri's people in Vella, but I hoped that El Elyon handled the Witch. Indeed, it was out of concern for what the Witch could

do that had in large part made up my mind to leave my personal army here.

This coming battle with a powerful Witch would be far different than any physical engagement of war such as this night had heralded and yet I had confidence it could be won. I had confidence because Kuri thought I could do it and if he believed so then I knew that even so it would be done.

Chapter Seventeen

Armored Faith

I stared into the flames of the campfire pondering on what would happen on the morrow.

“You have changed.”

I glanced upward from the fire to Mayrin and said, “I could say the same of you.”

She blushed profusely before smiling and nodding, “Yes, I have come a long way since you and Kuri held me down to cut off my bug infested hair.” She shivered involuntarily then and smiling I

went back to staring into the flames.

“What bothers you? Are you concerned about confronting the Witch?” Mayrin asked.

“Are you?” I asked knowingly.

She looked down, suddenly pensive, before nodding her confirmation of my question.

“Why?”

“She is very powerful. None have ever overcome her.”

I stared at the flames for a moment before I posed a question to her, “If you had to choose a winner in a battle of the spirit between Kuri and the Witch, who would it be?”

“Kuri,” she said, not hesitating in the slightest.

Nodding I said, “Then why fear since he was the one who sent you on this

mission?”

“Because he’s not here,” she replied honestly enough.

“Perhaps not in body, but in spirit I would say, yes, he is.”

“I don’t understand.”

I tried to explain it to her, “People have come to look at me as a man of importance, a hero if you will. They think I can accomplish anything that I set my hand to do. That there is no enemy that I cannot vanquish, but I tell you now that they are all wrong. I am but a man. There is nothing greater in me than any other man, save for one thing, and that is obedience. When Kuri found me, I was a boy on the verge of manhood with no purpose in life. He gave me purpose. He showed me the hidden aspects of the spirit realm that takes place all around

us. He trained my body for combat, my mind he sharpened with wisdom, but his greatest gift of all was that he showed me that my spirit is the only aspect of me that will continue past any deeds I accomplish in this life. From there the decision has been a simple one and yet a hard one. I pledged my allegiance to the Creator of my spirit in that I have purposely done that which I knew to please Him and obey His will in my life. He is the force behind all my greatest successes and the gracious giver of all my greatest joys in this life. To Him I deny nothing. I forsake all in place of my obedience to Him. Whether I live or die in this coming confrontation is of no concern as I know it is El Elyon's predestined will for my life to be here in this moment. I tell you a truth that many

are yet unaware of, Mayrin, and that is that El Elyon and Kuri are one and the same!

She stared at me in shock. “I..... I..... I always wondered,” she breathed out at last.

Nodding I added, “Now you see why going to face this Witch under the direct guidance of Kuri is the same as if he was right here beside us. All these years away from Kuri I have never truly been apart from him, because I have never stepped out of the Father’s will for my life.”

“Then what gives you the sadness I see in your eyes?”

I dropped my eyes from hers to stare once more into the flames in brokenness of spirit, “Despite all I have done I am at heart a man of emotions like any other. I

miss my family and more and more I fear that I may never see them again. I do not deny El Elyon anything He asks of me, but the cost of doing so can be great. The thought of dying does not bother me as I do not fear the life to come after this one, but dying and being without the ability to protect my family gives me great distress. So you see, I am a man of faith and yet one who is faithless.”

In disgust at my lack of trust in El Elyon to provide for my family, I buried my head in my hands and asked for forgiveness of this continued weakness of mine.

Mayrin stared at the man across the fire from her.

How he had changed since she had first met him as a girl and yet he was

the same in many ways. Perhaps it was only her that had changed.

Drawing her sword free, she brought out a honing stone and began to pass it down the already sharp blade. She doubted how much a sword would be of use against a powerful witch, but it was something to do to pass the time.

She did feel better about the coming confrontation though. Her mind ran full of what might happen, but such musings were worse than useless. She would just have to trust in El Elyon that the impossible could be accomplished.

I had come close to Vella years before when I had rescued the children of

Crona, but never had I passed over its borders. Vella was its own kingdom, but in actuality it was more of a system of clans than any united leadership under one banner.

All the clans were hostile to outside intervention and had little to do with the neighboring countries. For the most part Vella had been left alone through the years and little was known of it. Over the years I had managed to learn that the principal population center was gathered around a temple in the northern foothills of the country and it was to this temple that I headed.

The men and women accompanying Mayrin were of the formidable sort and I didn't doubt that they would hold their own in a fight. They talked often among themselves, but rarely to me. They were

Yesathurim, the chosen people, and to them I was but an outsider. An outsider picked by El Elyon to confront a witch of their own national identity. El Elyon must have a sense of humor.

I was glad to at least have Mayrin to talk with. Turning to her I asked, “This wall protecting the city in the Holy Mountains, tell me about it.”

Without hesitation she began to tell me all the important points of its structure and purpose. “It fans out across the valley where it opens up to the desert. The very place that you vanquished the Saber Cats.”

I smiled, “Kuri told you of that.”

“Oh yes! Kuri speaks often of you and your exploits.”

I nodded, “It seems as if all that happened a lifetime ago.”

Time went by and I asked something I was curious about, “Kuri was the one behind building this wall?”

Mayrin’s face darkened, “No, he was not. In fact he has been against it from the start. He says that it is better for the people to put their trust in the Most High than to rely on the wall and a strategically placed mountain range to save them from the evil that is coming upon the land.”

I nodded as I confirmed my suspicions. “So Kuri’s plan is to gather the Yesathurim from Vella into the valley beyond the wall with all the rest, even though he opposes this wall?”

Mayrin hesitated a moment before saying, “That was the plan, but the people have rejected Kuri’s leadership over them.”

I stared at her in disbelief as I exclaimed, “Then where’s Kuri and why did he send you on this mission?”

“Kuri left the Holy Mountains over a year ago, when the people would not hearken to his command to stop building on the wall. He said that the wall would not stand. He went so far as to say that there would not be one block of it left upon another. The people do not know who he is to us. Like you, I have often wondered as to who Kuri really was, but now, since our conversation of several days ago, I am sure of it. Kuri is he who was written of in the Holy Scrolls from the time before. It is him on whom the faith of the Kingdomer Nations was first founded after we the Yesathurim, El Elyon’s chosen people, denied and even slew him. He has been at work all these

years in the spirit and in body and yet my people still deny him!” Her fist smacked down hard on her saddle horn for emphasis.

I patted her shoulder consolingly and asked, “Where has he gone?”

“He went to the East, past the Wastelands, and into the Forests of Darkor. He told me he was going to prepare a place for us. A place that could never be lost to a siege of any proposed length. He made it sound so wondrous to me that I’m not sure whether he spoke of this world or the next.”

“The Kingdom. He spoke of the Kingdom of Shamayim.”

“Yes, I think so,” Mayrin affirmed.

“Tell me then, what purpose is there for confronting the Witch if Kuri no

longer remains in the valley?”

“He told me to wait until specific changes in Ayenathurim and in the skies above occurred. When I saw the signs I was to know that the end had begun and that I was to leave the Holy Mountains and find you.”

“What purpose do I serve other than reconciling this last tribe of your people to the valley?”

“Kuri told me that you would be tasked to gather all those who believe in the Holy Scrolls and the promise of the new covenant recorded down in them and take them to the East.”

“Take them where?”

“I do not know, but if I had to say, it would be self-evident in that you now possess a kingdom of your own. A kingdom that lies to the east.”

I regarded her closely for a long moment before nodding, “It could be.”

“Kuri told me that he would return when it was time, but other than that I do not know what else to do but to be in readiness for that day.”

I nodded and asked her nothing more on the matter. The day after next would see us at the Temple. It was time to set all fears aside as there was work to be done and prophecy to be fulfilled.

Susori leaned back against the pillows of the bed in weariness from the day's travails. Her heart was burdened from some unknown source that seemed to steal the joy she should be feeling in this moment. She glanced down to

where her newborn son had fallen fast asleep against the warm comforting contours of her chest.

This had been a day of blessing and yet a sense of deep sorrow threatened to overwhelm her in the moment. Quickly she brushed her tears away before they could fall on the baby, which she held a little tighter to her.

She glanced to the window where the last rays of daylight were disappearing from the land. Fear rose up to clench around her heart and something of her inner turmoil transported to the sleeping infant in her arms, causing him to stir fitfully.

“Shhhh, my young Prince. It’s okay. Daddy will be all right. I promise,” she whispered and the baby’s restlessness stopped, but Susori’s tears did not.

A soft white rag suddenly appeared and gently wiped at the flow of open grief caused by the soon expected death of her husband. Startled, Susori pulled back from the tall figure standing beside the bed.

“Who are you?” she quivered out as she held the baby protectively away from the tall figure.

The figure in robes knelt down and put his hood back, “My name is Urtholan. I believe your husband has spoken of me to you?”

She nodded, as she felt peace come back into the room. Then, in sudden paralyzing fear, she asked, “If you’re here, then who is protecting my husband?”

“Be at peace Susori, for the Spirit of my Lord is even now with your mate.

He is in no danger.”

Her breathing calmed, but then in a whisper she said, “I’m in danger aren’t I?”

“Yes, and for that reason I have been sent to you as well as others of my order.” More hooded beings briefly lit up about the room, which somehow had the resemblance of fire to them even though they were dressed as Urtholan. They were visible for only a moment and then they were gone from view.

Susori had never seen the like of such warriors before and she had no doubt that one could slay 10,000 or more on his own. Urtholan remained beside her, still visible. Looking to him she asked, “I am far from such an honor as this!”

“No, I tell you that you are deserving

of such honor Susori. You have been faithful to both lead your people into righteousness and to instruct your daughter of the ways of El Elyon, and your prayers for the safety of your husband have never ceased to reach into the highest realms of Shamayim. You are blessed of women. The child you hold is a blessing from the Most High as all that is given birth to now in this dimension of time will even so go into eternity. Your child is destined for honor. Your way is sure and soon the journey will be completed. Have faith Susori. Kingdoms will fall and the rule of kings will be broken, but those who put their trust in El Elyon will put on new strength and be saved from the calamities about to befall all of Ayenathurim.”

Susori nodded as the words of promise washed over her as a comforting balm. Urtholan turned to the window and gazed for a moment before turning back and saying, "I must go, but the others remain. Soon this city will fall, but you will be saved from the calamity that is coming. Rest now and get your strength back for a long journey to the East is about to begin."

He started to leave, but Susori reached out and grasped his robe, "Thank you for coming and for whatever you're about to do!"

"Don't thank me, but rather the One who sends me. To El Elyon be all the glory." Urtholan was suddenly gone then and Susori was left to ponder on all that had been said. She wished Lavaya was here with her in bed, but

she had sent her to her own bed hours before, after the birth of the baby in the late afternoon. Fear for her first child and the impending doom of the city that the Malachim had spoken of began to drive her to get to her feet and go to Lavaya.

The walls of her bedchamber suddenly shimmered and dimmed as if they were but a see-through curtain. It took her a moment to realize what she was seeing. She was seeing through all the walls of the palaces that separated her from her daughter's bedroom.

She could plainly see her daughter laying peacefully asleep upon her bed, even as hooded figures whose presence only brought peace stood all about the room in silent guardianship of her daughter. Overcome with emotion,

Susori would've slipped off the bed to her knees and worshiped her Creator and praised Him for His mercy, but a kindly force held her tired body at rest upon the bed.

Peace overcame her and she fell into a deep healing sleep even as the realm of Crona was invaded by dark forces bent on its destruction because of its people's rebirth into observing the ways of El Elyon over any other former false beliefs that they had kept in times past.

We were watched, but no move was made to hinder our approach to the town. The town and its occupants, who stood stock still in the streets gazing at us,

echoed strongly of all things Yesathurim. Here was a traditionally minded culture set apart from the outside world.

The sense of hostility towards us was high, especially, I felt, in regards to myself. The others, after all, were of their blood but I was an outsider. Worse than that, I was a Kingdomer. Long had there been enmity between the first people of El Elyon's choosing and the seven kingdoms that had come into the promise later.

In large part the Yesathurim had been persecuted within the seven kingdoms for their beliefs and for the most part had taken up residence outside of them over the years. I was very much trespassing here.

No one stopped us and slowly, so as not to alarm, we made our way toward

the impressive colonnade of pillars that bedecked the temple at the head of the village.

The temple was located on a promontory above the town, over which it projected impressively. There was nothing overall evil in its appearance, but there was an undercurrent of darkness that ran deeper than the gorge I'd help slay the Gargons in years before.

At the base of the slope of the mounded hill that the temple was built on, the road stopped being straight and curved around the slope. At last we were stopped. Temple guards stepped forward to block our way threateningly.

One who looked to be in command approached us pompously. He pointed to me with abruptness and said, "Only you

are permitted to go farther. The High Priestess Ayaya is expecting you.”

Mayrin made to object, but I held my hand up, forestalling any words from her as I said, “You and the others wait here. No, on second thought, I may be a while.”

Turning to the guard I asked, “Is it permissible for my fellow travelers to make camp outside the village?”

“Yes, as they by blood are welcome to our sanctuary away from the world, even as your kind are not.”

I nodded, taking no offense at the man’s insulting demeanor. Turning to Mayrin I said, “Take your group and make camp. If I’m not back after three days assume the worst and head back to the Holy Mountains.”

She started to object, but I had already

begun to dismount. I handed her the reins for Phalon. I didn't want him falling into enemy hands.

Reluctantly she took the reins from me. Turning to the guard I drew out my sword by the blade and extended it handle first to him. He took it and stood off to the side and motioned me onward.

"You're sure about this Benaiah?" Mayrin asked, her voice a mixture of hesitation and alarm.

"I'm sure that we were supposed to come here, beyond that I do not know. Have faith Mayrin and say a few prayers for me."

She looked as if she would say more, but I turned and started up the path. The time for words was over and the test of wills had begun.

The road curved upward until it leveled out flat with a side entrance to the temple. The accompanying guard halted and I walked alone into the temple.

The outside of the temple, though impressive in size, had not impressed me overly in terms of detail, but not so here. Ornate was not the word to describe the vividness of color and tapestry within the room that I had entered. Gold and precious stones were everywhere.

The pillared halls all around the sanctuary of the temple were empty and I very much felt alone within the place. Just then a voice, ripe with seductive undertones, called out, "Well, if it isn't

the mighty hunter come at long last to slay the dragon! Oh my!” The sound of laughter rang out clearly and yet I could not tell where she was as the echo of her laughter made it hard to place her.

The voice seemed to sigh then before continuing on, “To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the hero of Sapan? Congratulations on yet another of your many victories over these past few years.”

The Priestess came into view then. In fact she materialized right before my eyes not 10 feet away.

It was hard to stay cool in the presence of this sort of power, but I tried. I inclined my head forward in a slight bow before saying, “The rumors are true my lady. You are very beautiful and you know how to make an entrance,

but I wonder.....” I let my words draw out as I then glanced up to her and said, “are you also as wise as I have heard?”

Her seducing gaze on me turned to one of calculation, even as a sardonic smile played about her full lips. Slowly she nodded her head approvingly, “He certainly taught you well, I see. Tell me, how is Kuri these days and why did he send you here?”

“I’ve heard he is the same, both in purpose and in authority.”

She smiled fully at me then, but I didn’t trust it as a sign of anything. I didn’t trust anything about her other than that she would be out to deceive me at every turn.

“You play the game well, Benaiah. Now answer my first question or be

gone from here.”

Her face had instantly turned cold in the wake of her statement. It was a hard look to see on a woman so beautiful. As beautiful as she was though, I felt no attraction for her other than the simple fact that I could acknowledge that any man would be proud to have her and yet I doubted very much that any man had ever really had her. More likely it had been the other way around.

I chose to be completely honest in my address to her, “You are aware of the lateness of the hour my lady?”

“I am,” she responded affirmatively.

“Kuri has never quite told me what to tell you, only that one day this day was to happen. I believe, though, that if Kuri could be here he would say that it is still not too late. The door is still open for

you to walk through to reclaim his love for you. He does still very much love you.”

She had turned away from me as I had talked and I was unsure of any of the effect that my words had upon her.

“Tell me, Benaiah, do you really think it’s as simple as that?” she asked harshly, as she turned to glare at me in a complete changeover of mood from that of playful dominatrix to that of hostility and extreme hatred.

I felt sure in my spirit that I wasn’t talking with the same woman anymore. “I wish to speak with Ayaya,” I said, addressing the dark entity that had taken over the Priestess.

The Priestess’s body drew up in supreme indignation of spirit and flung back at me in challenge, “You presume

too much impudent boy, to tell me so within the confines of my own temple!”

I stepped forward aggressively and with matching resolve I said, “I am not here of my own doing. I am here on the word of my Master who walks in the blessing of El Elyon and whose spirit is a part of Him. Now be gone and trouble the work of El Elyon no further for I fear you have angered Him grievously already with your interference!”

The Priestess’s body shook for a moment and then her eyes opened, blinking as if rising from sleep.

“Ayaya?” I asked, but she turned away abruptly and began walking. Surely this wasn’t how this encounter was supposed to end? Did I go after her?

“Hold your ground.”

I looked to the right to behold

Urtholan standing there.

I did as he said and within moments the Priestess was back. She stalked towards me with rage coloring every step of her stride. There was nothing at all repressed about her now. I fully expected her to attempt to kill me and I was right.

An invisible force slammed into me with a flick of her wrist. I would have been knocked flat from the force if I hadn't already been partially braced against an attack. Even so I was about to go down, but I was getting angry.

"I have authority to be here! Now I demand that this unnatural force from you be removed as you assault not my flesh and blood, but rather He who sent me!"

I had no sooner spoken the words than

I was watching the Priestess flying backwards to smash against a pillar. The force against me was gone and I breathed with heavy exertion as I tried to make up for the heavy strain I had just been under.

Not knowing what to do now, I watched as the Priestess slowly rose up from the ground. She didn't look at me as she said, with head cast low, "Even as you have said, the hour is late. Even so, go and leave me, for I can't change. My path is agreed upon. Tell Kuri I am promised to another. I grant you safe passage from these lands. Now go!" She pointed to the door of the temple, still not looking at me.

"I will not go my lady," I responded confidently and then I added, "Not until I have all that I have asked for."

“For the third time I ask, what is it that you want?” she cried out in anger, turning to face me.

“Kuri wants you back. You and all those who follow your commands.”

She shook her head at me, “You do not know what you ask Kingdomeer. Now go before it is too late!”

The temple began to shake and I felt as if caught within the confines of an earthquake. The priestess’s eyes widened in alarm and she stepped toward me with the look in her eyes genuine for perhaps the first time, “You must go..... now!” The priestess’s words had trailed off to a choked whimper as a hand materialized out of nothingness to close about her throat.

She barely struggled for her own breath as she was held off the ground by

the hand at her throat. She was turned to face the visage of the dark cloaked figure that had materialized into being, visible along with the hand that gripped her throat. Whatever it was that Ayaya saw within the fallen Malachim's eyes, it was enough to turn her features into a scene of stark horror.

The fallen Malachim spoke, "My orders were for you to kill him! Not to let him go!!!"

I'd seen enough. I stepped forward towards the pair, "let her go! Now!"

Laughter echoed out of the fallen Malachim that seemed to issue forth straight from the pit of Sheol, "Let her go? You impudent fool! She's mine!!!"

The fallen Malachim had turned to me and I saw all the hellish torment of his eyes that had paralyzed Ayaya with fear.

Stepping closer I said, “She has a choice to make. Now let her go!”

The fallen Malachim leaned toward me with a sneer of triumph and said, “No!!!”

I heard the bones of Ayaya’s neck snap and I watched her eyes spark as the last rays of the light of life faded from them until she hung limp from the fallen Malachim’s grip, devoid of all life. Her body was then casually tossed to the side like a wilted flower.

I looked from Ayaya’s crumpled form on the floor to the fallen one’s triumphant gaze. Sneering he said, “We’re done here. Now let’s see how it fares for you in your attempt to escape the city which will soon come to believe that you killed their beloved priestess of the stars.” The fallen one laughed once more and then

turned his back on me dismissively as he started to fade from view.

At the last moment, when it looked as if he was about to fade into invisibility, his transformation abruptly stopped. In disbelief the fallen Malachim turned back to me and glanced down to where my hand gripped hold of his robe. His eyes rose to mine and in rage I demanded, “We’re not done yet!”

The fallen Malachim’s eyes blinked and then refocused as he said, “Indeed we are not. Very well, if it’s a fight you want then it’s a fight I will give you. Tell me though, what is it that we are fighting over brave, but foolish human?”

I smiled and gestured to myself as with sudden revelation I said, “As long as you’re here with me, then you’re not anywhere else.”

The fallen Malachim's head tilted to the side in apparent confusion at my statement and then I watched as comprehension dawned within the fire of his eyes. He turned away again abruptly, with a shouted exclamation of fury, but was brought up short once more by my grip upon him.

He roared in utter fury and before me his form dissolved into a creation of fire and intense darkness, more fearsome to behold than any army of lion men. The robe that I'd held onto was no more, but it was as if this fallen being, once of the realm of Shamayim, whose power was far greater than my own had not been released.

He turned to me as fire snaked down his arms to the taloned points of his fingers even as wings of the darkest

black sprung out from behind him. “I will make short work of you flesh man!” he said. His forked tongue flicked poisonously even as smoke issued forth as if from some internal fire.

I stood, beyond any capability of my own, as I continued to smile, “Flesh I am, but of the Spirit of El Elyon am I reborn. You face not me, but Him who sent me.” Even as I said that I felt as if transported from time and space into an airy realm of some other place.

It was just me and the being of fire in this place, only my perception of myself had changed. I was no longer defenseless against the fearsome monster that was arrayed in fire before me. Armor, that glowed as if from an inner source of strength, clad every part of me. My left arm bore the weight of a shield

unlike any other, as it seemed to reflect all my journey through life to this point, reflected now into a prism of light that was impenetrable. I brought my right arm up to behold in wonder the sword it held. From a source higher than the imagination of any man the sword glowed with all the glory of Shamayim's import, as if witness to the beginning of all. I recognized it for what it was, the words of the Holy Scrolls, which I had studied all these years and were even now inscribed in the plains of my heart.

The battle was not mine, but rather the Spirit of the Most High, "Ruach, enable me to complete the Father's will for my life!" I said, bringing the sword up to my lips to kiss it.

With an insane howl fire was hurled upon me, but the shield held it back even

as I lunged forward to the attack. Where the finest of sword steels would've melted in contact with the heated flesh of my opponent, my sword of Ruach cleaved through with impunity.

My opponent was immortal, but fully capable of experiencing pain. While I, who was but human, excelled to my Shamayim appointed mission, which was to buy time. How much time I did not know, but I would give my all in the pursuit of it.

Ayaya shrieked in the sorrow of her spirit even as torment was upon her from every side. The past and all that she'd done rose up as a choking hold about her throat, as if it were a

replacement of the last moments of her life before death. She pitched forward to the ground under the weight of her past misdeeds.

The ground beneath her writhed as a solid mass of worms, even as snake heads flicked around her as if in parade to repeatedly bite her and infect her with the stinging quality of their venom, which she felt over and over in perpetual agony. This was Sheol.

Softly she cried out in forlorn agony the Name above all names. The Name she had rejected so many years before.

“I’m here.”

In disbelief Ayaya raised her head, only to be blinded by a light too bright to be gazed upon. Every recrimination of the past truly began to choke her then, but she knew that the source of

the light, though blinding, was the source of all life.

She knew she was dead. She knew she deserved the torments of this place. She knew all that and that it was pointless to beg for a cessation of all that she had brought upon herself, but she wanted to make one thing right while the Light remained.

Reaching out, as if weighed down by a thousand tons, she grasped hold of Kuri's foot. "I'm sorry!" she managed to croak out against the weight upon her.

It was over now. She lay with her face pressed to the cursed ground even as the worms consumed her, while fire burned her every memory.

The torment went on and on and she knew that forever it would, but she had

at least some measure of peace now. Peace or not she sobbed brokenly as all that she had lost out on by her choices made in life rose to haunt her worse than any torment Sheol had to offer.

“Kuri!” she screamed out in helplessness.

“What is it you want of me Ayaya?”

“I want you!!!”

The torment was suddenly gone and in disbelief she looked up into the face of her first love even as she felt herself being transported higher.

Kuri was looking at her and smiling as he said, “All you had to do was ask.”

“But I’m dead!” Ayaya called out in forlorn sorrow, as she gazed upon all that she had walked out on in life in the form of this man.

“And yet, I have conquered death and this place. What is it to you if I should will for you to continue living?” Kuri affirmed as more statement than question.

Crying now, not in brokenness but rather in joy, Ayaya pressed her face into the chest of her betrothed.

“Ayaya.”

“Yes my Lord?”

“I need you to lead my people free from the bondage of the spirit of unbelief.”

Self-recrimination rose sharply within her at all that she had done, but Kuri spoke into her, dispelling the past with three words, “All is forgiven.”

“I will do as you ask and be your witness.”

Kuri held her tightly to him as the

last bit of the journey passed by quickly.

“Why?” she asked, still unable to comprehend her rescue from torment and darkness.

“I love you Ayaya. I have never stopped in my love for you and my Father’s mercy knows no bounds. What has been written will come to pass even as it was predestined by the Father before time began.”

“I love you!” Ayaya said dreamily, as Kuri faded from her view.

Chapter Eighteen

El Elyon's Way

Coughing, Ayaya sat up, suddenly conscious of her surroundings. She stared around the empty temple in surprise. Feeling at her throat she realized it had been restored to wholeness even as her spirit sang forth of joy from within.

Her eyes fell on the only other occupant of the empty temple. The form of the warrior, who had come to bear witness to her and had fought for her, lay upon the floor.

Hurriedly she moved over to him, fearful that he had died in the fight for her return to the land of the living. Instantly she relaxed as she saw his back rise on an indrawn breath. She shook him as revelation came to her as to what to do next.

Blinking, I looked up into Ayaya's eyes. She smiled tearfully before fiercely hugging me. Drawing back she said, "Thank you for your faithfulness!"

I smiled at the joy that seemed to radiate out of her in waves. It was like looking at a completely different person.

Sudden seriousness came to her eyes and her hand came to rest upon my shoulder, "We do not have much time! Armies of darkness held over to this day are even now marching forth on all of Ayenathurim. My people, the

Yesathurim, and the other people of this world are all in grave danger. Those of the Yesathurim who believe, even as you, are now of one spiritual blood. We are hated the world over for this and we will be destroyed by both those of our own family and those of darkness. The time that was foretold is upon us and we are two witnesses of this. Go to the remnant of your people who believe and take them to the East. They must forsake all their possessions in order to flee what is coming against which no armed resistance will be able to hold out.”

“What of you?” I asked.

“I will take those who will believe the truth of the new covenant from these lands and go to the fortress in the Holy Mountains. There, I will urge my people to forsake the defense of the city; a city

never intended to stand in the first place as the Kingdom of El Elyon is not made with the bricks of man nor is it a place that can be overcome.”

“They will not listen to you. They didn’t listen to Kuri.”

She nodded, as her eyes were suddenly cloaked in sadness, “I know, but I still must try. Perhaps some will listen. If only one will listen it is a victory. I will join you in the East and together our peoples of the new covenant will be one, for we are unified by the spirit of El Elyon to be the first fruits of the Kingdom.”

I rose to my feet with the responsibility of all she had said heavy upon me. I turned to her, “My wife and child are to the south! Surely I’m not to leave them there?”

Ayaya's hands framed my face, "Your family will join you on the way. Go to Philanthia and sound the cry. Take those who listen and retreat through the kingdoms gathering all who will follow. I will see you in the East in two weeks' time."

Ayaya turned then and left. I heard her begin addressing the people of the town that had gathered outside the temple. I sensed that my work here was done and I exited out the side entrance and made my way unnoticed to the camp outside the town.

There was nobody there as it seemed everyone had gathered at the temple to hear Ayaya speak. Some part of me still hadn't caught up with the reality of everything that had happened in the past little while. I may never come to grips

with it. It was enough to know that I had fulfilled my role set in motion what seemed like so many lifetimes ago by Kuri.

Mounting Phalon I took off to the south. I desperately wanted to go to my wife's side in Crona, but I'd only gotten this far in life by being faithful and my orders were to go to Philanthia. I hadn't been there since I'd left four years ago.

The King who had once favored me highly favored me no longer. I could be riding to my death, but I had faith that it would be otherwise.

On the third day of the journey south my stallion's hooves resounded loudly off the cobblestones of Philanthia's

capital city. Everywhere I looked I beheld a general malaise of discontent on the faces of the people.

The rumors were true then. Philanthia, once greatest of the seven kingdoms had now fallen out of its former favor with El Elyon. Still, there must be some within the city and surrounding countryside who would listen.

Surprise shown clearly on the faces of many at the sight of me alone once more within the city. I headed straight for the King's court. Gates and doors were opened before me without hesitation and I soon found myself walking the marble floors of the judgment hall.

A hush fell over the typical hubbub of the court officials as my presence was announced. The hush remained for only a moment before whispered conversations

broke out everywhere with a wide host of speculations being put forward.

My hopes sank though as I took in the judgment seat. I had expected to make my case with the king, but he was not present. Instead, his daughter resided over the court in regal fashion. While still pretty, I could not dissuade myself from the feeling that she appeared much colder than I had remembered.

Reaching the steps to the throne I knelt down in respect and said, "My Princess, I have urgent news the King must hear!"

"The King, my father, is indisposed and has been so for quite some time. I rule in his stead. Pray, tell your traitorous remarks to me instead."

The hall had gone deathly silent at her words. Reigning in the urge to mount the stairs to give the royal brat the spanking

of her life I managed to say instead, “The time of the end of the world, that was foretold in the Holy Scrolls left to us by the prophets of old, is upon us. Princess, this kingdom, indeed all of the kingdoms, are about to be overrun by darkness. Those who would place their trust in El Elyon must evacuate at once before it is too late!”

“Evacuate the kingdom! Are you insane? Tell me Benaiah, once friend of my father, where would you have us go? Where, in all this world, is a land with the beauty or majestic quality of our own?”

Patiently, as if dealing with a child, I said, “To the East, just as the Holy Scrolls have told us since time memorable as to where our redemption would come from. In specific, I speak of

no land to be found on Ayenathurim, but rather of Shamayim.”

The Princess snorted indignantly and tossed a hand upwards in a disregarding fashion, “You speak in riddles. I don’t know what I once saw in you and here you are now as one gone mad, decrying the peace and prosperity that we have managed to acquire for ourselves. Such men as you are dangerous and your foolish ideas even more so! The last time you left you took with you almost half of my father’s knights and now you come back to ask for the entire kingdom! Does your arrogance know no bounds? Apparently not, but I for one have had enough of your impudence! Throw him in the dungeons and see that his stay is a most uncomfortable one!”

I made no move to protest against the

guards who, somewhat hesitantly at first, moved forward to disarm me. They pushed me from the room that had gone wild in the wake of the Princess's actions.

The Princess's cold stare followed me from the room and I could not help but notice the resemblance to a viper that she now possessed about herself.

The guards were not all rough in their treatment of me as they hustled me onward. Reaching the dungeons, I was shown to a dank and quite filthy cell as per the Princess's instructions.

The bars clanged shut behind me. Turning, I called out to the one guard that I recognized as one of those who had trained under my command, "Falarin, I need a favor."

"Sir I..... I....."

I waved my hand dismissively and gestured him closer to the bars, “I’m not going to ask you to break me free of this place. All I want is for you to have my horse ready for me on the eastern side of the fortress’s wall.” I pointed off towards the solid stone wall to my right in indication of the East.

His eyes came back from where I had pointed and I could see I had completely befuddled him. “Just do as I say Falarin.”

“Yes sir,” he said dazedly.

As he had begun to turn away, I spoke idly, “Falarin, your name is a unique one, an old and seldom used one for sure. Have you ever wondered at its significance and why your mother chose it?”

Falarin’s back had gone completely

rigid and his tension was a palpable emotion clouding the air of the dungeon. He remained still, with his back to me.

“Yes, as I was saying, it’s a very unique name. The meaning of which I believe has slipped from most people’s consciousness. I believe it means, ‘son of the king,’ does it not?”

Falarin had turned fully to me now and with a tight expression he asked, “How did you find out?”

“I studied the old scroll archives quite a lot in my spare time while I was here, Falarin, and in the process I picked up a lot of knowledge. Besides knowing the meaning of your name, it wasn’t hard at all to see the resemblances that exist. Falarin, now is a very dangerous time and the Princess, out of past upsets and perhaps simply a cold heart, is

sentencing everyone within the kingdom to certain death. Your secret is even less of a secret than you think it is. Why do you think you were placed under my tutelage among the rank-and-file of the first sons of royal houses? The time has come for you to become a leader.”

“I’m nothing but the bastard son of a king and a servant girl!” Falarin said with bitterness.

Gesturing wildly to myself I said, “Look at me Falarin. I can claim to even less birth status than you and yet El Elyon has favored me beyond measure. The same road lies before you now as it did for me. The only question is, do you have the nerve and greater sense of faithfulness to your God to take it?”

He stared at me indecisively to which I said, “Make sure my horse is there.”

I stepped back from the bars and headed toward the eastern wall of the dungeon cell in obedience to the prompting that I had received. Urtholan appeared before me with a grin and extended his hand to me. Without hesitation I took his hand as he led me onward, straight through the stone wall.

I blinked, but kept walking, as I passed through solid matter and empty space. So much of my life these days had gone beyond the ordinary and into the realm of the supernatural.

Urtholan was not content to simply lead me free of the dungeon of the castle, but instead he led me up through the floors to come right up into the center of the judgment hall. He was gone from view, but I remained.

I winced in response to the startled,

deafening shrieks on the part of horrified courtiers and headed toward the double doors, completely ignoring the wildly screaming Princess at my back. No one was listening to her anyway.

Reaching the double doors I turned back and said, "I'm leaving now and all those who wish to come are welcome, but it means you must leave behind your former lives in this place and embrace your new, faith filled one."

I turned back to the doors even as a guard stepped forward towards me. With a flourish he presented me with my sword, "Your sword, Sir."

"Thanks!" I said and went out the door even as he and a few others followed behind.

Reaching the lower steps, I came upon Phalon being held steady by an

astonished Falarin. His hand shook slightly as he handed the reins to me.

I pointed to a promontory point along the eastern horizon, far from the confines of the city, "I'm going to make camp there for three days during which time I expect you to lead what few, or perhaps many, of your people who are still awake to the signs of the times and meet me there. Send riders to the Kingdoms of Lancandia, Perganel, and Sartorry to witness to them of both my words and the miracle performed here today in the sight of everyone."

"I will do it!" Falarin affirmed and with a pounding slap to his back I moved past him and mounted Phalon and began my second exodus from the city that already ran hot with the news of all that had transpired. Sadly, it was a

contingent of far fewer souls than years before that I finally led free of the city.

The city as a whole was still too content with the way things had always been for them to notice that nothing was the way it had ever used to be.

Susori pressed back into the dark shadows of the doorway of a closed down shop. On the hill behind her the Palace was in flames and the last of the men her brother had spared to see her free of the city were no more.

One hand held her daughter to her even as her other arm held her newborn son. Her lips were all that moved as she prayed that both children remained silent. Even now she could

hear the heavy breathing of the Gargon out in the alleyway as it ventured closer to where they hid.

The city all around her was in utter chaos as it was torn down by an army of darkness too unimaginable to comprehend. There were Gargons, lion men and many other twisted forms of man and nature, all of fallen Malachim design. Susori doubted that there would be a sole survivor left within the city by morning.

Just then the baby within her arms stirred and cried out loudly in fear at the sounds of a woman shrieking for mercy somewhere else in the fire and darkness of the city. The Gargon's breath huffed out and Susori knew the game of hide and seek was over.

Handing her son to her shaking

daughter, Susori stepped out into the street even as the Gargon drew to a stop not 20 feet away. It towered over her by at least another 8 feet, but she'd had enough!

Raising a hand she pointed at the beast, "I've hid far longer than I already should have and now I won't any longer! I step out now in the faith I should have proclaimed earlier! I warn you now, if you take one more action to harm my family then you are in violation of my protection by the Most High!"

She stood there defiantly, a diminutive figure before the monster of half giant and half bull that had a spirit that knew only the reaches of evil and was capable of nothing less. With a roar it drew back in one hand a huge

battle ax, but that's as far as it got. Warriors, wreathed in fiery robes with blades of pure fire, suddenly appeared and hacked down the beast where it stood.

Shaken, but renewed with resolve, Susori turned and reclaimed her son from her daughter. Turning, she went in the way indicated by one of the Malachim's upraised sword of fire.

They were Warriors beyond compare and she found herself in as great a fear of them as that of the enemy running rampant within the city. Rounding a corner, a group of lion men raised their bloody heads from feasting only to then growl and launch at her protectors.

Susori could only be amazed at their impudence. The flaming swords swished and the mightiest of the enemy

were no more.

Fires were everywhere. It was to the point that the heat and flying embers given off by them should have put her and her children into flames, but it was as if a protecting veil had been drawn over them.

Susori found herself sobbing at the plight of her people and she asked the Malachim in general around her, "Can you not help them too? Do you not care?"

Instead of the censure she half expected to receive for her impudence, she received looks of commiseration from them all. Instantly she felt that she was in error for thinking that what was transpiring around her was any fault of those shepherding her through the fires and the depravities of the enemy.

“I’m sorry! I just want this bloodletting to be over! I just want there to be no more killing!”

“Our Master wishes the same, but as it is written within the words of El Elyon all must be fulfilled. The end of the world is not a time of tranquility and peace, but rather of war and despair. Despair for life to be over and a daily war to stay alive. To those who believe though, a way has been made out of the wrath of the judgment that has been held in store for this day. You are not alone, but a remnant of your people who believe in the new covenant remain,” one of the Malachim said.

Somehow Susori and her children suddenly found themselves transported from the fiery streets running full with blood into a gentler country setting.

Refugees from Crona streamed all around her, fleeing to the East.

A Malachim lifted her and Lavaya onto the back of an oxcart. The Malachim no longer glowed with fire as beings ready for war, but appeared as normal men. The one who had lifted them into the cart addressed her once more, "What has been foretold will come to be and everything promised of the Father will by no means fail."

Susori nodded tiredly. Unable to hold herself up any longer, she lay back to nurse her son and fell asleep under the watchful protection of those sent to protect her. Lavaya, meanwhile, stood watch over her mother and stared with fascination at the men who no longer glowed with fire.

I stood with my back to the flames of the campfire. There was sound out in the night. Was it another band of Kingdomer refugees or a force of Philanthian Knights intent on what many within the kingdom were beginning to call a popular rebellion.

So far we had not been attacked, but I did not put it beyond the realm of possibilities. In the morning we would be leaving. I'd said three days, but the response had been such that I had stayed two extra days on the promontory point that I had indicated to Falarin.

People began to make their way into the firelight to be greeted by those already gathered there. The strangers in the night were Cronians!

I ran out into the darkness calling, “Susori!”

I heard a baby crying and somehow I knew. Susori came out of the darkness then with tears streaming down her beautiful face.

I rushed to her even as she held our child out to me, “Your son, my love!”

I hugged them close with one arm as my other hand pressed against my daughter’s back where she stood encircling my one leg tightly with both of her arms.

I was crying. I was happy. I was overwhelmed. I never wanted to be without them again!

Pulling my face from Susori’s neck, I looked down into the face of a boy regarding me studiously, “A son.”

“Yes!” she said, pressing my son into

my arms. The world was falling apart all around me and yet my world had never been more complete than it was now.

Susori leaned against me tiredly and slowly, as not to dislodge my still attached daughter, I moved back towards the fire. Tomorrow we would leave for Thyana, but that was far away right now.

I laid down by the fire with Susori beside me, our son between us and my daughter on top of me. We were together again. I whispered praises to El Elyon for much of the night as I held my family close, not caring for a moment about all the other things that had been put under my care.

The caravan of people I led numbered

about five thousand. They represented a smattering of individuals from all walks and positions of society, but that said, the majority of them were of the poorer classes. It would seem that they had an easier time giving up their meager riches than those long attached to greater wealth.

We had entered Thyana a day ago. Four days before, I had sent riders to alert the people of this kingdom of the need to flee. By afternoon we would be at the border of the Nicationer Nation of Faquanna.

I expected there would be no trouble from them, but the Kingdom of Poretani on its eastern border was likely to be a different matter as they had been in outright war with the Kingdom of Ephanum for over a year. Our choice of

such a dangerous of route couldn't be helped. There was no other way to reach Ephanum and Smirnaz.

Thinking of Smirnaz I wondered if my people would leave their lands at my command and trudge off trustingly into the desert sands of the Wastelands to the mythical Forests of Darkor? I could only hope so.

My personal army that had fought for me these past few years would. They would follow me anywhere. How I wished I had them with me now!

I would wait for the Thyanians for one day at the border before I headed for Ephanum.

The next day I was blown away as over four times our current number came to us from the lowlands of Thyana. It would seem my reputation lived on here

as few would talk of anything else. In fact I heard Thyanians, speaking to other Kingdomers around the fires at night, say that I first got my notoriety as a warrior within Thyana and that I was sort of a national hero to them.

I would lay no claim to that, but at least the notoriety had helped motivate many of them to come. I was glad for that.

The Thyanians confirmed that five days previously a large party of Yesathurim had slipped across their borders enroute for the Sarran frontier and no doubt the Holy Mountains beyond. I prayed for Ayaya's success and that it would be greater than my own to date.

I wished that more kingdoms would choose to embrace the future as so many

of the Thyanians were. And yet almost nine out of ten Thyanians remained within Thyana. So many world wide gave so little credence to the prophetic warning of the Holy Scrolls.

The Faquanna border the next day

I stared across the invisible line in the grass into the foreign country's realm. I had no army to repel an attack as most of those following me were of the simpler folk and a large part of them were women, children and older men. For the hundredth time I debated over the wisdom of going this way.

It was a much longer journey to go north along the shore of Lake Orlone in

order to reach Ephanum, but surely it would have been safer. I could not be sure of that though. A rider had brought news that the invasion of Philanthia had already begun, but worse than that was the news that the Kingdomer nations of Sartorry and of Lancandia had already made a deal for peace, in which they had agreed to forsake the Kingdomer faith and willfully burn all their copies of the Holy Scrolls in exchange for not being invaded by the armies of darkness that had, it seemed, come from underground almost everywhere.

It was hard to believe Kingdomer Nations could stoop so low as to deny their faith, but it was the way of it. The Kingdom of Sartorry had always been more liberal than the other kingdoms when it came to matters of religion and

morality. With Sartorry given over and both Perganel and Philanthia already engaged on multiple fronts, the way north was a risky one at best.

I had only a few more days to line up with the timetable that Ayaya had given me. If I had more time it would have been a tempting option to take several days to build rafts and sail across Lake Orlone and avoid confrontation altogether, but I had rejected it as too many of the people would be lost in the tempestuous waters of the lake and I had no time to build the rafts anyway.

I glanced away from the border as a shout rang out. Another rider bearing ill news, no doubt.

The rider brought his foam flecked mount to a stop before me. His face echoed the horror of the words his voice

hadn't even given birth to yet, "Philanthia has fallen!"

The others around me gasped in horror, but I couldn't say I was all that surprised. They had been great in number, but poorly led. I hadn't thought they would last for long after hearing how Crona was overcome in a night.

"How long do we have before enemy advance troops are here?"

The man shrugged in exhaustion, "Maybe a day, perhaps a little more. They move so fast! It's inhuman!"

I nodded and was about to speak when he said, "That isn't all. The Kingdom of Sartorry has signed a peace agreement and she has been joined by Lancandia."

That I knew, but I wasn't prepared for what he said next.

“Even now Lancandia, per the request of her new dark overlords, sends a force to intercept us here! I heard this straight from a Lancandian believer several miles back trying to catch up with your group.”

A Kingdomer Nation coming to hunt down her own flesh and blood. The world had gone mad!

The unthinkable had happened and I was suddenly without choices anymore, “Give the order for all wagons to proceed over the border. No one stops until we reach Ephanum!”

Those around me stared at me aghast before one said, “It will take at least two days! How can we ask so much of the animals to go without rest?”

“We can and we will or else I fear we won’t reach Ephanum at all.”

Shouts of my order rang out as well as word of the loss of Philanthia and the heavy laden carts started forward quickly into the terrain of the unknown borderlands.

I rode beside the cart that Susori was in. I stared ahead, waiting for the inevitable to occur. The border of Poretani was just ahead and my scouts had reported a massing of troops there. I had close to thirty thousand people in this caravan, but only about seven hundred had any fighting experience. It was a problem that I attacked relentlessly in my mind as I rode.

No matter how I figured it, I couldn't see a way through what was waiting

ahead across the border, barring the miraculous.

“Dear, if those worry lines are etched any deeper I fear they may become permanent.”

My eyes found Susori and I smiled tightly. The sight of my son held in her arms though brought all my fears back into sharp focus.

My headache began to pound in earnest. What was I going to do? What could be done?

“I think you’re approaching the future in the wrong manner, my husband.”

I looked to Susori, eager for any wisdom she could impart to me, “You’re right. What should I be doing?”

Her gaze turned reflective as she looked off toward the horizon behind us, “When I was running for my life in the

city, I was choked with the fear I felt for our children. It didn't matter that the night before I was told by one of the Malachim that my future and that of my children was secure. That was all forgotten in my moment of panic. All I could think of was the Gargon down the street from us. It occupied all parameters of my mind until I couldn't think of anything else. The baby cried out and I knew it was all over in that moment except..... except for the truth of El Elyon's hold over the realities of my existence. I told you what I did next and what happened.”

I nodded in remembrance of her amazing story.

Her eyes came back to mine, “In a way I'd say the situation facing us at the moment bears some resemblance to my

experience in the city wouldn't you say my love?"

I stared at her for a long moment as her words sank in. Leaning forward out of the saddle I kissed her.

Drawing back from her I felt peace come into me and I said, "You are an amazing woman."

Her smile turned teasing, "I'm so glad you noticed."

Smiling at her, I straightened in the saddle and rode Phalon forward. Reaching the forward point of the caravan I came alongside of Falarin. I gestured to his lance and he obligingly handed it over to me.

Reaching back to my saddlebag I pulled free a silken banner. The banner wasn't in commemoration of any one Kingdomer Nation, but rather it was a

universal symbol of the Kingdomer faith being itself in the shape of an unrolled scroll with silver etched words set against a blue background.

Falarin watched me curiously as I fixed the banner to the end of the lance. Banner in place I held the point of the lance aloft and the banner took flight in the breeze.

“Falarin, you’re in command until I return. Keep the caravan moving at its present rate and whatever you do don’t stop for any reason.”

“Where are you going to be?” Falarin asked in alarm.

“Claiming promises.” With that said, Phalon launched forward with little urging. We soon left the caravan behind and within the half-hour they were completely out of sight.

I rode onward. Cresting a rise I stopped as I took in the army of Poretani arrayed in formation below awaiting the caravan. There was a flurry of activity as they noticed me on the valley rim.

I heard harsh commands issued and the force of roughly ten thousand soldiers began to march forward. I stayed where I was on the valley's rim with banner held high.

The movement of the army was abruptly arrested to a standstill as I watched several forward scouts return to report their findings. Minutes went by and then in the relative silence of the morning a sound broke forth from the enemy host that gained in strength as the news spread throughout the ranks.

They were laughing. Laughing at the prospect of but one man arrayed against

them. Their first mistake was in standing in the way of El Elyon's purposed plan. Their second mistake was in believing that I was alone.

I was never truly alone in life. A fact of which I often forgot in moments of trial, but thanks to my wife today was not such a day. I raised the banner high into the air, as high as I could, and then I urged Phalon forward toward the laughing ranks of the enemy.

Phalon lunged over the bank of the valley, at full stride within but a few steps, as we charged full tilt for the enemy's center. The laughter rang louder, only to stop a moment later even more abruptly than it had started up.

I continued to race down towards the enemy's center line as ten thousand riders clothed in fire rode off to either

side of me in perfect formation. No force on Ayenathurim was going to stand in the way of El Elyon's people reaching the Kingdom. The struggle of getting them there was not mine but rather El Elyon's and to His glory I rode.

I drew my sword from its saddle scabbard and held it out in readiness to bring it down upon the enemy that stood still in horrified disbelief at what was occurring. In that moment, every member of the Nicationer army fully realized a thousand times over the folly of their beliefs in gods of falseness and immoral deceit.

There was no denying that the source of my faith in El Elyon was justified. Their gods were no gods and it was their undoing this day.

Some of them made to run while most

continued to stand still in horrified wonder, too paralyzed by fright to move a muscle. I crashed into the enemy ranks even as fire seemed to consume them in a solid front of epic power previously unseen on the battlefields of man.

It seemed that in less than a minute the enemy host lay fallen within the valley and I and Phalon were alone once again. I pulled Phalon up to look over the devastation, even as scores upon scores of vultures already hovered within the air as if pre-alerted of the bountiful feast to be had this day. El Elyon truly did know all and orchestrated the beginning from the end.

I waited for the caravan silently, still marveling at what El Elyon could do. In an hour's time the caravan appeared and slowly made their way around the scene

of divinely purposed conflict. The faith of all was increased as one and all realized the depth of the Father's love for us who had forsaken all to follow where our faith had led us.

I came up alongside my wife's cart and tied Phalon off to it. I handed the lance with the banner to an old man sitting beside the driver and climbed on past him into the wagon.

How I could think of sleep in a moment like this after what I'd just seen I wasn't sure, but I had let fear wear upon me for days and now the peace that I felt told me it was safe to rest. I lay down beside my wife, who slept on, blissfully unaware of the larger engagement that had just occurred.

Lavaya appeared at my shoulder with a grin and I knew what she wanted.

Tiredly I smiled up at her and said, “Daddy needs rest, but then I promise I’ll give you your first riding lesson.”

“Yes!” Lavaya crowed out jubilantly.

Smiling I fell asleep, even as my son claimed my finger with his tiny hand.

Chapter Nineteen

Vision in the Night

Poretani was behind us and so were the hosts of Sheol. We'd reached the Kingdom of Ephanum with not a moment to spare.

The caravan was already pressing northward toward the Kingdom of Toll. The Kingdom of Toll was largely friendly to us and I expected to meet with no resistance to us passing through

their lands to the Wastelands beyond.

The King of Ephanum was drawn off to the side of the caravan's passage surrounded by a group of his military commanders. When we had reached the border it was to be greeted by most of the Kingdom of Ephanum's army.

I drew up beside the King, who looked me over somewhat coldly before saying, "Glad to see you made it through Poretani."

Sure, he was, I thought to myself sarcastically. The kings of Smirnaz and Ephanum had never been on the friendliest of terms and I now filled that role.

It was hard to think of myself as a king and yet the fact remained. The fact also remained that the King of Ephanum had known that I had to make my way

through Poretani. He had been at war with Poretani and it would've been a thing of ease for him to keep a force on the border so that Poretani could not have mustered a second force to come against us without exposing themselves to an invasion from behind.

Instead the King had waited within his own borders and held back his troops from the border. Such actions were not the act of a friend.

“Are you ready to evacuate your kingdom sire? The enemy's outlying scouts aren't but a few hours back of us.”

“We're not leaving. The Wastelands hold no refuge for us or for you, but go if you must. We will cover your retreat from the field of battle,” the King said dismissively.

His response was not surprising, but I felt that I had to try anyway, “How do you hope to stand, sire, where five other kingdoms have failed to do so?”

“Ephanum has always been alone in our fight for independence with the other kingdoms so far removed from us and Smirnaz, cursed with perpetual witness to the north, being of no help to us.”

It was a direct insult and one I would not let pass, “Who has done more for Ephanum than Smirnaz of late? We rid your northern border of giants, but go ahead and sit on your border and wait for certain destruction even as you doom your people to the monstrous appetites of the host that approaches! You will have your wish in being alone as I will not allow one resident of Smirnaz, who believes in the new covenant, to remain

within the reach of the evil that is coming!”

With no further words I steered Phalon away from the King's group and headed northward to Smirnaz to oversee that very commitment as the caravan headed for Toll.

It was early in the morning of the second day of my ride north that I saw the banners of a people on the march. The people of Smirnaz were leaving their ancestral lands. From the size of the caravan of people it looked as if everyone was coming.

I rode toward the column of refugees, closely watched over by elements of the army. Cheers broke out from soldier and commoner alike as I drew close enough to be recognized.

I rode through the ranks of civilians

and soldiers to the tune of shouted praise. I was a hero to these people. The rest of the world was in dark times, but for Smirnaz, times of late had been the best it had ever experienced as a nation.

They were willingly forsaking all that now, because of how much they trusted me to not lead them astray. The pressure to not let them down was enormous, but one I accepted.

The morning sky was stained with smoke and distant fire. I rode on, concern mounting within me. It took a while to get past the seemingly endless droves of people, yet I saw more approaching across the smoke-filled plain in the distance. Were they enemy or friend?

I rode onward, assuming the latter, and was rewarded with the appearance

of Thanuel and others of my trusted friends. Thanuel and I embraced briefly.

I gestured to the burning horizon, “Surely the enemy has not advanced so quickly?”

“No, but they’re not far. I didn’t feel that you would want to leave them with anything so I burnt the entire kingdom. I’m sorry, but it would appear that you are King over very little now.”

“You thought right Thanuel and I am yet King over much! Leave the Smirnaz army to guard the civilians. I want you to take my men and provide support for the caravan I brought from the West. They should have just entered Toll to the south. Both caravans will meet up in the Wastelands as we journey to the Forests of Darkor.”

Thanuel saluted and headed off with

the others at his back, while I made my way to the front of the people of my nation. They'd put their trust in me and forsaken all, now I would do the same and not ride off to my own family further south.

The sands blew about as the wind howled. I walked among the dunes at night, all the while keeping a close eye for Evanik dogs.

I had far more sentries posted than even wartime would require. I even had kill teams patrolling out in the moonlit landscape. If I could keep the hounds on the move instead of letting them form into larger packs, my hope was that they would be unable to mount a massed

attack and pass beyond the sentry lines and claim the innocent lives of children.

What I did now by walking out into the dunes alone was foolish by even my own standards, but I felt driven to do it. I stared at the forest in the distance off to the East.

We had been camped here in this low depression in the Wastelands for two days twiddling our thumbs. My scouts told me that Ephanum was on the verge of collapsing against the fast-moving forces that had been trailing us. It was as if all had been overcome by darkness in but the matter of a few hours.

The enemy would be here soon. Troubling also was the fact that Ayaya was several days late and my scouts had reported no signs of a party of Yesathurim coming up from the south to

join with us. I was at a crossroads once more as to what to do.

“El Elyon help me,” I whispered out into the chill desert air.

The figure of a man began to grow closer to me, coming across the sands of the Wastelands from the East. Somehow I knew who it was and my feet took flight as I ran with all my strength toward the oncoming man, who had likewise broken into a run towards me.

I know Kuri would've embraced me as his brother, but I threw myself at his feet instead, “My Lord! My Lord!”” I said over and over as I was completely overcome with emotion.

Kuri pulled me to my feet and embraced me tightly to him as one greatly loved, “My friend! My faithful friend! How I have longed for your

company again Benaiah!”

Kuri pulled back to regard me and I saw the truth of all things to be seen within his eyes like never before. He had come back as foretold by the Holy Scrolls!

Kuri shook his head, “This is a dream Benaiah. Even now you lie beside your wife in a deep sleep.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, at a loss as to how what I was experiencing was not reality.

“The prophecies have not yet been fulfilled. The people are not yet one. I need you to finish your witness of faith in this life. Gather my wayward sheep into the fold and then come to me.”

The dream began to fade then. Dimly now, I heard Kuri say one last time, “Come to me.”

I awoke with a start and sat bolt upright breathing hard.

“Benaiah?” Susori asked in concern, her hand touching at my arm.

I lay back down and she pulled in closer to me, slipping her leg over mine as she laid her head on my shoulder.

“I had a dream,” I said dazedly, still trying to become aware of what was reality and what was dream.

“Can you tell me?” she asked softly.

I told her all of it. Through it all she remained very quiet and after a pause of time I said, “Tomorrow I’m going to have to leave you.”

Deep wracking sobs shook through Susori and she clasped onto me so tight I could hardly breathe. I held her to me as she continued to sob with her face buried against my neck. She wasn’t the

only one crying.

I tucked my face against her hair. I loved the smell of her hair. All I had ever wanted to be happy in life was to be with this woman.

“I love you honey!” I said with all the emotion I felt for the woman in my arms.

Her face lifted to gaze down into mine. Tears dribbled onto my chest as she blubbered out, “All I’ve ever wanted is to be with you! I.....” her voice trailed off in a slight wail.

I grasped her face lovingly and in the gloom of the tent I stared imploringly into her glorious eyes and said, “We will be together again, I promise! I don’t know how it will be, but we will be together again. I promise!”

She nodded and whispered brokenly, “Hold me.”

My arms wrapped around her and I held her for what seemed only a few minutes, but was probably more likely hours, before the sun began to make its unwanted appearance over the horizon.

I stood tall in the stirrups watching as the mass of wagons and those walking began to grow dim. I sat down in the saddle and took a moment to bring myself under emotional control, but it wasn't happening I silently acknowledged, as a tear made its way down my face.

I heard the shifting motion of a horse coming up beside mine and I hurriedly wiped at my tears. A hand touched at my arm and I looked over to see Falarin

shaking his head.

“Sire, do not hide what you feel, for surely those who follow you do so out of the knowledge that as a leader you are great, not because of your great feats of courage alone, but also because yours is a heart made to love and have compassion,” Falarin said with tears in his own eyes.

I looked at him as a smile made its way through my private sorrow and said, “Spoken like a King, Falarin.”

“If I speak as a King it is only because I have learned to witness what I see exhibited by you.” Then, on a different note he asked, “Can I not come with you?”

I shook my head, “The people are in need of a leader and you are a great one. A man after my own heart and not that of

your father. Lead the people to the edge of the forest and there make camp and wait for us. You will need to make a breastwork defense to repel against both the animals of the forest and any advance parties of the enemy, but do not fear as help will come. The prophecies of the Holy Scrolls will be fulfilled. El Elyon be with you Falarin.”

“And you my King!” Falarin said, before riding off to join the disappearing convoy of people that represented all of Ayenathurim.

Though their origins were as varied as their many languages they were a people unified by faith. I prayed once more for their safety.

Turning from the East I faced the indomitable army at my back. My eyes scanned over these most faithful of all to

me. Some of them had been with me since I had left Philanthia four years before. A few from years earlier and some for only a few months.

To a man or woman I knew they were dedicated to whatever task I put before them. Such unquestioned loyalty was the stuff of legends.

To them I was a legend. To myself, I was an inferior man being used to accomplish the impossible on a daily basis and yet with El Elyon all things were possible.

I rode through their ranks toward the south. Jarken was at my side with the banner of the Holy Scrolls held high and Thaniel rode on my other side. It was good to go into my last battle with my friends beside me.

None at my back questioned why it

was that we rode to the aid of a people who regarded us as their inferior, because to them it didn't matter. We rode under El Elyon's banner and it was His will that we would fulfill.

Ayaya rested back against a boulder as she held a cool rag to her sore throat. She had talked and talked until she was blue in the face, still it seemed to matter not at all. The people would not listen to her and now it was too late.

The enemy camp lay beyond the wall already. For better or worse, they were now trapped within this valley.

She stared hatefully at the wall that ran from one end of the valley opening

to the other. The people would rather put their trust in a creation of mortar and stone than they would the God of their creation.

If she could, she would crush the wall before her so that her people would have no other choice but to awaken spiritually and stop being caught up in the ancient traditions that had no spiritual meaning. Now, though, if the wall came down they would all die.

An enemy host numbering well over a hundred thousand lay encamped against the wall. The enemy's numbers swelled daily by a figure of ten thousand or more. It was as if the whole world had risen up against them.

Ayaya rose up and made her way to the colossal wall. By torchlight she

began the long climb to its top.

Her people had built the wall well, but it would be their undoing in the end. Bitterly, she stared out over the vast plain dotted with campfires. Tomorrow the enemy would attack.

The end had begun and her people had not been ready for it. The need for a miracle was high and earnestly she prayed for one.

Horn blasts rent the night air apart and drove the drunken revelry of the enemy camp into consternation. Ayaya gripped hold of the stone wall before her and watched as dark shadows sped past enemy campfires.

Tents were knocked down and caught ablaze as enemy combatants were either run down or cut down by fast-moving blurs of motion. The onrush of

the unknown force was concentrated in its approach to the solitary gate in the wall.

Ayaya broke away from her spot and ran towards the gatehouse screaming, "Open the gate!!!"

Strangely, a people who had played deaf to her voice and everything that she had to say for days now, leapt into action to do her bidding. The massive gate began to inch upward just in time as the front runners of the unknown force converged on it.

I ducked under the steel teeth of the still rising gate and sped onward into the valley that I and Kuri had helped drive clear of unclean beasts. Pulling off to the

side, I held up as my army continued to stream by in great volume.

The enemy encampment, roused from their rest and drunken debaucheries, formed a disorganized force that now raced for the open gate that had begun to lower as the last few riders streamed through. The enemy was cut down by massive volleys of arrows that sheeted down on them from the wall tops.

The gate clicked into place solidly and the enemy retreated after having suffered serious casualties. A cheer went up from all the defenders on the wall.

I dismounted and walked toward the welcoming committee that was forming. Ayaya was the first to rush forward. Her voice was painfully hoarse as she spoke, "Thank El Elyon you came!"

The excitement fell from her face to

then be replaced with a spirit of defeat as she said, “I’ve failed in my quest to get them to leave. I.....”

I put my hand over her mouth, “Rest your voice Ayaya. You have not failed! The witness we give to others is not measured by their willingness to accept what we tell them, but rather by how faithful we have been to impart what truths have been revealed to us. El Elyon expects our best and I do not doubt that is what you’ve done. Now who is this approaching me?”

“The tribal elders. The Yesathurim have no central leader.”

I nodded before I headed straight for the group with Ayaya by my side.

“Welcome stranger! How many spears do you bring to the fight?”

“About four thousand, but I haven’t

come to help you in your foolishness to think you can resist the prophecies given of old.”

The five tribal chiefs stared at me in a mixture of shock bordering on outrage. Inspiration came to me and I pointed to the wall at my back, “Your wall will fall in three days’ time. I speak to you from the Most High and not out of any private knowledge. I will help you today and tomorrow, but before the third day dawns I am leaving with my warriors and all who choose to come with me of their own free will.”

“And just who do you think you are to speak to us so?” One of the tribal members spoke out harshly.

I stepped forward, “I’m the man who killed the monster single-handedly on the spot you now stand. Behold the dirt still

stained red by its blood. I'm also the man who helped make this valley habitable and a safe place for your people to dwell, along with the Savior of your own flesh and blood whom you rejected as a leader over you in times past and even now to the present! That's who I am! Now where can my warriors bed down for what remains of the night in order to be rested for the attack in the morning?"

The five tribal chiefs looked at me in shock. One pointed off to the left and I said, "Thank you. I will see you on the wall in the morning."

I walked away then with Ayaya tagging along.

"That was awesome!" she breathed out.

"You think so? Time will tell I guess,

as nothing is to be gained by not being upfront about things.”

The valley had changed a lot, but even in the dark I sensed the familiar outlines of the place that had once been my home for a year. I looked to the wall bathed in the light of torches. It was different and, although well-built, it didn't belong in the majestic setting of this valley.

The next morning

I stared out at the solid ranks of the enemy. There were soldiers from all nations and then there were also monsters: Lion men here and there, lots of Gargons and even more creations of darkness that I had never seen or heard of before.

Idly I wondered how ordinary, howbeit misguided and deceived, people could stand so casually beside unadulterated evil. I said as much to Ayaya, beside me on the wall.

She shook her head, “Not casually. They stand there in fear. Motivated by fear. Bound by fear. Enslaved by it to do its bidding. Behold an army built on fear. They only believe in what they can see and the power of the evil beings standing to either side of them testifies to the fact of whom they should serve.”

I shook my head, “Not a good way to live.”

“No,” Ayaya affirmed.

“An army comprised of such divisions surely must be a fragile one in terms of morale,” I said, more to myself.

“What do you have in mind?” Ayaya

asked knowingly.

“Something crazy,” I said, as a plan began to formulate within the fertile plains of my mind’s eye.

I started to move off when Ayaya stopped me with a hand to the arm, “Do you think any of them will leave with you tomorrow?”

I thought about it a moment before saying, “Yes.”

“How do you plan to leave with the enemy force cutting off any escape from the valley?”

I smiled, “There is another way out of the valley that Kuri and I found.”

Ayaya nodded her head as if marveling at something. Softly then she said, “El Elyon provides.”

“Yes, He does.”

It was midday when the army beyond the gate began to escalate the tension, in the buildup to what I felt would be a night assault on the wall. If the enemy was left free to attack the wall I felt sure that the wall defenses would fail the first night.

Something needed to be done to steal the momentum and I had a good idea as to what that could be. The only question was, would it work?

I paused beside an offensive siege machine on the wall top and studied it closely as a band of Yesathurim warriors looked on curiously. The machine in question was a simple bolt action javelin launcher.

The javelin was already loaded into

the receiver and was of standard design. Turning to the warriors manning the siege batteries on this far left side of the wall I asked in their own language, “Do you have any javelin bolts for this machine designed with a latchet to attach a rope?”

One warrior dug around in a pile behind him and produced a javelin that suited my needs perfectly.

“Perfect! Now can you guys reload the machine with that javelin bolt and then move the whole contraption closer to the wall edge?”

They worked to quickly do what I requested, which gladdened me. It was as I suspected. With no real leadership being exhibited by the tribal leaders, the warriors were only too glad to follow the dictates of someone with an actual

plan.

I doubted that there was an experienced warrior on the wall who believed victory, or even just defense against the enemy forces beyond the wall, was even possible. To the tribal chiefs and common people, however, the wall looked imposing and combined with their arrogance of superiority they thought themselves invincible.

“What are you up to?” came Mayrin’s voice from behind me.

I turned to her, “Think you can get your horse up here on the wall?”

Her eyes got big and stuttering slightly she said, “Uhhh..... I think so, but why would I want to do that?”

“Just do it.”

She just stood there staring at me. “Well get on with you!” I said, shoving

her good-naturedly into action.

She turned from me and began leaping down the stairs two at a time. Turning back, I was in time to see the javelin launcher moved into final position.

I picked up the ends of two rope piles and tied them together. I then kicked one pile of rope over the valley side of the wall.

The rope from the second pile quickly snaked down over the wall after the first rope pile. I picked up the free end of the fast disappearing pile of rope and tied it off to the metal ring on the end of the javelin.

Turning to the valley side, I called out to the first of my friends that I saw there, "Sar'ran!"

He looked up and I gestured to the rope hanging down the side of the wall,

“Tie it off to your horse and be ready to move all out when you’re given the word!”

He leapt to the task without asking any questions, but I knew he must be curious. As for myself, I was either going to make a really big fool of myself or pull off the stunt of the century. On the other hand, if I did make a fool of myself it wouldn’t matter because I would be dead.

Over the racket of the enemy army, I heard a disturbance off to the side. Looking that way, I beheld Mayrin leading her horse up the steep stairs to the wall top. The horse took to it easily enough, but it appeared that almost everyone was asking her what in the world she was doing. In reply she just kept gesturing off in the distance to me,

which only seemed to puzzle her questioners more.

Thanuel and Jarcken had appeared in the battery and were both looking on the proceedings with interest. Jarcken nodded slowly, as if realizing some private puzzle and picked up a piece of rope and began braiding a loop of it around the rope that trailed out from behind the javelin launcher.

Thanuel walked to the wall and glanced over for a moment and then back to me, before laughing softly as he shook his graying head of hair back and forth, "You never cease to amaze me."

Stepping up to the wall beside him I asked, "Will it work?"

"I think so," Thanuel said. Then laughing again he said, "For your sake I can only hope so!" He slapped me on the

back good-naturedly and went to help Mayrin.

In this moment I wished that I possessed his confidence in me. My palms were sweaty, as I ran through my head once again what needed to be done.

A snuffled snort behind me alerted me to the fact that Mayrin had arrived with her horse. I helped her to lead her horse over the rope and to my side of the javelin launcher. The breadth of the wall stretched out before us.

Pointing I said to Mayrin, "Go tell the warriors gathered along the wall to move back to the valley side edge and to stay down."

She looked at me strangely, but quickly complied. The warriors moved back at her bidding as Jarcken and I worked on securing his short length of

rope, which was noosed over the main rope, to Mayrin's saddle.

I glanced over the wall, and saw that Sar'ran was ready and on his horse, prepared to ride. He gave a big grin and waved up to me. I waved back, as I felt a smile come out on my own face. I was crazy to do this, but increasingly the thought of pulling this off was a challenge I desired to accomplish.

All was in readiness and Mayrin was back.

“Just what are we doing?” she asked nervously.

I patted her shoulder, “You'll see. Now mount up.”

I helped her up and then gazing up at her I said, “When Thanuel gives the word, you ride as fast as this horse can go out along the length of the wall.

Understand?”

Wiping sweat off her brow she nodded shakily.

“You’ll do just fine.”

I turned from her and went to the wall. Thanuel handed me a short length of chain, which I accepted.

Jarken was already manning the javelin launcher. He lifted it to point it down over the wall and for a man typically of many words he spoke only a few. “The big one?” he asked, as he sighted down the peep sights of the launcher.

“Yep. Put it in the sand right in front of him,” I said.

Yesathurim warriors all over were shaking their heads in disbelief and beginning to voice objections to what was going on.

“Do it!” I said.

The taunt strings of the launcher snapped forward and the javelin shot out at high-speed over the wall. I watched as it streaked out toward the giant that was whipping up a frenzy among the enemy forces.

Standing about 11 feet tall he wasn't the most imposing of giants that I'd ever seen, but he did possess the fighting attributes of a superior fighter along with some leadership ability. It didn't matter. I was going to kill him.

I leapt up onto the wall top at the same moment the javelin buried itself deeply into the sandy loam not 10 feet from the giant's feet. I jumped out into space as Thanuel and Jarcken pulled taut the rope attached to the javelin.

I whipped the chain out and overtop

the rope and caught the other end with my free hand. My wild ride began in earnest then.

The chain, now burdened with my weight, skipped down the rope at high speed. The ground was fast approaching and at the last moment I let go of the chain and tumbled head over heels into the sand and up to my feet.

My tumble had brought me dangerously close to the giant who had turned from the crowd before him at the outburst of excitement when the javelin bolt was shot from the wall. In surprised alarm at the appearance of me, the giant swung his large broadsword down in an attempt to separate me into two pieces.

I sidestepped away from the blade and as his sword bit into the ground I drew my own blade, stepped close and

swung upward with all my power. Blood spurted as the giant's head went rolling, even as his body remained motionless still grasping the sword buried in the ground.

Dodging forward, I picked the head up by the hair and then, spinning in a half circle, I heaved the head, that had the weight of a boulder, out into the stunned crowd of onlookers.

That done, I wiped my blade off on the back of the giant's body that had meanwhile fallen forward. Then I stepped backward with an overly dramatic bow as if receiving praise for a well done performance.

An insane howl erupted from a nearby creature of darkness and as one the enemy line heaved forward toward me. I grabbed hold of the rope still attached to

the javelin and with one short swipe of my sword I severed the rope from the javelin. In the next moment I re-sheathed my sword.

I heard Thanuel's booming voice call out to Sar'ran to ride hard and the rope in my hands jerked me forward toward the wall so abruptly that I almost lost my grip on it. I held on with a death grip though, because that would be what I was if I let go. As it was I could barely keep my feet under me as I was pulled along at high speed.

The wall was very close now. Very close!

I couldn't help but think this had been a bad idea. As if from a long way off I heard Thanuel's voice ring out, yelling at Mayrin.

All of a sudden I was jerked off my

feet and into the air towards my left. With gritted teeth I prepared to push off from the wall before I smacked into it. If I didn't keep my feet under me I'd be dragged up the rough side of the stone wall and be nothing more than bloody pulp by the time I reached topside.

My legs connected with enough force that it felt like my knees were blown apart, but the image of my bloody misshapen form reaching the wall top was strong motivation to keep my legs going. On and on I ran sideways up the wall getting closer and closer to the top of the wall as Mayrin's horse pulled the rope upward.

Suddenly the wall top was there and all I had time to see was the wide-eyed stares of the warriors gathered there. Perhaps this had been poorly thought out

after all.

If I overshot the wall top I'd plummet to my death on the Valley side of the wall. That thought had me letting go of the rope. There was a quiet moment then, when blessedly no further exertion was required of me.

I landed on the outstretched hands of the warriors on this part of the wall, who narrowly saved me from going over the other side. I was out of air and energy and ill-prepared for the jubilant shouting tumult that had erupted on the wall all around me.

They pounded on me and screamed excitedly in my face, but all I craved was silence and a place to recover my shattered nerves.

"Backup! Give him some room!" came Thanuel's voice and then, like two

guardian Malachim, he and Jarcken swooped in beside me and gave me some space to breathe.

Blinking, I looked up into Thanuel's concerned eyes and he asked, "Okay boss?"

"I think so," I huffed out.

He helped me to my feet and half supported me as my legs about gave out on me. I leaned forward on the wall for support and as I did so I noticed something profound. The enemy beyond the wall was utterly silent where before they had filled our ears for hours with the roars of their desire to kill us.

Reversely, it now seemed that the whole valley echoed with the vibration of the elation on the part of the Yesathurim reacting to what had been done.

“I think I’m going to take the rest of the day off.”

“Yes, that would be good I think,”
Thanuel said at about the same moment I felt myself pass out.

I awoke to a groan of pain, followed by realized actual pain. I’d been dreaming of Susori and that she’d been taken from me. I’d been reaching for her when I woke up. Now all I felt was the pain of my ordeal earlier in the day.

Blinking I looked around. It was dark. I’d apparently slept the day away. Some part of me wished that I’d slept the night away as well, but responsibility drove me to my feet.

Groaning, I began to walk, the

soreness of my limbs easing up a bit with increased movement. I walked in the general direction of the wall in the need to know what was going on. I certainly hoped that a night assault wasn't imminent as I was not ready for it by any means.

Everyone I came across bowed and made way before me. It was a bit awkward.

Reaching the steps I stopped and winced at the prospect of going up them. The stairs were full of warriors poised to repel an assault if one was attempted.

The warrior nearest me extended a hand and I took it. He heaved me upward a step and in like manner the action was repeated until I reached the top of the wall. In gratitude I turned back to the stairs and the warriors gathered there.

“Thank you,” I said in their native tongue, which Kuri had taught me years before.

As one the warriors saluted. Their action was echoed by all those on the wall as they noticed my appearance. It would appear that I had won the heart of the army.

Ayaya came to me smiling broadly. I smiled as well. It was an encouraging sign of a possible change in her people’s heart.

A tribal leader was nearby and I made my way to him, “What’s going on below?” I asked, as I looked over the wall for myself.

“Nothing, thanks to you.”

It seemed he was right as I saw no suspicious activity going on in the enemy camp below.

The tribal leader spoke again, “Tomorrow.....”

I nodded encouragingly and he continued as his voice strengthened, “I and my tribe will be going with you. I believe. I have been blind for so long and now it is as if I am seeing for the first time.”

I saw the sincerity of his statement reflected in his eyes and I reached toward him and hugged him to me like a brother. Falteringly at first, his arms closed around me, and then strengthened to match mine.

Encouraged beyond words I drew back from him and hoped that he was but the first of many to move beyond the past and accept the promise of the future that had been so freely given by El Elyon to all mankind.

“Sir?” A warrior nearby called out with concern and I turned back to the wall and looked over it. Dark cloaked individuals, though few in number, had advanced to stand widely spaced out before the wall.

I had a hunch which was confirmed a moment later by my friend Philuke when he sent an arrow speeding off toward the nearest cloaked individual. The arrow passed clear through the hooded figure as if he wasn't there.

“They're of the fallen Malachim.”

“What will happen now?” The tribal leader breathed out.

I shook my head, “Who knows, but I will say that whatever it is, it will cause this wall to fall in two days' time.”

The cloaked henchmen of darkness began to hum loudly in a way that no

human could make or much less sustain indefinitely as they were. They seemed to achieve a desired resonance between them and when they did I felt the wall beneath me begin to vibrate.

“The wall is actually shaking!” My new friend said in a tone that sounded just as shaken.

Nodding I turned away from the enemy.

“What do we do?” The tribal leader asked me desperately.

I shrugged, as I manifested a spirit of calmness and said, “Well, for starters I’m going to go get something to eat and then I’m going to get some more rest.”

He stared at me in disbelief and I continued, “Then, after I’m rested, I intend to leave with my force of warriors and all who wish to enter the

Kingdom of Shamayim tomorrow morning.

I turned to take in all the listening warriors and I said broadly to all of them, “All of you are welcome to come, but it involves making a choice grounded in faith. It does you no good to come if you do not believe in the new covenant as I do. That new covenant is to be found in Kuri, the man you rejected as leader over you. It is not too late to join him, but the hour has grown late and soon there will be hardship as never before. I pray that you choose to believe now in the source of the redemption of all mankind instead of waiting to believe at a later date. Tomorrow I leave to join my men and women waiting for the King of Shamayim who is coming soon. Very soon.”

With that said I started down the wall that vibrated underfoot. Calling out behind me I added, "I very much doubt that any assault will be made on the wall now and I believe it would be advisable for as many of you as possible to get off of it." A crack split through a rock in the wall beside my head as if to prove the efficacy of my words.

With newfound strength I made my way down the stairs, confident that many were now ready to come along with me on the journey tomorrow.

A tall, dark shadow of a man stood up ahead of me and as I drew closer I recognized in astonishment the form of Bruton. I had not known that he was a man of Yesathurim lineage, but his residence here echoed loudly of that fact.

I came to a stop, uncertain as to what this man would do. Slowly I watched as he held a massive hand out to me. I took it wondering if it was a trap and that my hand would soon be smashed beyond repair within his grip, but he squeezed only lightly.

In his deep voice he spoke, “You once gave me life and now I have new life beyond any that you extended to me. Where once I was damned, now I am free to live. I will be with you on the journey tomorrow for I believe even as you.”

Feeling a bit overcome I said, “I’m glad to have you Bruton. The King’s glad too.”

For the first time I saw the somber features of this man split wide in a smile that warmed the night as he said, “I

know.”

Chapter Twenty

The Final Order

I sat on my horse in dejection as I stared at the three tribal leaders who yet refused to go with me.

Looking to the wall that now shook and was visibly crumbling the one leader said, "Of a truth we do not doubt what you say in that this wall will fall on the morrow, but what you ask us to believe is too much. We cannot go with you as we do not believe as you do that the old prophecies have already been fulfilled and that a Savior has already

come from long ago and whose spirit is even at work in the world today. We cannot accept this and thus we cannot embrace the future that you seem so positive is to be found waiting for us in the Wastelands.”

I leaned forward toward the speaker and said, “The day will come when you shall have no choice but to believe, but I wish for your sakes that you did not have to go through the trials that your unbelief is going to take you.”

The three remained silent as well as the people behind them. There was no changing their minds.

Looking off into the valley beyond the newly constructed city I said, “Since you will not come with us and if you stay here before your wall you will die, I suggest you flee further into the valley.

There are caves all throughout these mountains where many of the high order animals survived while the fallen order kinds dominated the valley below. Perhaps you will be able to hide from and survive the onslaught that is beyond that wall, eager to be unleashed upon you. Either way it at least gives some of you the best chance of survival.”

“We’ll take that under advisement, but we have not yet given up hope that our Savior will come for us and yet win this battle.”

In disgust I wheeled Phalon away from them, but I heard what Ayaya said. “He has already come and when he did we rejected his kingship. I should know for I was to be his bride, instead I wounded him and was party to his death, but now he is alive again! The truth of

my witness is before you and yet you are deaf to it! I am one that lived in and saw those days and since then my years have been expanded so that I might see this day of reconciliation take place, only to behold that those first invited to my wedding are few in number and that the guest roles have been likewise filled by those deemed as foreigners to the truth first given to us! You choose death when life is but a step away! May El Elyon have mercy on you for the world will have none!”

I continued urging Phalon away. All that could have been said had been. Though a witness had been raised from the grave to bear witness to the truths of the past, still the people would not believe, for they rejected the path laid down in the Holy Scrolls and substituted

it for the doctrines of man. There was nothing more to be done as even the Holy Scrolls had predicted this.

I led the people behind me across the valley. Almost a third of the Yesathurim had come and I was grateful for every one of them. It would have been a sad tale to come so far, to risk so much, only to return with nothing, but as I had come to learn over and over in my life, the words of El Elyon never failed to deliver what they promised. Even so there was, as prophesied, a remnant behind me of those who believed.

Thankfully, we were soon distanced from the internal groaning of rock against rock and the infernal humming of the dark ones' song of destruction. The knowledge of how soon the wall was likely to collapse drove us all on at a

fast clip. I only held back from a cantering trot because of the slow oxcarts filled with children and those too old to run along.

The valley's environment became more lush in its vegetation as we went deeper into it. Soon I saw the small lake that lay in the valley's center and around it was gathered a large herd of Tricans.

My mind drifted back to the big female I had ridden into battle and idly I called out to her in my mind. The herd moved away from the water then and began moving towards our destination point in the opposing mountain slope.

My brow furrowed in perplexity of the strange reaction and then it occurred to me that these high order beasts had been gifted with an exceptionally keen intelligence. Their fate as a giant's or a

Gargon's meal was sealed once the valley was overrun.

They were escaping the Valley too, but they had been held in readiness against doing so by a higher power so they did not give away the valley's only other exit. El Elyon was always so thoughtful of even the most minor of details, I mused to myself.

The Tricans acted as if they were nothing more than big tame cattle as they trotted into the cavern located in the rocky side of the mountain slope ahead of us. Their passage would help clear the way of obstructions for the ox carts as any loose stones would be crushed to gravel beneath their great weight.

“El Elyon is good!” I said out loud.

“All the time,” Ayaya echoed.

The darkness of the cave closed

around us as the sound of rock being pulverized echoed back to us from the herd ahead.

The dawning of the third day occurred just as we came clear of the tunnel and stepped into the Wastelands. The Tricans had not stopped and neither would we. There would be no stopping until we reached the encampment at the forest.

The day moved on with no sign of the enemy and it passed with no sign of the enemy. Our progress was good and I allowed a brief rest of about four hours during the darkest part of the night. Before the sun was up though we were back on the move.

The sun had not reached quite halfway

into the sky when it became real to me that pursuit of us was close at hand. Pausing, I stared off behind us but I sensed no pursuit from that quarter. I looked to the West and the kingdoms of Ayenathurim and felt more certain that it was the direction from which the attack would come.

Sar'ran got off his horse and put his ear to the ground for a moment. I looked to him and he nodded without a word and pointed off to the West.

“How long is it till we reach the encampment do you think?” Thanuel asked uncertainly.

“The people we protect should reach it just as the sun is going down,” I said, as I thought out the remaining journey ahead in my mind. So close, but yet so far.

Sar'ran spoke up, "There is no time for us to reach the encampment. At our present rate of speed we should see the enemy within the hour and from there they will be on our position in an hour or perhaps a little more. They are moving very quickly!"

I nodded, already aware of that truth. I turned from gazing toward the West to looking at each of my friends, some from a long time to those quite recent. They visibly straightened and perceptively they all knew what was in my heart to do.

"Prepare the army and inform the convoy to pick up their pace as much as possible."

"Yes, Sir!" they all affirmed and rode off to see that it was done.

I alone stared off to the West. I wasn't

alone for long though. I glanced off to the side and silently acknowledged Bruton, who had stepped away from the caravan, along with most of the Yesathurim warriors who had come with us.

I could see dust clouds put off by the enemy now. They were running themselves to death in their eagerness to put us to death. Such hate was unfathomable and yet there was no denying its existence.

Hearing snorted grunts and heavy steps from behind me, I turned in the saddle and was astonished to see that the herd of Tricans had come about and was coming up into a position behind me in a long, staggered out line.

I waited as they came close, only to drift to a stop and then stare steadily into the West, not moving a muscle. I got off

Phalon and approached the massive female not far from me.

She turned her great head to regard my approach with a keen interest. Laying a hand on one of her horns I patted her great snout with the other, “The years have been kind to both of us. Thank you for this last service on behalf of the Kingdom.”

Her eyes blinked and I walked away. Warriors had already started to outfit Phalon with his heavy chain link regalia of war. Glancing back to the West I acknowledged that war would soon be upon us.

A second flurry of dust off to the East had me looking in that direction with concern. As the dust got closer I recognized the banners of the Knights that had forsaken their kingdoms to come

with us to the forest.

Before long Falarin pulled up before me in a cloud of dust as what looked like the entire army of gathered nations of Ayenathurim fanned out to either side of my position.

In grave concern I addressed Falarin, “You left the people undefended?”

He shook his head and with a smile said, “They are in no need of our protection. The great high order beasts of the forest have surrounded the encampment as a living wall of defense against any opposing enemies. No enemy would dare to even attempt to get through their line. We have come to aid you in the fight.”

Walking to his horse I put my hand on his leg and said, “Falarin, there are many battles, but this one today will be

different than all the others.”

He leaned forward to me with a look of earnest passion that said he was every inch the King that I knew him to be and said, “There are two ways to enter into the glory of the kingdom. One can wait in earnest expectation of it,” he gestured off to the East with one hand, “Or one can ride straight into it.” He gestured off to the West with his other hand. “I choose to enter it by your side Benaiah, unworthy that I am of the honor of doing so.”

I nodded and said, “Then it will be so. Thank you for coming Falarin.”

“I would have had it no other way.”

I went to Phalon and mounted up and trotted forward of the main battle line, followed by Thanuel and Jarken. I looked to Thanuel only to see that he had

the banner from the battle of Poretani tied off to the lance I had used. Where he had gotten it from I do not know as I had lost track of it.

Noticing my gaze he grinned and said, "Until the end."

I smiled, "The end is just the beginning for us old friend."

I turned back to the West and waited as the army formed a solid line off to either side of me. They filtered to the side and blended around the Tricans, but none stepped in front of them. The Tricans stood solid in their face-off against the threat from the West with all three great horns held high in alertness.

Time passed and the army at my back was silent, except for the jingle of harness and the metallic chink of metal on metal, as we watched the mixed

multitude of the enemy draw close. I saw banners from several Kingdomer Nations and many from Nicationer Nations, although none from Crona.

There were also the usual enforcement henchmen of darkness as well. How else would the masses of the enemy's usurped army be held together if not for the fear of the creatures that evil had spawned.

I glanced behind me at the army that was in readiness to do battle. They were more impressive to behold than the force before us.

We were outnumbered by probably a hundred to one or more, but today it did not matter. I broke my stance of stillness and rode down the column to the left with my sword raised to them and then I rode back to the right side of the column

in a silent salute to all those gathered upon this battlefield today that transcended more than just the physical plain of our existence as mortals upon this world.

Reaching the center of the line once more I called out as loudly as I could, "It is written in the Holy Scrolls that the role of a shepherd is to watch over the sheep and if called upon to even give up his life for the sheep. Today you and I are those shepherds! Today, though we sacrifice ourselves out of love for our families, we are by no means separated from them! Today we enter the Kingdom!!! Victory is already ours!!!" I wheeled Phalon around and he jumped forward with a will even as the whole battle line roared out behind me in echo to my own cry of war.

The staggered line of Tricans let loose with a bellow that shook the dunes and bounded forward, horns lowered toward the fast approaching enemy line. It was a glorious charge.

I had never been a part of anything so unified of faith as this charge into battle and I reveled in it. My wife and children were safe and I was going to do my part this day to keep them so.

Unbelievably the Tricans, at the last moments before the clash of opposing armies, outdistanced the horses and were the first to smash into the enemy line. My big female swung to the right to gore a giant, only to toss him to the side in the next moment, as she churned on over the bodies of the enemy before her. I followed her into the fray of war and the greatest battle of our time began.

Susori looked off to the West as she had all day, her lips moving in silent prayer. The sun hung low in the sky soon to fade from the world, only things began to suddenly get brighter. But the brightness came from the East and not the West.

In astonishment, all turned to the forest to behold a rider on a flaming mount appear overtop the trees. Instantly the faith of all was confirmed as the voice of One who needed no introduction said, "Come up to Me, you who have been faithful to believe, for even so your belief has been attributed to you as righteousness."

All had fallen to their knees at the

voice, but now as one they hurried eagerly forward toward the light. Light pierced through the gloom of early evening as it radiated out from the Rider, who had dismounted and was beckoning all upward to Him.

A miraculous thing occurred then. All the leaves of the trees of the forest let go their hold and swirled in a myriad of color to form a shimmering pathway leading upward to where the source of all light waited patiently for all to come to Him.

As people mounted up the pathway into the sky, another wonder took place. The trees of the forest uprooted and floated upward. Even as they floated upward their masses twisted together to form boats of intricate design that was beyond any craftsman's

ability who had ever walked upon Ayenathurim.

As people made it to the One, they filed past Him to the newly made ships that lay in readiness beyond, as they began to embark on their final journey to Shamayim.

Ayaya looked on in awe as their convoy streamed into the encampment that was fast emptying of people. In sudden trepidation of spirit she made it to the pathway leading upward and began to climb.

She would've passed by Kuri, only He held His hand out to her. With a cry she threw herself at His feet in joy that she was not rejected, but conflicted of

spirit because she of all was the most unworthy of the mercy being offered to her.

He touched her and instantly her travel worn garments were gone, now replaced with a dress of purest white. Gasping she looked up to behold the face of her Suitor, who had never ceased from His ardent pursuing of her.

He took her hands and pulled her to her feet, "All is forgiven Ayaya. You are My bride in whom I find no fault. Your place from now on is by My side even as we are one."

Ayaya, feeling gloriously changed, stepped beside Him who was now her husband and together they stood receiving the souls of those entering into the Kingdom.

Not sure how it came to be, Susori found herself climbing the pathway upwards with her children, the last of all those gathered. The Savior and His bride continued to wait for her slow approach toward them.

Her Master's face bore only kindness and understanding in its regard of her as He said, "Let go of the world and all its cares Susori and enter into the place I have prepared for you."

Crying Susori approached and fell against Him and He held her tenderly, mindful of the baby held in her arms. Gently, He took the baby from her, as with His free hand He wiped at the tears on her face.

He waited for her to calm down and

then simply said, "Come."

He turned to the last vessel and climbed aboard with the baby, who cooed delightedly the whole time within His grasp. Susori, feeling strengthened from within followed behind Him, as Ayaya was beside her carrying Lavaya in her arms.

The boat drifted upwards from the stairway of leaves that now fell spent to the upturned forest floor as all the light and color of Ayenathurim faded into darkness, because the Spirit of El Elyon was no longer in residence upon the face of the land.

It was the end of an age of Grace and the beginning of eternity for those who were the first to believe. More would follow, but theirs would be a salvation gained through great

tribulation.

Dazedly I took in the fact that the sun was all but over the horizon. More keen than that though, I sensed the spiritual change in the atmosphere around me. My family was safe along with all the others.

Victory had been achieved. I could die now.

My head was roughly jerked upright, as I was held up by someone's harsh grip on my hair. The battlefield stretched out all around me. I surely must be the last of my men to be alive.

My gaze took in the fallen Trican not too far from me. After Phalon had gone down from a giant's spear thrust, it had

been me and her just like old times again. Someone was talking.

I tried to focus on the shadowy individual that was screaming at me, but it was hard as I felt more of me was on the journey to Shamayim than remained in the physical.

“Renounce your faith and I will see to it that you are once again restored to the position of King!”

What utter ridiculousness I thought abstractly to myself. They still didn't get it. I doubted that they ever would, until they kissed the lake of fire that was prophesied as their punishment to come.

I focused myself to the task of forming words with what little life I had left in me, “My kingship I cast at the feet of my Master, who alone is worthy of all glory and honor. I am His servant to the end.”

“Do you not know that I am greater? Look, I have conquered this world for myself and by my might I control it and have been given power over all!” the fallen Malachim screamed at me, to which my response was a laugh that hurt my broken body.

I sobered up then, and with a moment of clarity beyond the pain I felt, I looked into his face and said, “The war of life is long and the battle hard, but my reward is eternal.”

The fallen Malachim roared out in fury, “Cut his head off!”

I closed my eyes and peace took over. I was so ready to go and depart from this struggle of the flesh.

Susori looked forward in awe, as the heavens opened before her, in a grand display unparalleled at any other time in history. She'd left her body far behind and now, as a living spirit, she beheld all the wonder of the Creator becoming real before her. A hand slipped into hers and she glanced to the side in startled wonder.

I grinned at her, "I told you we would make this journey together."

Kuri looked back at us with a smile, even as a voice with the resonance that had all creation written within its authority spoke, **"Well done thou good and faithful servant. Take your place at My Son's right-hand and receive the honors set in store for you from before the beginning of the world."**

I stepped forward, eager to know

what lay before me in eternity in my
Master's service.

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- A lot of prayer.

- My desire to carry over key Biblical tenants of faith into an allegorical fictional setting that deals with End Times events from the setting of a culture that has never reached the modernity of our own. I think this is important to do, because I feel that our technology of today separates us often from the cold hard reality of what good vs. evil is truly all about. It is a very sharp divide and it has an end.

- I grew up watching a lot of classic movies (1930's-1960's) and while many may feel that the recent renditions of Lord of the Rings was beneficial in the formation of the world of Ayenathurim, that would be wrong. I have always wanted to create in a fictitious setting

the portrayal of a figure reminiscent of Roderigo Diaz de Bivar, as depicted in the 1961 Blockbuster film, El Cid. If you've watched the movie then perhaps you see the parallels between my character Benaiah and the El Cid. I've always found the story of the Cid inspirational and something to personally emulate in my own life.

- I'm a history nut and I love using my writing to introduce Biblical or antiquity era facts over into the present. For instance, some may think my Lion Men are farfetched, but they are not. Check out this Bible verse from the King James Version of 2 Samuel 23:20 – *“And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, the son of a valiant man, of Kabzeel, who had done many acts, he slew two lionlike men of Moab: he went down also and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of snow:”*

I hope you'll take the time to leave

me a review on any of the many social platforms that there are to pick from today and please tell others about my writing. I would greatly appreciate it.

Sincerely, *Guy Stanton III*

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up with me. God has blessed us with three awesome children that I am very proud of. It seems authors always mention whether or not they have pets and so I will say that

we have two, both cats. As to my interests,
well, writing
and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

