

# *The Endless Knight*

## *~ Honor Restored ~*

### *by Brit*

That a man would see such a storm within his young lifetime was a wonder. To see such a storm twice in his span of years, he would be called either fortunate or cursed.

To be out in it, he would undoubtedly be called a fool.

The solitary figure cantered along the shoreline, just out of reach of the hungry waves pulling the sand away from his horse's hooves. Wind and rain lashed both mane and cloak, threatening to pull back the horse and rider from their chosen path. Each gust was like a slap in his face, forcing his head aside and leaving the bitter taste of sea salt in his mouth. The freezing drops consisted more of ice than of water and pelted his exposed face and hands, but the desperate man was heedless of the stinging pain it caused him. A jagged bolt of lightening split the air, crackling and spitting its wrath, illuminating the sea and surrounding beach with light, making the night as day.

And still he rode on toward the cove.

As horse and rider struggled nearer, the timbre of the surging sea changed. Instead of the angry rush against the unresisting sand, waves battered the few larger rocks jutting out of the water, giving up driftwood and debris and smashing them against the unyielding stone. The guardian urged the chestnut faster still, pressure from his right leg bending the stallion onto higher and firmer ground in order to increase his already breakneck pace. The horse ran gamely on, his rider's fear and urgency propelling them forward.

When the two finally reached the massive outcropping of rocks marking the turn of the shore to the cove, the knight reined in the stallion, causing him to dance against the wind. Successive bolts of lightening shook the sky and forced the horse's ears back. The dark-haired man twisted in the saddle, the wind whipping his own wild mane as he searched the beach and incoming waves for any sign of life. Or death. The chances of any survivors washing to shore were non-existent, but somehow—*somehow*—the man knew deep within that *this* was the night, after so countless many, and that his effort and desire would not be in vain.

Heels tapped the stallion's barrel and the two surged ahead, rounding the bend of the cove and again racing along the shoreline. They were long since soaked through, but the man was oblivious to the dank. The familiar longing drove him past reasonable thought when the storm had come up, and while neighbors and countrymen were securing their possessions and homes against the gale-force winds, the knight was leaving the protection of the castle walls against his superior's orders and heading for the sea.

Lightening again seared the sky. A flash of pale color from within the waves caught the man's eye, and his heart leapt to his throat. *Dear God, please! Let it be...*

With a bellow, he urged the chestnut on to even greater speed, crazily galloping back down the embankment to the water's edge. The knight dropped the reins, trusting that the horse's speed would keep the slippery leather from catching under its hooves. Half-frozen hands unclasped his cloak, the cloth falling aside like a downed bird. Just as his scabbard was worked free as well, the man shifted in the saddle, and a word brought the stallion to a ground-churning stop before the next outcropping of rocks.

He threw his leg over the horse's neck and slid to the sand, ignoring the trembling legs that threatened to drop him into the waves. A quick toss placed the longsword and sheath over the saddle's cantle.

Wildly, the knight ran the remaining steps through the surf toward the outcropping of rocks, scanning the ocean for the flash of color he had spied only seconds ago. Chunks of wood from a destroyed ship brushed his leg as he surged past. *Fool! How could anything—anyone—survive such a storm?*

Swallowing back his fear, the man mumbled a half-remembered prayer of protection from his childhood and waded farther into the onslaught of waves. Lightning flashed again and he was rewarded with the sight of a body draped across the flattened top of the farthest boulder, debris floating nearby, legs still at the mercy of the ocean.

He knew there was no way he would be able to safely make his way across the jagged boulders with the ocean's fury pounding against him, especially carrying back his burden. With a cry of desperation, the knight threw himself against the surf, frenzied strokes slowed by the watery force. It was as if the waves themselves wanted to prevent him from reaching the figure slumped on the rocks, threatening one instant to dash the swimmer against the boulders, the next trying to drag him out to sea. The minutes it took to reach the storm's victim seemed like an eternity. The dark man glanced up in horror to see the receding waves beginning to drag the body slowly back into the blackened waters.

*No! Please, not again!* Renewed by fear, his effort was redoubled until he reached the body, one shaky hand grasping the tattered remains of a shirt, just as the figure slipped off the rocks, bonelessly succumbing to the sea.

The knight threw his right arm across the chest of the other and slowly began the long trek back to shore, desperate to keep both their heads above water. More than once the waves forced them under, until the swimmer was able to claw his way back up to the salty air. Just as he felt his great strength giving out, he found his footing and allowed the angry waves to propel them to the sand.

Exhaustion swept over him as he dragged the body onto the damp shore, the wind whipping hard enough to join the sand to the still pelting sleet stinging across his face and exposed hands. He dropped to his knees beside the still body and took his first good look

at the man only moments from death. Dark circles marred the pale skin below the closed and swollen eyes. A bruise the size of a man's fist stood out in angry relief on the left temple. Fine hair lay dark against his head, its color disguised by the damp and night. Decimated clothing barely covered the thin and battered body. The guardian placed a hand trembling from exhaustion and adrenaline on the survivor's chest and was rewarded by a faint and unsteady rise and fall. The rescued man tried to speak in his delirium, but the words were incoherently more like a moan. He tried a second time, barely able to raise his hand before succumbing to merciful unconsciousness.

Briefly, the guardian bowed his head in a prayer of thankfulness and absolution—grateful that the soul he stole back from the sea was alive, if only for now, and shame for the disappointment he felt. This man was not the one he had sought, the one he had spent most of his life waiting to return from the sea.

Blue eyes darkened with the first sign of fear when his gaze returned to the sky, noting that if anything, the storm was growing worse. Exhaustion overcame him like a shroud, tugging both at his overused limbs and wearied heart. Despair clawed at him, wanting nothing more than to give up and offer himself and the stranger back to the sea.

Instead, he whistled shrilly and the blood-red stallion made his way to his rider, dancing in agitation as the wind picked up even further. The knight retrieved his sword and buckled the scabbard back on; the cloak he knew had long since blown away. A few words and a tug on the horse's reins brought the beast to his knees. Awkwardly, the unconscious man was straddled onto the horse's back, with the guardian climbing up quickly behind, one arm firmly clutching the stranger to his chest to keep him upright and in the saddle.

"*Home.*" The single word was all the coaxing the chestnut needed to send it scrambling to his feet and up the shoreline toward the wind-whipped fields. A jagged lightning bolt illuminated the sky behind the horse and his burdens as the boiling sea was left behind to mourn what it had lost that night.



I couldn't remember having ever hurt as much as I did when I began to wake. Every part of me seemed to ache, and I felt as if I had either drunk or breathed in the entire sea. It was more than enough to cause me to lose the contents of my stomach.

All down the leg of the man slouched on the bench next to my bed.

In the rushlights, I could see the waking expression on his face was anger at first, then acceptance, then perhaps a perverse amusement. I remember waking up more than once that night, or fourscore of nights, so it might be this wasn't the first time I had given up my guts before him. Or *on* him, for that matter.

He made quick work of cleaning me up, and did so without as much as a word. I was embarrassed as Hades, but so weak I couldn't do or say a blasted thing to help or hinder. *What was wrong with me anyway?*

I tried to ask the stranger—my caretaker—but my throat didn't seem to work. It became increasingly difficult to form cohesive thoughts, so I gave up trying. He didn't seem to expect anything from me anyway, just quietly urged the blanket around me more securely. He hesitated briefly before laying his hand on my brow, checking for fever.

I remember trying to speak again, but I must have passed out, because my next realization was that the sun was finally out after the seemingly eternal storm.

The stranger was now across the room, slumped over the table in an uncomfortable sprawl of sleep. I wondered briefly if it were to keep him out of the range of my 'fire,' as it were. The distance allowed me a moment to study him. His features were unfamiliar to me, foreign even, but strong and well defined. An unruly mass of dark curls gathered in a leather tie fell between his shoulder blades. The leather jerkin over the rough-hewn shirt bore the insignia of the kingdom he served and gave a soldier's rank. His breeches were well worn and bore the marks of mending from many scrapes—battles, perhaps—and the dark boots were scuffed, though not in ill repair. I decided he was a rough-looking man for an officer serving the crown. *But of what kingdom?* His olive features spoke of a different land, as did the insignia of his uniform.

As I raised my hands to rub the grit out of my eyes, I could feel they were swollen and sore well before I could see the bruises lying across my knuckles. *How had this come to be? How? Where?*

Panic set in and I fought to keep myself from crying out when I realized my mind held no memories. *Why can't I remember what happened to me?* I sat up awkwardly, the cold sweat of fear rolling off my naked chest. *Who...who am I?*

I couldn't remember.

My revelation woke the man across the room. Somewhere in my haze, I saw him jerk from his sleep, drawing a dirk from his boot in one smooth motion, the eighteen-inch blade sweeping the room. I watched as his face relaxed when he realized it was me, but after a heartbeat, all I saw was blackness.



I don't know how much longer I remained unconscious, but the sun was only just beginning to set to twilight when I opened my eyes. Another day must have passed since my last moments of consciousness. Almost immediately, the same sense of panic overwhelmed me again, but I pushed it back down and forced myself to think rationally. I had heard of such instances where the elders of the village gradually lost their memory, or even knights losing their thoughts after a grueling battle, often due to a severe knock to

the head. A cautious hand to my own confirmed that I had taken a nasty blow to the temple—perhaps that was the cause. *But where had I heard of these things? How did I know of them? And the blow itself—how was that received?*

When no answer came, I pushed the thoughts away and slowly sat up. A wave of dizziness brought on nausea, but I swallowed it down along with my misgivings. I was alone in the room, wearing nothing but a pair of woolen breeches. Coarse bandages wound around my midsection, confirming my suspicions of cracked or broken ribs. I deduced that I was in an upper chamber, crude though it was, since I could discern voices from the room beneath. From the sounds of it, there were more than a few men gathered below, making for the evening's meal.

*Where was the stranger? Who was he? Friend? Enemy? Comrade? Jailer?* The rough door had a single bolt on this inside and was unlatched now. Could it be locked from the outside and I was indeed imprisoned? *If so, what had I done?* I forced myself not to dwell on it.

I unsteadily got to my feet and made use of the chamber pot. My own clothes were laid out on a chest at the end of the bed, though how I knew for certain they were mine was beyond me. Examining them, I could see the numerous tears and rends that matched those on my pale body. I shuddered at the severity of them, becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to remember how I came to receive my wounds. Next to my ripped garments was a new shirt made of soft flax and calf-length boots. I gratefully put on the new clothes. For whatever reason, my own clothing added to my sense of disquiet, and I did not want the feel of them against my aching hide.

I was finishing with the laces of my tunic when the dark-haired man softly entered the room, his azure eyes bright. Though his countenance was pleasant enough, he seemed to remain guarded with me. “So, traveler, you’ve decided to rejoin the living after all.” They were the first words I’d heard from him. At least that I recalled. His voice was low and held a faint accent I couldn’t identify, though I was grateful we spoke the same tongue. By his addressing me thus, it confirmed that he did not know me. Somehow it was both a relief and a disappointment.

I tried to smile, but it was hard to engage in idle pleasantries within the midst of my inner turmoil. Besides, my split lip prevented anything but minimal movement. “I believe so, anyway.” Try as I might, I could no longer stand and sank to the chest. The stranger quickly took a step forward, then seemed to make a conscious effort to pull himself back from completely crossing to my side.

“It’s no wonder after...that you might be feeling weak. After all, you’ve been without food for at least five days now.”

I looked up at him sharply. “I’ve been asleep that long?”

“More or less. You were almost conscious more than once. I was able to give you some broth, but nothing more. Most of that—apparently—did not suit you.” He said the latter with a grin, displaying a teasing personality that his formerly neutral stance couldn’t hide.

“Ah, that. My apologies, sir. I believe it’s poor etiquette to vomit on your host.”

“Then you’ve better manners than I.” His grin widened and he nodded acceptance of my contrition. His eyes continued to judge me, weigh me out. “Are you up to something a little more substantial? You might not manage the stairs, but I could have something brought up.”

While my initial reaction to the thought of putting anything in my stomach brought bile to my throat, I knew my weakness was heightened by a lack of food, along with whatever five levels of Hades I’d been through. I had better make an effort if I was going to regain my strength. “Perhaps something...bread?”

“Aye.” His eyebrow raised with the agreement. “I don’t think you’re ready for shepherd’s pie and ale quite yet. Bread and soup maybe. Milk. We’ll see how that sets with you. Rest. I’ll go below and ask Hughley to have it sent up.”

“Hughley?” I stood and slowly made my way toward the small table and chair by the window.

“Hughley d’Baehr. This is his place. Below is ‘The Den.’ Not exactly a tavern the high court would frequent, but it’s a good place to go for talk and a hot meal.”

I stumbled before I reached the chair, weaker than I would have thought. He was beside me in an instant, strong hands gripping my forearms to hold me steady. The eyes that bore into mine were the deepest shade of blue, almost black, and piercing. *What was he trying to read in my eyes? Was it something I should remember?*

The guardsman helped me to the bedside, easing me to sit propped against the pillows and rough wall. Every muscle protested the movement, and double vision brought back the now familiar wave of nausea. I fought for control, not wanting to vomit yet again on the nameless man.

Actually, I was the one who was nameless.

“Sir,” I managed to grind out, “I haven’t thanked you yet for your care.”

He merely nodded at me as he crossed back over to the door, apparently to go downstairs for the proffered meal. Something within me cried out that I keep my state—my vulnerability—a secret. I was compelled to protect myself from heaven knows what, but the *not knowing* scared me to my core and I felt desperate. I gestured toward his rank and uniform. “How should I address you?”

“However you like. I’m called Starski. And you, sir? What shall I call you by?”  
Somehow, I think he already knew the answer.

I put my head in my hands, overwhelmed despite my best efforts. “I don’t know.”



He left me for the moment, giving me privacy to deal with my grief and regain my composure. He returned within minutes, bearing a tray and a curiosity he couldn’t quite mask. The knight set the covered dish, half loaf of dark bread and tankard within reach, but I knew I couldn’t even attempt them now. The single chair was drawn up close to my bedside, and he sat down facing me, his probing blue eyes searching out mine. “Do you wish to speak of it?”

I drew in a breath and let it out gingerly in response to my aching ribs. “Do you know what happened to me?”

“You don’t?”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Do you not...?”

I cut him off as anger coursed through me. “Is that all you’re going to do—answer my questions with more questions? If I knew what in Hades happened to me, I wouldn’t be asking, would I?”

If he felt slighted, he didn’t show it, but rather calmly met my fury. “We’ve never met. I can only guess to your wounds. Do you not remember anything? The storm?”

“The storm...” I breathed. Vague images of an anger-tossed sea came to my inner eye. “It was night...”

“Yes, a storm such as we haven’t seen since...” I was so wrapped up in my own turmoil that I almost missed the shadow that danced across the other’s features as he swallowed. “Not for many, many years. I’m guessing you were shipwrecked and somehow managed to wash ashore. How you survived, I don’t know.”

I watched him as he studied his hands, but I was too engrossed in my own fear to give his momentary discomfort a second thought. “I seem to remember a skiff. I think I was able to get to it from a ship. I rode out the storm, but...I don’t remember much after that. You found me, then?”

He nodded. “You were washed ashore with much of the debris, probably what was left of the skiff. I didn’t think you would make it.” He studied my face intently. “Do you remember anything else? Your people? Friends? A wife?”

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to grasp any tendril of memory—*anything*—but there was nothing. I shook my head as I met his stare, despair taking hold of my heart.

“Not even your name?”

I couldn't meet the pity in those blue eyes and looked away.

“Blazes,” he cursed under his breath. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him studying me, weighing what I said. He seemed to almost mentally shake himself, as if a decision were made. “Well, I have to call you something. ‘You there, sir’ would get tiresome.”

Rather than being affronted, I was somehow oddly comforted by his ability to apply grim wit to my humorless situation; otherwise, I was afraid I was about to unman myself and weep before him. I sighed gamely, playing along. “What would you call me then, good sir?”

“Starskivett. My name is Davide Starskivett, and I am a knight in the guard of Kalif, this kingdom. But you,” he said this all with a great flourish, as if putting on the airs of a liege lord, “you may call me Starski, as all the others in my division do. And I shall call you...”

He paused, taking great pleasure in this. “‘Arliss,’ because you came from the sea.”

I blanched. “‘Arliss?’ That’s the name given to a lady’s palfrey or singing bird.” Starski studied me a moment more, the foolish grin slowly fading along with our façade. “Then I shall call you ‘Hutch,’ if you’re willing, as you are a man without a home.”

No truer words were spoken. “Hutch it is.”



He asked a few more questions that I had no answers to, before leaving me to my meal and for the night, both of us recognizing the futility of probing my memory, at least for the time being. In hindsight, I think he didn't believe me at first, that perhaps, for whatever reason, I was lying about not being able to remember who I was or where I came from. I wondered what his reasons were for doubting me, other than that it was an incredible tale. I felt a lingering fear that he really did know who I was or something about me, something I didn't want to acknowledge or admit to. Either way, I was too exhausted to ponder it much, and after managing to keep down a small bit of the bread and soup, fell into a dreamless sleep.



The next morning I was wakened by a knock at my door. Immediately after which, a thin black man pushed open the door and stuck his head inside. *Black man?* Oddly enough, I

*could* remember that I had seen a black man before, but that had only been once, and I couldn't dredge up the circumstances. I only knew it was a rare thing. The surprise on my face must have been more evident than I had thought, though I tried to mask it, because the man grinned at my expression.

"Starski *was* right, you definitely don't hail from here." The smile splitting his face in half told me that he was not offended by my unintentional rudeness. Still, I could feel my ears burning in shame.

"Your pardon, sir. I meant no offense." I hoped my swollen face was able to display my contriteness. A glance in the small looking glass last night had shown me not only the face of a stranger, but a battered stranger at that.

"None taken, friend." I was intrigued by the rhythm of the man's speech, the slight accent was different from Starski's, and one I again couldn't identify. He moved with an odd fluidity that was almost comical. A quick lift of the dish lid and crumbs on the tray confirmed that I had at least eaten a little of last night's fare.

"Thank you for the meal, my lord."

The man's face screwed up in amusement. "My lord? *Shah*, I'm not nobody's 'lord.' My name's Hughley d'Baehr, and I'm the proprietor of this fine establishment." His thin frame melted onto the nearby chair. "This would be 'The Baehr's Den,' where the bears come to howl and the wenches all growl." Again the face-splitting grin. "You can call me Hughley."

"Hughley, thank you for your hospitality. I'm not sure how I'll be able to repay you. If there's some work around here I could do..."

Hughley waved my offer away. "Not to worry, Starski's seen to it. Rest, eat. Give yourself time to get back on your feet."

"Please, don't think me rude, but, as you said, I don't hail from this place. Are there many, uh, men of your color here?" I felt stupid for asking, but my curiosity was stronger than my manners at that point.

A slight tension marred the amiable features. "Does that matter to you?"

I shook my head quicker than was prudent and felt my brains slosh around inside my skull. "Not in the least, sir. I...this land is different than where I have come from...at least, I think."

The proprietor's face relaxed marginally. "From what I hear, our friend, Starski, netted you out of the Bay of Lost Angels during the worst night of the gale." Dark brown lids hooded the man's eyes. "Where exactly do you hail from?"

Silence and the look on my face must have laid bare my anguish, because he stood and waved any response away. “No matter, we’ll talk more when you’re up to it.”

I nodded my thanks, already feeling sleep pulling back at me. Hughley must have recognized it as well and retrieved last night’s tray. “I’ll be back up later with your midday meal. Anything tempt you, uh...?” He paused, not knowing how to address me, his voice gentling. “Starski tells you remember nothing at all.”

I nodded, again futility searching my mind for any new memory to surface. The thin face creased in concern. “Not even your name?”

I met his eyes. “I have no name, no past that I can recall. Your friend, Starski, calls me ‘Hutch’.”

“‘Hutch’? A Brookillyan name?” Hughley smiled to himself and considered the word. “‘Hutch’—as in ‘home’?”

I looked at him curiously. “I thought it meant ‘homeless’.”

Hughley shook his head. “Naw, that’d be ‘hutchinson.’ ‘Hutch’ alone means ‘home’.”



Those initial days spent in the upper chamber were like being encased in a cocoon, cushioned away from the harsh realities of the world, though my situation worried at me as a dog will with a bone. I was content to keep my own company for the most part, reading a bit of the books Hughley supplied me with to quietly while away the time between sleep and his and Starski’s visits. Starski would spend the better part of the day training with his division or patrolling the nearby coast, then would spend several hours to sup and visit with me in the upper room. A few hours of sleep would be snatched when he’d return to his barracks within the castle walls—called “The Hold”—then he’d begin this routine all over again. I spent my days in a state between being oddly content and fearfully anxious.

The next week was a blur of lengthy sleep and frustrating lack of recollection. Starski and Hughley were my sole companions during this time, though both disappeared for prolonged periods, which I filled with sleep. I think my mind and soul needed the rest as much as my healing body did. Panic at not being able to remember gave way to frustration, wearying me. *Was there someone at home searching for me? Mourning me? Did I leave behind a wife and children? What obligations was I breaking? To whom did I owe my fealty? Am I a good man or...? What are my regrets?* If it hadn’t been for my companions and the deep, dreamless sleep that made up the bulk of my days and nights, I think I would have gone stark-raving mad.

Despite his scruffy appearance and often-childlike humor, Starski proved to have both a quick wit and intelligence. It was from the congenial tavern keeper that I learned of my

rescuer's service to the crown and recognition for bravery. Starski was a knight in the king's legion of peacekeeping guardians, and quite respected amongst his peers. He was known throughout the kingdom for his risk-taking courage and audacity, loyalty to the captain of his legion and the crown, and love of fast horses. And equally fast women. Hughley, on the other hand, just barely managed to maintain a level of respectability, and was a literal fount of information about anything, anyplace, and anyone in the realm. Kalif was an island in the Sea of Pac'I'Fice, and a shipping port. Starski's watch encompassed the west coast, keeping the shoreline safe from smugglers, thieves, and scouts from warring factions. Traders from distant ports would frequent the island to replenish supplies before continuing their journey to the larger ports of call. With the amount of foreign trade, Hughley explained, Kalif became a cultural melting pot, which was evident by the number of diverse persons I observed from my second-story window.

After his initial wariness, Starski began to relax with me, and I warmed to him as well. At first, I thought the bond I was beginning to feel with him was due to gratitude for his saving my life that night, but I soon recognized that he was a good man in his own right and worthy of my regard. I later learned from Hughley that, while Starski had many friends, the guardian was never at ease with anyone the way he was with me. The revelation made me feel privileged to call him friend. Hughley, on the other hand, was the most affable fellow I think I had ever met. I had learned he was everyone's comrade and confidante, making him extremely valuable in providing information to a certain sergeant of the king's guards.

I began regaining my strength after the second week of rest and the tavern's hearty fare. The food there was often spicy and greasy, but there was plenty of it, and I began to put back some of the weight I had lost. After the first week, which was primarily spent sleeping, I asked Starski if he had been able to find out anything about myself, or the shipwreck that had brought me here. Surely someone on the docks would have reported a lost ship bound for the ports Kalif. There was something I couldn't quite name in his eyes when he responded that no one had reported losing a ship, but I didn't pursue it. I was almost relieved, I think, but I don't know why. *Why didn't I want to know? Since I had recovered from the blow to my head, there must be some other explanation for my loss of memory. What had happened that was so horrible that I couldn't even remember my own name?*



Within the third week, as I began to feel better yet, I realized that I had seen no other living souls other than those I watched through the shutters of my room's single window. I promised myself I'd bring this up the next time Starski came to visit, later that afternoon.

It was well past dusk by the time Starski finally made his way up the stairs. Hughley had long since brought up dinner, which for the last several nights had been shared with Starski, as he told me of his daily tour of duty, as well as relaying the local scuttlebutt of the king and kingdom.

As the door creaked open, I was about to mock him for causing our dinner to congeal—more so than normal—when he stumbled into the room, bone tired and battered. I quickly went to him, steering him to the bed. He fell back with a groan.

“What in blazes happened to you?” I asked, retrieving the short hidden dirk and yanking off his boots. He smelled of wood smoke and blood. I paused before dropping the boots to the floor, as the right one was sliced at the top and slick. A quick inspection of his leg showed the breeches in a similar state, coagulating blood sticking the wool to the black slash across Starski’s calf. “You’re hurt.”

Starski hissed and pushed at my hands, as I further examined the wound to see how deep it went and to pull the coarse fibers away. “And you’re smarter than you look. Leave it be; I’ve cut myself worse shaving my beard.”

I ignored him and made for the door, intending to go downstairs to find Hughley, a basin of warm water to clean the wound, and something to bind it. I heard Starski stir from behind me, but didn’t realize he had gotten up to stop my departure until he stumbled against me. I turned and untangled him from me, then helped him back to the bed.

“I already asked Hughley for help,” he panted, clutching the again bleeding wound. “He’ll be up as soon as he’s able.”

I looked at him carefully, knowing that his not meeting my eyes had nothing to do with the pain of his injury. Still, I could not stand to see his blood pooling about his tense fingers. I sat beside him and pried away his hands, then pressed the edge of his cloak against the wound. “But that doesn’t explain why you wanted to stop me from going downstairs.”

“I already told you...”

“Starski, I don’t think you’ve ever lied to me since I’ve met you.”

Blue-black eyes flashed at me. “I am a man of honor!”

“So, don’t start lying to me now.” I met his stare, and he was the first to look away. “Why don’t you want me to go downstairs? Why have you and Hughley kept me sheltered up here, away from other people?” My mind went down a path I wasn’t sure I wanted to follow. “Have you learned something about me? What do you know that you don’t want to tell me?”

Contrite eyes met mine. “Nothing. I’ve learned nothing new. I do...I do owe you an apology, though.” We both turned toward the door in unison, having heard footsteps on the stairs. “Give me a moment to bind the wound, please. Then I’ll tell you...I’ll tell you my reasons, though I meant you no harm.”

All I could read in the blue eyes was truth, and I nodded to him, though not relaxing any and feeling a burning sensation in my gut. I opened the door at Hughley's knock and relieved him of the pitcher and basin. He returned a moment later with wine to clean the wound and fresh linen to bind it. Once he saw that I was capable of caring for the still bleeding gash, he left as quickly and quietly as he had come.

I broke the awkward silence between us, while I gently swabbed the breeches from the cut. "So, how came about you the wound?"

"I was patrolling the docks as is my due. My captain..." His speech was broken up by the occasional intake of breath when I hit a tender spot.

"Your Captain Dobae?"

He nodded and squeezed his eyes shut as I picked out a few threads from the congealing blood. "Yes. He had been tipped off to more of the poppy's bane being smuggled through our harbors. The captain sent me to check out the shipping manifests and poke around. He was right."

For some odd reason, his story sent a cold finger trailing down my spine. I looked up when his voice became strangled, though he tried hard to mask the pain. The gash was quite deep, though not to the bone as I had originally feared. I used his boot dirk to trim away the rest of the frayed cloth from around the wound. "So, some merchants or seaman didn't take too kindly to your discovery?"

The pinched face broke into a wicked grin. "You could say that."

I placed the basin under his calf and poured the wine generously over the wound. I could tell it hurt like the blazes, but all Starski did was grip the bedclothes more tightly in his bruised hands and close his eyes.

"Here." I took up one of his hands in mine and squeezed it as I continued to douse the wound, cleaning out what looked like dirt. At first, Starski tried to pull away from my grip, but then, as the pain intensified, held on to my hand as if it were a lifeline. When the wound was cleansed, I gave him a smile, retracting my hand. I dried the area around the wound, satisfied that it would soon begin to clot, and padded linen on top and secured it.

Tying off the bandage, I thought how best to bring up his promise to tell me what he knew. I drew a breath to speak and lifted my gaze, only to find him staring at me, his eyes strangely soft.

"Thank you." The words were whispered and heartfelt. There was a stark vulnerability about him that I had never seen before, nor imagined as part of his countenance. *Could such a simple gesture as binding his wound bring this about? Was a kindness such as giving him my hand to clench against the pain so foreign to him?*

“You’re welcome. It was a small thing, after all you’ve done for me.”

“Of course.” There was a disappointment in the breathy reply I almost missed. I straightened in my chair. *What was I missing here?*

“Forgive me,” I continued. “Certainly, I am obligated to you for all you’ve done for me. I owe you my life twelve times over. But more so, I am obligated by friendship.”

*Was it hurt in those blue eyes that I saw fade away by my declaration?* I was the one with an evasive past, yet the man before me was all the more a mystery.

“Friends.” He echoed. A vow.

I made myself busy by gathering up the basin, pitcher and empty wine bottle, giving him a moment and letting him be the first to pick up our previous conversation. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

“News travels fast in Kalif. Many people know that Hughley has been secretly harboring someone up here. *Hades!* He and I have threatened bloodshed to many curious people for even *considering* to disturb this room. If anyone had seen you, a stranger, coming down from Hughley’s private quarters, word would have flown faster than a gull throughout the quarter. People have already speculated as to who was up here. The most popular is that you’re old Bishop Richleau, holed up here with some wench.” He shifted on the bed, carefully moving his stiffening leg into a more comfortable position. “I simply thought that the fewer people who knew about you, especially how you came to be here, the better. If it was by ill that you met with such a fate, those who meant you harm might be interested in knowing that you survived, and want to finish what they began. In the meantime, I have been checking my contacts at the seaport for what information I can, without rousing suspicion. That is all. I only wanted...I only wanted to keep you safe.”

“But I can’t stay here forever.”

He sighed and nodded. “True enough. I think I would have jumped out the window by now. Do you feel fit enough for travel?”

I felt a surge of anticipation. “Surely. What are you thinking?”

He looked at me critically, gauging my health. I know I was still far too frail-looking and pale, and today had finally been the first day since he’d found me that I hadn’t run a fever. “Let’s give you two more days to make sure you’re as sound as you think you are,” he grinned. “Perhaps Thorseday, or the night after. Once the tavern beds down for the night, I can come for you. We’ll make our way back to a small inn on the eastside of the fortress walls. In the morning, you can come to my barracks. I’ll tell my captain you’re an old friend up from the country looking for work. You’ll say that you came to

the Bay via the old miner's road—no one uses that much anymore, so you wouldn't have encountered many townspeople on your way. We'll find you some work with the guardsmen or in the stables, then perhaps we can start digging for a few more answers as to what happened to you, and where you belong.”

My mind was going in many directions rapidly. Still, I was able to think through some of the holes in his plan. “You can get us out past the gate guards then? Won't our arriving so late at night arouse suspicion in the innkeeper?”

His smile was feral. “Let's just say I know a way around the guards, and the innkeeper's daughter is a...uh...an *acquaintance* of mine.”

I smiled back at him, feeling better than I had in days. “Maybe your ‘acquaintance’ has a friend?”



The next night I taught Starski the board game of “Rooks, Knights and Queens.” Surprisingly, Hughley had a beautiful hand-carved set he'd brought up that midday to while away the time during an unaccustomed lull in business. *Why in blazes can I recall the value of sacrificing the knight to save the queen, but not remember my own name?*

When Starski returned from his rounds to share the evening meal with me, I introduced him to the game. I could tell he was weary and his leg sore, but he seemed to still want my company and was up for the challenge. Even though he had never tried his hand at it before, he was a quick study. While he had an odd penchant for not being able to recall the proper names of the pieces, calling the knight a “nag” for instance, he grasped the basics of the game at once, and by the second round had me in an uncomfortable position.

Admittedly, I myself was growing a bit tired, and he more restless. A storm had swept in out of nowhere, and, while not as fierce as the gale that had brought me to Kalif almost a month ago, it was violent enough. With each bolt of lightning, Starski glanced to the window, and I began to wonder what he was expecting to see. I knew from my quiet days staring idly through the shutters you could see down several cramped streets. But if you looked out farther past the castle walls, you could see a portion of the coastline and the open sea.

I moved my bishop, anticipating his counter move. A fierce bolt of lightning illuminated the room, its thunderous voice following. In reaching for his piece, Starski inadvertently knocked over several others. Silently he returned them, but I could feel a tension mounting in him every time he glanced at the shuttered window. After a few more uncomfortable moments, my curiosity could wait no longer. “What is that you wish to see?”

His eyes flashed up at me, half-angered, half-guilty. “What say you?”

“From the window. What is it you expect to see?”

“Nothing.” He moved his own black bishop. “I haven’t...nothing.”

I countered his move and we sat in silence, he pondering whatever it was that was troubling him, and I his last statement. The next bolt of lightning actually caused him to flinch. I glanced up to the window as well and thought of the last storm endured. Hughley had told me how ferocious it had been, the numerous homes destroyed, as well as many crops and animals lost to it. What prompted Starski to be riding the coast in such a gale as that was beyond anyone’s understanding. Still, I was grateful, whatever his reason.

Throughout the last week, I had remembered bits and pieces of that night—images, really—like portions of a tapestry telling a story, but moths had destroyed many crucial pictures, leaving the tale incomplete. The storm itself had been horrific, lightning continuously lighting the sky as day, thunder rumbling deep and long, shaking a man to his marrow. I remember being lost, adrift, the waves twice the height of a man, crashing down upon me, threatening to send me to the bottom of the sea. I could still feel the sharp boulders, cold against my chest, the greedy waves desperately trying to pull me back into the deep one final time. *Why would Starski be out on such a night?* “Why?”

I hadn’t realized I had spoken aloud until Starski looked up at me, game piece in hand, mildly irritated for breaking his regained concentration. “Why what?”

“Why were you out on the coast the night of the storm? Surely you wouldn’t have been required to patrol that night...” A new thought came unbidden. “Unless you knew there was a ship trying to make port or had run aground. Is that it? Did you know my ship had been lost?” I grew angry at the idea that he may have information about my past and hadn’t revealed it to me.

“No!” His reply was heated. “I had no knowledge of you or your ship. I wasn’t looking for you that night, it was my...” Realizing he had said far more than he’d ever intended, Starski looked stricken, then immediately turned away to the shuttered window, exhaling.

I softened my tone. “Then what were you looking for? *Who* were you looking for?”

Though he sat now mostly in profile, the next flash of light showed his eyes closed, and he was swallowing painfully. He looked weary and years older than moments before. I finally broke the uncomfortable silence and began to put the game pieces away. “I’m sorry. I have no right to pry, and I understand how you wouldn’t feel as though you could trust me to speak. I had no right...”

One strong hand flashed out, grasping my wrist and stopping me from putting away the alabaster knight piece I gripped. “No, I’m the one who is sorry, Hutch. You’ve never given me cause to not trust you.”

The silence between us lingered. Finally, he dropped his grip and looked away, but remained silent. He needed time, or something more, that I was yet to understand. I would fulfil his unasked plea and not press. “It’s your move.”

He glanced up at me sharply, understanding my dual meaning, then returned his focus to the game at hand.



The storm continued through a second night, as furious as the first. For whatever reason, I had been restless all day, perhaps anticipating that my inactivity would soon be at an end. I felt trapped in the room that had been a haven to me for many weeks, and all I could seem to do that day was pace. Hughley took pity on me, or perhaps grew tired of my stomping about overhead while he tried to work in the tavern below, so with my midday meal he brought along a lute, slung carelessly over his shoulder. The body of the instrument was well worn and scratched, but of a decent make and retained a fairly clear tone. After setting down my lunch tray he presented it, running his hand lightly over the strings. “Do you play?”

“How the Hades would I know?” Of course, I wasn’t angry with Hughley; he was simply a convenient target for my angst. The affable man didn’t show that he was offended by my venom, but simply handed me the instrument with a shrug and left the room. I felt horrible about my actions afterwards, and stood there numbly holding the lute. Biting back my inner turmoil, I none-too-gently laid the piece on the bed and paced to the window, looking over the busy street. *So many people, so many families, friends, lovers, going about their day...* For some reason, their normality enraged me.

Turning from the window, I stalked across the room to the small table. I leaned heavily against it, breathing rapidly at the anger that my own futility roused, until I grasped the table and heaved against it with all my strength. The meal tray, tankard and chess set sailed throughout the room, clattering against the walls, bed and floor. I stood numbly for a moment, surprised at my own lack of control.

Disgusted with myself, I sat heavily on the bed, the lute bumping against the wall, strings vibrating their song. I put my head in my hands and rested my elbows on my knees, staring at the floorboards. Between my feet lay the alabaster knight piece.

I picked up the knight, the marble cool in my hands. The force of my tantrum had placed a crack in it, beginning at the base of the horse’s throat and running the length of the piece to his eye. I wanted to weep.

Instead, I gently placed the knight on the upright bench and sat down at the head of the bed, my back against the wall. Finally, I drew the lute into my lap. My hand seemed to find its place on the neck of its own volition, and after a moment’s hesitation, I began to pick out a melody.



The next night came clear and cold, and Starski and I quietly left The Baehr's Den once the tavern grew quiet with sleep. Getting past the guards at The Hold's outer gates was fairly simplistic. Apparently, my companion required them to "look the other way" on a fairly regular basis, with the typical gift of cheap wine to keep the chill off in the dark of night. I was quite sure, however, the blondes taken through the castle gates under the billowing cloak that masked my face were typically of a different sort than I.

The "acquaintance" at the inn was a saucy little thing, alternatively pouting and flirting with her late night guest. She didn't appear to have two wits to rub together, but she apparently knew enough to keep her mouth shut about me, and slipped Starski the key to the quarters off the side of the large common room.

Starski and I agreed on the story I was to tell those I encountered in the morning. If anyone were to ask, and they undoubtedly would since I was a stranger to westerly Kalif, I was an old friend of Starski's from the east side of the island, specifically Brookillyn where his people hailed from. Since the planting was poor this season, I traveled to the west coast in hopes of finding work on the docks, but was set upon a fortnight ago by vagabonds, and lost my horse and all my belongings.

Starski persuaded the innkeeper's daughter, Molly, to assist me in getting a horse at his favorite stable the next morning. From there, I would make my way to the captain of the guards and seek work of some sort. I hesitated in accepting Starski's coin purse, but knew I had no other choice. Pride formed a knot in my gut, but the kindness in Starski's eyes when I finally accepted it, made it worth swallowing down my hauteur.

As I locked the door of my rented room behind Starski's departure that night, I thought my feelings of fear and uncertainty would have overwhelmed me. But with the door secured, and one of Starski's rather wicked stilettos within easy reach, I slept as soundly as I had in the safety of Hughley's upper chamber.



Molly proved to be as bright and talkative as a mynah bird, and chattered all the way to the stables that morning. She explained all of what I hadn't been able to see in the dark the night before, and had never seen from the small window in Hughley's upper room. The castle sat a few leagues from the rocky coast and was encompassed by an enormous wall. Everything within the barricades was called "The Hold." There we found scores of merchants, shops and homes, mostly those of the craftsmen who sold their wares within. The majority of local farmers and herders—of which were mostly of sheep and cattle—were outside the town proper, still tithing a percentile of their annual harvest to the crown in exchange for its protection.

As we walked along the outer castle streets, dirt crunching beneath our steps, she aptly pointed out all the horses that she knew to come from our destination. Many of them

were excellent, and I wondered briefly how I knew to identify the finer points of the beasts. Quality of the horses aside, I was a bit disconcerted about their trappings: everything ranging from brightly colored silken tassels to silver clad bells danced and jingled from bridles, martingales and saddles.

I began to wonder what Starski had gotten me into when we reached the small paddock and stables. Molly explained that the owner had been the son of an earl, but as soon as he came into his inheritance, found that there was nothing left of the family fortune but a small herd. He gradually made a name for himself by supplying many of the local knights and court with some of the finest—and most gaudily decorated—horses in Kalif.

While Molly went into the stables to seek out Mearle, the owner, I leaned against the fence and examined the few horses milling about the paddock. As I looked them over, I instantly knew which one I wanted.



It was midmorning when I rode into the practice yards of the King's Guardsmen. Many of the guardians were engaged in swordplay, honing their skills and training the younger men in the arts of warfare during this time of relative peace.

I could make out Starski instantly, seated in the midst of a cluster of knights, apparently discussing the workmanship of a new hilt style on one of the men's broadsword. I waved when Starski's eyes fell upon me, his face alight with a greeting.

Then he noticed my horse.

*Horror* is the word that comes closest to describing his reaction. Granted, I knew it wasn't a handsome beast, but in my mind, it was the most logical choice to make. If, in my fabricated tale, I had just had my horse stolen out from under me, wouldn't I pick something that no one would *want* to steal? Besides, I was supposed to be a poor farmhand coming to the castle walls for work. The colorless horse was a perfect fit to our ruse. Even so, I knew the beast had some outstanding qualities, including her temperament, girth, age, and soundness. The length of her legs and thick barrel spoke of being able to run for great lengths without tiring. Her appearance was not a consideration.

Starski, embarrassed, made his way over to me, still favoring his wounded leg. "What is *that*?" he hissed under his breath as he shook my hand, encouraging the story that we hadn't seen each other in a considerable amount of time.

"What do you mean?" I returned through teeth clenched in some semblance of a smile. "She's my new horse." Granted, the dun didn't inspire awe, one back leg already cocked as if to sleep, her overly large ears swiveled to either side of her head in an appearance of being bored or dimwitted. Apparently, she also had a penchant to droop her lower lip, which didn't help her countenance.

“A *horse*? That...*thing* you’re sitting on would hardly pass for a...”

“Starski!” The bellow came from across the walled compound, and a bear of a man pushed his way through a cluster of men. I saw my companion cringe.

“Is that...?” I whispered. I admit, I was taken aback by the large black man striding toward us, a fierce scowl etched in his face.

Starski’s only response was a sickly smile, as he turned to greet the captain of the guards. “Yes, sir, Captain Dobae?”

“I thought I told you to...” He actually paused upon getting a closer look at my new horse, the expression on his face making his opinion of it clear. The brown eyes then traveled up to study me. I put on what I hoped was my most pleasant and guileless expression.

“Captain, this is my friend, Hutch, who’s just come up from his family farms in Brookilynn.” Like a brainless fool, I nodded my agreement, unsure of what to say or do. Fortunately, Starski continued. “With the drought on the east coast, he came to The Hold looking for work.”

I have to give him credit; Starski was every bit as good an actor as I’d ever seen from the street performers...*where? Shah! Where did that memory come from?*

The captain crossed his arms as he studied me. “Is that so?”

It took me a second to realize he was expecting an answer from me. “Yes, sir. Captain. Sir. I-I was robbed. I mean, on my way from my family farm I was set upon and robbed. They took everything.”

One eyebrow raised eloquently on the wide face as he reassessed my horse. “Smart thieves. They apparently took everything of *value*.”

Starski grinned behind his captain’s back. I’d deal with him later. Dobae turned his attention to me again. “So, what can you do?”

“Do, sir?”

“Did the thieves addle your brain as well? *Do*—you’re a farmhand—I’m guessing you know how to at least muck out a stall?”

*Oh, Shah! What did I know how to do?*

“He’s an archer, sir!” I think Dobae and I were equally surprised at Starski’s revelation. “He knows swordwork as well. Sir, it’s been some time since we’ve had a chance to

spar, and Hutch is still a bit out of sorts from being set upon. I'm not up to much either." He rubbed his aching leg. "Let me take him to the practice field and work him through. I should be able to get a feel for where he's best suited."

The captain looked at Starski with a critical eye. Apparently, my friend had tricked the large man more than once, but Dobae eventually relented. "All right. Take him out and see what he's good for, then report back to me." The captain turned to walk away. Without pausing, he called out, "Oh, and, Starski?"

My comrade turned expectantly. Dobae then swung around, his balled up fists on his hips. "Don't forget what happened the last time you tried something foolish." The smile fell from Starski's face. "Yes, sir."

I waited until the captain was out of sight before asking what the last part of the conversation was all about. Starski blanched. "Have you ever shoveled out a horse stall without a shovel?"



The practice field was just that—a field where a portion of the grasses had been scythed and cleared away. Off to one side, sat hay-stuffed archery targets riddled with past strikes. Additional sparring rings for hand-to-hand, sword and staff work took up one side of the field, with the remainder of the area dedicated to training on horseback and perhaps jousting.

Starski's blood-red chestnut developed a habit of reaching over to nip my dun, who alternatively ignored the stallion or simply shook her head as if annoyed by a fly. Starski reined the stallion out of reach of my mare. "I can't believe Mearle even had that...sorry excuse of a beast on his lot."

I pulled a burr out of the dull colored mare's mane. "How not? She's the perfect horse to support our ruse—blends in, unobtrusive, a farmer's choice. What did you expect, something as flashy as the *target* you're riding? Why don't you just paint an 'X' on your chest?"

"What do you mean?" We both glanced down at the blood-colored stallion, four white stockings licking up his legs like flames, flaxen mane and tail dancing in the light breeze. A white blaze striped his face like a lightning bolt.

"All I'm saying is that you can see him a mile away, making you an easy mark. And, if you were trying to be unobtrusive while patrolling or getting information, having such a...well...*loud* horse like that linked to you would be a torch, that's all." I sighed. "At least, you didn't go for all those bells and tassels that come out of the earl's stable."

"Well, I'm surprised Mearle didn't *pay you* to take that ugly nag off his hands. What color is that, anyway—gray or yellow? It looks like a rotten squash."

“Now, I’ll have you know that this little lady can...”

“Forget it.” He waved me off from our good-natured argument. “We’d better get a little time in on the field or the captain’s going to have us both cleaning out stalls.” He swung off the stallion and tethered him. I simply left the reins loose on the mare and swung gingerly down.

Starski eyed me critically as I stretched my hands over my head, arching my back. “Are you up to this?”

My smile was feral. “Give me a sword and find out.”

The longsword he handed over had dull edges for practice. Still, it was well made and balanced. I was also grateful we had agreed to simply work through some of the basic play, testing my mobility and reflexes, and honestly, to see if I could even handle the weapon, though neither of us voiced it aloud. As soon as my hand wrapped around the grip, I felt assured that I well knew swordwork. I shadow-sparred for a moment, ignoring my companion, and put myself through a somehow remembered basic routine, as natural to me as breathing: *en guard, riposte, salute’, thrust e’ supine...*

“What the blazes are you doing?” The look Starski gave me was incredulous.

“Warming up,” I responded, cheerful at another memory’s return. I thrust and parried again, then retreated a few steps.

“It looks like you’re dancing. Shah! This is worse than I thought!” My friend stood hands on hips, his practice sword tip buried in the grass. He shook his head in disgust.

“I’m preparing to spar.” I flicked the blade in his direction.

“With your grandmother, perhaps.” Starski never flinched, even when I wagged my blade under his nose. “It’s not right, how you do it. It’s...it’s *womanly*.”

“Come then, sir...show me what you’re made...” I never got to finish my thought. Starski came on like a bolt of lightning, even though he favored his injured leg. Without thought, I parried each stroke he threw at me, though I could tell he pulled the full weight of the blow. I was startled, but it didn’t take long for me to find my rhythm and press the offense. Our styles were markedly contrasting—he chopping like a frenzied woodsman out of control, while I utilized what I remembered to be the more polished and traditional style of the French.

I was pleasantly surprised when we appeared to be an even match, considering our current injuries. Still, the exercise felt more than good; it felt *right*. Several minutes passed quickly, with one or the other of us throwing out barbs and insults. “You fight like a Barbarian! Come to think of it, you *smell* like one as well.”

“You call *that* swordplay? Ha!” Starski shook the sweat from his eyes. “My mother was more fierce beating rugs!”

“Ah, that explains it! That must be who taught you to fight!”

“*Oh, yeah?*”

“What a witty and biting response, Sir Starski! I may bleed yet from your cutting wit!”

Not being able to come up with a better response frustrated him to the point of making a more aggressive leap and thrust, but his anger overrode the failing support of his injured leg. As Starski landed, his leg gave way, sending him to the ground to lie panting on his back.

I stood over him, triumphantly placing one boot on top of the sword still clutched in his hand, my own pointed at his throat. “Now, what were you saying about my *womanly* style of...”

I barely saw his good leg swipe both of my own out from under me. The next thing I knew, *I* was lying on *my* back, my sword yards from me, Starski’s bent forearm at my throat and his boot dirk aimed directly at my...well...a “delicate” area.

“You were saying?” His grin all but split his face in two. I couldn’t let him beat me that easily. I rolled my eyes up in my head with a groan, my hands coming up to my eyes as if in extraordinary pain.

“Hutch? Hutch?” He crawled off me, the dirk cast aside. “Are you hurt? I never meant to...”

I rolled quickly away from his gentle hands, and ended up on my seat, having retrieved his sword and thrusting it before me. As he ungracefully stood, the momentary fear on his face washed away to disbelief, then amused disgust. “You donkey’s backside! I thought I’d hurt you!”

I grinned as I accepted the hand he offered me, knowing that our sport was over and he wouldn’t let me fall as he hauled me to my feet. I was sore and aching, but could feel a renewed confidence in myself. Somehow, I knew that no matter what the future revealed, whatever I did or didn’t remember, I was no longer afraid. As we stood, I held his grip for a moment, even after I was righted to my feet, hoping that he would read the gratefulness in my eyes.



It only took a few moments at the archery site to confirm what Starski had guessed—that I knew how to handle a bow as well. When my third arrow surpassed the accuracy of the

first two and rested dead center, he simply raised one raven eyebrow and quipped that we could call it a day.

We returned to the barracks, and, after introducing me to a few of the men of his division and requesting they give me a tour of the grounds, my companion excused himself and reported to Dobae. Starski met us later at the dining hall with the self-satisfied grin I came to recognize whenever he got his way.

I was now Starski's partner.



The next few weeks were a contented and exciting blur of learning the “where’s and what for’s” of Kalif common law and the duties of the peacekeeping guardsmen. The men that made up the division serving the crown at the Bay of Lost Angels were a friendly group of men that welcomed me readily. I felt badly for deceiving them with my farmhand’s tale, but discussing my circumstances with Starski, we both believed it was best that I not divulge anything yet. In the meantime, we continued to probe for any leads that might reveal the events that led to the shipwreck and my past.

While not officially knighted as Starski was, I still was appointed the rank of Sergeant of the Guards in a quiet ceremony one night, surrounded by the men who had become my peers and comrades. I had knelt before Captain Dobae under a new moon, both hands on the grip of the sword I’d been issued, its point to the floor.

I stared at the firelight dancing off the gleaming blade, while the captain’s voice growled low and solemn. “Do you swear, Guardsman Hutch of province of Brookillyn, to uphold the laws of the kingdom of Kalif? To protect king and crown and all her citizens? To be a man of virtue and honor, by the name of all that is sacred?”

“With all my heart,” I whispered. I had never wanted anything more.

I felt the mantle bearing the colors of Kalif draped over my head, a sea of azure under a golden sun. I looked up to see Starski, a hand’s breadth behind his captain—*our* captain—a smile dancing in his eyes.

I stood and took Captain Dobae’s proffered hand, gripping my forearm in a soldier’s greeting. As the men around me shouted their approval, he clapped me on the shoulder, then took his leave. Starski was instantly before me, gripping my wrist as well, his lopsided smile feral with mischief and excitement. “The ports will never know what hit them—you and I are going to turn Kalif on its ear!”

I smiled back at my partner. “Me and thee?”

“Me and thee.” A vow.



Later, when we had all finally bedded down for the night, an unanswered fear and sense of foreboding tugged at me—there were still so many unanswered questions plaguing me. The “what if’s” loomed larger and more fierce than they had since those first days of consciousness. I got up from my bunk in the guardians’ quarters and wrapped my cloak around me, then made my way out toward the stables.

Belle greeted me with a snort and whicker, much like a mare would call her foal. Starski mocked the name I had given her, saying she sounded more like sea cow when she trotted gruntingly along, than a proper horse. All the same, I thought she simply looked like a “Belle,” so Belle it was.

The sweet smell of hay and alfalfa was comforting, and I rested my cheek against the mare’s neck. The thoughts and doubts in my head whirled like a cyclone, too confusing to single out and untangle.

“Do you wish to speak of it?” So engrossed in my own thoughts, I hadn’t heard Starski approach. It was the same question he had asked me a month ago in the upper room.

I sighed. Again, for whatever reason, a part of me felt that I should hide my doubts and vulnerability from him. *What if my fears were true?* I looked to his face and saw no doubts to mirror my own, saw nothing there but honest concern.

“I’m not sure what to say. Starski, you don’t really know me...blazes! *I don’t really know me. What if...*” It was all too much to try and put into words. I was mildly surprised to find I didn’t have to.

“*What if you were a horrible person? What if you ‘deserved’ whatever put you near death? What if you were a murderer? What if you were a thief?*” Starski had quietly entered the box stall as he spoke. “Hutch, as far as I’m concerned, it all hinges on one word— ‘were.’ It’s in the past—good, bad, whatever. Life changes in a heartbeat, and I think, so do we. Whatever you were, *whoever* you were, may be gone. Yes, you may someday remember, and we’ll deal with that if and when it comes. But who and what you are now, that’s what we have to work with. Whatever you once were has made you into the man you are now, even if you can’t remember. And who you are now is my friend, a man worthy of my trust and respect. You have shown nothing but bravery since I’ve known you.”

“Shah! When have I...?”

“It takes a brave man not to give in to despair. It takes an even braver man to meet it head on.”

We were quiet for a moment while the words sank in.

“I know there are many shadows still plaguing you, but you haven’t given in to your fears. You haven’t hidden in a corner and waited for answers. No, instead you’re willing to take whatever each day brings you, and serve a country and crown not your own because you believe in what is good, and just and right. That’s the man I call friend.

“I know you’re afraid of the future, Hutch. And maybe the past as well. But you don’t have to face it alone.” His eyes were bright when I finally looked up from the mare’s neck to meet his gaze. Starski extended his hand to me. I noticed it was trembling, as was mine. “I will face it with you, if you’ll let me, Hutch. Me and thee, remember?”

I gripped his arm, his hand returning the pressure. “Me and thee.”



It was one of those glorious spring days when the wind blows warmly, teasing you with the promise of summer ahead. I had ridden off by myself that afternoon after sparring a few rounds with Starski and some of the others in the division. I was feeling oddly melancholy and wanted some time to card through my thoughts. I left Belle to graze, knowing she might wander off, but not really caring.

I walked idly through a small field where the wildflowers were beginning to bloom. The blood red poppies dotted the grasses along with bluebonnets and daisies. I felt physically better than I had in months, but inside...my mind churned with anger at the continued absence of my history. I stopped myself from meandering and closed my eyes, willing myself to dredge up any memory, any picture from my past, but it was as if someone had thrown a blanket over my mind, and I couldn’t find a way out from underneath it.

A fury overtook me, and I swung out blindly, swiping at the array of flowers before me, their innocence mocking my pain. I began cursing anything and everything—the storm, the sea, God in His heavens, myself, the fate that brought me to this point. I drew my sword and hurled it before me, its tip burying itself into the uncaring earth. My rage propelled me forward, and I grasped the still quivering pommel as I continued toward a copse of trees. I then began hacking at the nearest oak, still swearing and emptying out my wrath.

I don’t know how long I pummeled the unfeeling tree, but before long my rantings left me breathless and sweating.

“Feel better?”

I spun around, surprised that I was no longer alone. Starski sat languidly in the saddle, one leg thrown over the saddle horn, an elbow resting on one knee and a hand cupping his resting chin.

“No!” I ground out. I was exhausted and still angry, but the rage that had consumed me had burned down to more manageable embers. “Have you been there long?”

“Long enough.” Starski threw his leg back over the stallion’s neck and slipped his foot into the stirrup. “Come on, let’s go to Hughley’s and get something decent to eat.”

I looked at him oddly. He had just seen me act like a madman, and it hadn’t seemed to phase him in the least. *Will I ever figure this man out?* I looked around for the dun, but she wasn’t in sight. “Where’s Belle?”

Starski smirked at me. “She tore out of here when you began your assault on that demon tree. Here.”

He leaned forward in the saddle and extended his hand to me. I sheathed my sword and locked my hand around his wrist. In one smooth motion, I was up behind his saddle as the chestnut bore us home.



The evening meal at The Den somehow managed to revive my spirits, though I’m sure it had more to do with the quiet support of my companions than anything else. It certainly wasn’t the food that comforted me. Though to Hughley’s credit and generosity, he had taken to putting aside a small portion of whatever was available each evening for me, minus the spices and grease preferred by his other patrons. My constitution was grateful.

The night was warm and I still restless, so we opted to take a walk along the shipping docks before returning to the barracks. Starski took great delight in pointing out and naming each star for me, and I was surprised by his extensive knowledge of the lore surrounding the constellations.

We walked along the docks, and I was content to listen to him prattle on, almost missing the sideways glance he threw at me, perhaps to see if I was still listening. “Did you know,” he continued conversationally, “that being eaten by sea drakes is the number one cause of death for livestock in Kalif every year?”

The look I gave him must have conveyed my disbelief.

“It’s true, I swear! The cobbler in the square told me.”

“Starski, that has got to be the most…” A woman’s cry and shriek for help, accompanied by the rough, mocking laughter of men cut off my words, and a quick glance between us sent Starski and me charging back the way we had come.

It didn’t take long to make our way down the darkened alley behind one of the many shoreside taverns. There, a cluster of seaman had surrounded a young woman, scantily clad and heavily rouged. The men were obviously drunk and were boisterous about their intent. The woman’s clothing had already been torn when they threw her to the ground.

Regardless of the question of her innocence or virtue, she was obviously in a situation she had not asked for, and the certain outcome unpleasant.

I glanced at Starski. He looked at me, then quickly nodded to my right. I understood him immediately, and we parted to circle the group of five. In hindsight, I was amazed at how easily we fell in step with one another, without so much as a word. We were still learning about what it meant to work with one another, but it seemed to come as natural as breath.

Starski, his cloak encompassing him like a shroud, blended into the shadows. Knowing the moonlight glanced off my blond head like a beacon, I flipped back my cloak so that the markings of the guard were evident on my halberd. I moved into the ring of men as I drew my sword. “By order of the crown, you are directed to leave this woman in peace and go about your business.”

There was a moment of—what?—stunned silence? Then laughter. Of course, I don’t know who was more surprised by my audacity, them or me. One skinny guardsman against five seasoned shipmen was not wise by any account. A man to my right grabbed the woman by the arm and dragged her to her feet, while the other four drew their rather wicked looking scaling knives and shortwords. But it wasn’t their weaponry that caught my eye, but the woman... A sharp pain stabbed behind my eye as a picture—just for an instant—flashed before me: long blonde hair; tearing, fearful eyes; the bruises on her legs...*who was she? Had I caused her pain?* Before I had a chance to grasp the image it was gone, leaving me addled.

“Look a’here, mates!” The ugly one on the right called out. Actually, they were all none too handsome, but he was the worst of the lot. Past the small mob I could see Starski peering at me through the darkness, a look of concern on his face. “We’ve got ourselves a pretty boy from the castle. Maybe *he* wants to dance with us, too.”

There was a rumble of agreement from the others, and a few took a step toward me. Just as I placed myself in a protective crouch, there was a gasp, and a hiss from two of the men. Three other ugly mugs whipped around to see Starski, his longsword firmly jabbed into the belly of one man, while his favorite boot dirk lay tight against the throat of the second man he stood close behind. It only took me a heartbeat to disarm the other two, then grab the throat of the man holding the woman, who had fallen to her knees in fear.

I pulled him within inches of my face, my own sword tip placed under his fleshy chin. “You said something about a dance?”



It didn’t take long for the men to scatter when we released them. The woman didn’t want to pursue the issue further, which was probably the wisest thing to do, though I wouldn’t have called it the fairest. Due to the nature of her “profession,” the law would have attributed what happened to her, or almost happened, to be expected and of little

consequence. Other than scaring the young woman and roughing her up a bit, there was no severe damage done.

Still, there was a look of fear in her eyes when I helped her stand. As I searched out her eyes, for another instance, I didn't see her face, but that of another young blonde, blue eyes full of fear. I felt the pain behind my eyes returning.

"Are you all right?" The woman and I both turned to look at Starski. I'm not sure who he was asking, but I squeezed her hand, expecting a response.

"I can't believe you would...I...*thank you*, sirs." There was still fear in her eyes as she sought out our faces. "I don't know how to thank you, unless..." A dullness and sorrow filmed over her eyes as a new thought entered her mind. "Oh...of course."

I didn't release her hand yet. "Of course *what*?" I looked to my partner for answers. *What did she mean?*

Starski met my eyes, though I couldn't quite tie together all that I read there: disgust, pity, acceptance. His hand placed on my forearm gently broke the contact between me and the woman. He turned to her. "Woman, we are men of honor and serve the crown and Kalif. Do you know what the law demands of those who sell themselves for coin?"

Her voice was small. "Yes, my lord."

I looked at Starski sharply, wondering what in Hades was his next call. His question surprised me. "What should we do, Guardsman?"

The woman wouldn't meet my eyes and looked away, but not before I saw tears forming in them. I looked to Starski for answers. The look he gave me was benevolent, telling me I had much to yet learn. I touched the woman's shoulder. "What is your name?"

When she looked back up, there were honest tears standing in her eyes, and her chin quivered. "Alyce, sir. Please, sir..." She began to pull away from me, which made me want to hold her all the more.

"Alyce." I glanced at Starski, then returned to the woman. "Go home." I smiled gently into her surprised face, then fumbled with the drawstrings of my borrowed coin purse. I pressed a sovereign into her trembling hands. "A hot meal perhaps, then go home, Alyce."

The astonished woman took a few staggering steps back before turning to flee into the night. We watched as she slowed to a stop within the glow of a nearby rushlight, and turned back to where we stood in the shadows.

"Your name, sir?" She did not raise her voice, though we heard her clearly.

“Hutch,” I called back gently. “I am called Hutch.”

She nodded, taking a few more steps backwards, then disappeared into the night like the wisp of a forgotten dream. I tried desperately to keep her in my sight, as if in seeing her still, I could recapture the memory that eluded me moments ago. Starski’s hand upon my shoulder broke the spell and I looked to him. A narrowing of his eyes and slight nod marked his approval of my decision.

“Starski!” It was my turn to grab him by the arm. “I remembered something tonight. At least, I think I did.”

“When? Just now?”

“Aye, when we first came upon their little dance. I saw—I remembered another woman...blonde, like Alyce. She was crying. She’d been hurt...”

“Who was she? Do you remember where you’d seen her?”

“That’s all. But I think...I think she’s important to me somehow. Blast it!” I slammed my fist against my thigh.

Starski locked his grip around my wrist, preventing any further tirade on my part. “Gently, brother. Gently. It’s a start. Give yourself time, it’ll come.”

All at once, I felt exhausted, but nodded in agreement. Starski must have sensed my weariness and smiled encouragingly. The hand that had held my arm then wrapped about my shoulders and pulled me along, leading me home.



The next few weeks fled by, and I continued to grow in my love for this new land. Except for the unpredictable weather—that I could do without. Apparently, every season in Kalif included a bout of storms, and when the rainy season occurred depended on who you asked. All I knew was they had a tendency to blow up out of nowhere and threaten to sweep everything in their path into the ocean. Another bout of lashing rain came in from the west, making for a miserable night. Like the other men in our division, I bedded down early on that particular night, after a few lackluster hands of cards before the fire. I’m not sure what woke me: the lightning or the faint creek of the floorboards. When I slit open my eyes, I could make out the silhouette of Starski standing before the open window, his hands forcing back the shutters against the wind and pelting rain. Even in the dark of the room, I could make out the tense play of muscles across his back and shoulders as he hung his head in misery, the rain glistening upon his curls. Another bolt of lightning ripped through the sky, causing Starski’s head to jerk heavenward—a decision made. Like a man possessed, he pulled close the shutters, and with an enviable stealth, tore through the room to gather up his shirt, boots and cloak. Within a heartbeat,

the only evidence of his ever having been in the room was the mist that clung to the floor before the window and the faint trail of his bare feet.

I don't know why I decided to follow him. Or perhaps I do. Perhaps whatever was tugging relentlessly at his heart was now pulling at mine as well.

By the time I quietly made my way to the stables, he and the chestnut were long gone, the horse's stall door left hanging open in their haste to be away. Belle was already alert by the unexpected excitement, and anxious to follow. I would have to hurry to catch their trail before the pounding rains completely washed it away, but somehow, I think I already knew where my partner was headed.

The mare was no way near as fast as the red stallion, but she proved herself capable once again by her untiring strides, never hesitating or slowing over the rough terrain leading to the ocean. Even in the downpour, I could follow Starski's trail, especially since he hadn't felt a need to cover it. Lightning brightened the fields and knolls around us in an unearthly light. I felt the mare shudder, but she continued gamely on at my heels' urging. Two crests ahead I could make out the horse and rider, just beginning their downward ascent to the sea.

It was the cove where he had found me. Saved me.

Rather than follow Starski directly, I reined the mare down a different trail that I might observe him first from a distance. We picked our way down a rocky path, and I pulled her to a sliding stop in the wet sand, well beyond the ocean's reach. I tugged the hood of my cloak up farther around my head to shield my face from the pelting rain. The sound of the surf crashing against the shore unnerved me, vague memories of being lost at sea and tossed about like so much flotsam—a thing of no value. I dropped the dun's reins, praying she wouldn't bolt, and turned toward where I thought Starski must be. The sound of receding hoof-beats told me the mare was already headed back to the castle.

I was surprised to see the chestnut riderless, standing uneasily before a mass on the sand. It only took a moment to realize the huddled bundle at the edge of the waves was my partner.

Not knowing if he had met with some ill, I began to run, calling his name. More than once I was drown out by the thunder's angry bellow. Finally, I was close enough for him to hear me, and his head shot up as if he had been stuck. He surged to his feet, and began running toward me, his face the picture of disbelief and...something I couldn't quite name. Seeing he was all right, I slowed to a walk and he stopped completely, watching me advance with increased agitation. A fierce blast of wind swept up, almost knocking him off balance and ripping the hood off my head. Starski's face...I wish I could find the words to describe his face at that moment. *Recognition, disappointment, despair, then an anger directed at himself...why? Who had he thought me to be?*

Starski stumbled back, and twisting, fell to his knees, his head buried in his hands. I dropped down beside him and laid a hand on his trembling shoulder. *“Tell me.”*

Slowly, he dropped his hands to look at me, then shook his head. “I am a fool.”

The anguish in his face caused my heart to feel as stone. “No, never a fool. Tell me what brought you here tonight. Tell me what brought you here the night you found me.”

Tears mingled with the pelting rain on his face. He spoke desperately, his spirit broken. “I swear, I kept my promise.”

My hand left his shoulder and cupped the side of his face. “What promise?”

The abruptness in which he stood startled me. Starski rushed into the waves, and for an instant I feared he would charge out into the depths. He stopped when the water lapped at his thighs. *“I kept my promise!”*

I didn’t know who he raged against—God, the sea, or someone who had caused him to make this vow, never realizing what the cost of such a promise would be on his soul. Fear tying a knot in my gut, I waded in after him, thinking of the last time I felt Atlantis’ icy depths lick against my skin. I grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him back toward me, the waves rocking against us.

“He’s not coming back, Hutch.” His voice was small, lost.

“No, Starsk, he’s not.”

“I kept my promise. I kept watch.”

“I know you did, you did everything you could.”

“But he’s not coming.”

“No.”

It was then he broke, his face crumbling before me like shattered china. Instinctively, I reached for him and drew him to me, and he let me, his arms clinging to me as if his life depended on it. We stood like that for long moments, he crying for what I found out later was a lifetime of hurt and unanswered hope. His breath mingled with the thunder’s voice, and his tears the stinging rain. When I finally felt his heart’s storm subside, I carefully led him out of the water, back to where the chestnut had stood by faithfully, even though he danced in agitation against the gale. Starski stood numbly, not lifting a foot to mount. I had almost been afraid that he would simply vault onto the stallion’s back and pound away, but he didn’t. When he made no move, I gathered the horse’s reins and pulled myself into the saddle, then reached my hand down for his. He looked at it for a moment, then to my face. There was shame and embarrassment already growing

in his eyes, but as he looked at me, I knew he would find no condemnation there. He finally took my wrist, and I drew him up behind me. I gave the stallion his head, and we began our trek home.



If Starski were surprised that I reined the stallion into the small stable behind The Baehr's Den, he didn't show it. After leaving the chestnut in a spare box stall, I entered the tavern through the kitchen's entrance, Starski following mutely behind me. Hughley caught sight of us as we made our way toward the stairs, and it only took a gesture indicating the upper chamber, for him to nod his approval.

A fire was already burning in the small room, and I shook out both of our cloaks and set them on the pegs at either side of the hearth to dry. Hughley soundlessly entered the room, leaving a tray of strong wine on the bench and slipping away as quietly as he had come. I poured two goblets and handed one to Starski, who sat on the bed, staring at the shuttered windows. I pulled the single chair closer to the bed opposite him and propped up my feet on the bench. Idly, I picked up a piece from the nearby chessboard and rubbed my thumb across the smooth surface. The silence lasted for several moments before he finally spoke.

"You must think..."

"I think you had your reasons, and none of them foolish."

"All right, mad then."

"If you are mad, then I should be locked up in the tower right next to you."

He finally looked away from the window and almost managed to give me a wry grin. "Perhaps."

I set down my goblet and turned in my seat to face him, speaking as gently as I could. "Starski, you said you kept your vow. What was it that has kept you tied to the sea, tied to the storms all these many years? Who has demanded this promise from you?"

He hesitated. I made to speak again, but he closed his eyes and raised a hand to silence me. "It's just that...I've never spoken of this to anyone." He stood and walked to the window, pushing open the shutters. The rain had let up, but the occasional flash of lightning still lit the midnight sky. "My family, as you know, came from the east coast of Kalif, a poor village called Brookillyn. Before settling there, my people came from across the seas, from the desert countries. They fled religious persecution and came to Kalif to start a new life without fear and ridicule, though being so different than many of the settlers on the east side of the island, they were harassed to some degree. Still, my parents were so grateful to this new country that Da joined the guardsmen and swore his

life to serving the crown.” Starski glanced up, as if to see if his tale still held my interest. I gave him a small nod to encourage him.

“He was something to see, Hutch. He was the best and bravest, and soon earned the respect of everyone in Brookillyn and the surrounding ports. I was born there, as was my brother, Nicholai. We were happy for many years...” Starski turned his face back toward the storm and sea. “Then the wars came.”

His eyes closed as he continued, each memory seeming to run through his mind like pictures from a Psalter as he spoke. “Every able man to battle. Forces from Hobokyn had invaded the northern territories of Kalif, and our vanguards were sent to drive them from our shores. Da was knighted and called to serve on the west coast. His job was to captain the guard over the more vulnerable ports of The Hold during the first wave of the war. We moved here and he served for four years...four years Da kept those ports safe. But the war continued, and more men were sent to sea, including him.”

When he didn’t continue right away, I gently prodded him. “How old were you?”

“I had seen thirteen summers when he went to sea. Ma, Nic and I stood on the docks as the ships sailed away from the bay. It was an odd feeling, Hutch, to be so proud of him and so afraid for him. That...that was when we both made a vow.”

Starski’s anguish was like a living thing in that still room. “Da vowed that he would come back to us, no matter what, as long as I kept hope, kept watching for him to come home. I promised I would, with all my heart.” He looked at me then. “I know, I’ve always known that this was just a father’s desperation to comfort his son. My father knew very well the odds of his returning alive. I think he simply didn’t know what else to say to me before he left.

“I remember seeing him, standing at the bow of the ship, waving goodbye to us, the sunlight streaming through the clouds. There were a few wisps brewing in the distance, but no one of us thought too much of it. It was spring and there were always storms—always. Well, I knew it would take a bit for the ships to make the bend around the harbor, so I took my horse and rode to the cove to watch until his ship was out of sight. I swear he was still at the bow of the boat waving back at me.”

I could see the little boy my friend once was, astride his horse, watching his father sail away to war. I could imagine his face, proud one moment, fearful the next, the colors of sunrise washing his face in her palette. Starski’s voice was so soft I almost missed it when he continued.

“The storm came while we were at our evening meal. The wind whipped up and blew the shutters right open. Rain like a flood, and the lightning...” There was the slightest tremor in his voice as he continued, “Lightning and thunder as such that I never thought I’d see it again...until last new moon when I found you. I should have been afraid of being out in such a storm, but all I could think about was Da and my vow...”

I wondered if he truly meant back then, last moon or this night. “So you went to the cove in the storm, then?”

“Aye, I did. I rode down to the shore as if the devil himself were after me, hoping beyond reason that I’d see their sails bringing him back to safe harbor. But they never came.”

The silence that followed was long and I was loath to break it, content to wait for Starski to continue when he was ready. “Months later we learned that they never made it to the northern battles. I never heard from Da again.”

“And, somehow, you still had that hope...”

“It’s foolish, I know, to think the storm that took him could somehow bring him back—a child’s hope. Maybe I am truly mad. But have you ever had such a dream, a dream so real that you would swear by all that’s holy that it’s a true memory?” Starski realized what he had said, and to whom, and turned red with embarrassment. I cut him off with a wave of my hand before he could apologize. He swallowed, then finally continued, “After the storm—that first storm—I dreamt it was so, that he would come back to us.” Starski looked embarrassed and angry with himself at the same time. “I’m a fool.”

“No, not a fool,” I said softly as I looked at him, finally setting down the alabaster knight piece I had clutched throughout the story, the form of a horse imprinted in my hand. “Hope born out of love, hope for your da to come home could never make you a fool. If you hadn’t had that hope...” My voice caught in my throat with the realization that it was his hope that found me. His hope gave me life.

Starski finally turned to look at me, his smile tremulous and his eyes bright with emotion. Whether embarrassed further or overcome with despair, he turned back toward the sea. “I loved my da, Hutch.”

“I know, Starsk, I know.” I stood to join him at the shuttered window. My hand gripped his shoulder, trying to show with a touch what I couldn’t find the words to express. Starski looked toward me, his eyes conveying so much with a glance—his surprise, his gratitude, his friendship. He turned back to watch the storm, and I stood with him. The lightning still punctuated the night, but it was obviously fading in its intensity as it moved farther east. After a moment, Starski reached out and pulled the shutters close.



Spring turned to summer in Kalif, and the entire island seemed green and full with the wonder of it. I learned a great deal from Starski over these months, though I’d never admit it to him. He certainly didn’t need me to feed his self-confidence. The man was an enigma, the brashest of knights one moment, a tenderhearted child the next. A mystery, my comrade.

Much of our waking hours were spent riding the coastline, keeping it secure from the occasional thief or cutpurse, acting as constables to settle petty disputes. It was a glorious time of serving the king and crown, and somehow I felt—for the first time in my life, I believe—*fulfilled*. I can't tell you *how* I knew, but I was never more sure of anything. My daily frustration at not being able to recall my past lessened from the bleeding wound it was, to that of a dull ache—always lurking somewhere in the back of my mind, though not overwhelming me as it once had. Still, I was often discouraged since I'd had no more flashbacks of memory, but with my energetic partner around to bolster my spirits, I was hard pressed to remain engulfed in self-pity for long.

About midsummer, our division was called to escort some of the king's advisors, chancellors, and members of the high court to Fernanda, a city just north of The Hold, boasting the island's one institution of higher learning—a monastery run by a Trappist Order. There the brotherhood prepared young hearts and minds for either the church or to serve the crown. Every summer the king's appointed made their pilgrimage, though I soon learned that it was more of a holiday than for any actual monitoring of an official nature. This year the entourage was leaving a few weeks earlier than usual, as the court had gotten word that Kalif was to soon be visited by the king and queen of the neighboring country of San Dia Aggio. Not wanting to miss either of the events, we were quickly drafted into escorting them north, the high court lords and ladies resting comfortably in their gaily draped coaches as we rode along side, often bored out of our wits. Starski grouched about having to move up the scheduled trip and spent considerable time making plans as to how he and I could go out scouting the southern tip of the island once we returned from the monastery. This way, we wouldn't have to be subject to a “mummer and pony show” for the visiting dignitaries.

I couldn't have explained why, but a sense of disquiet encompassed me as we began our week-long trek to the north. Starski soon sensed that something was troubling me, but let me keep my own counsel. Still, I could often feel his eyes upon me, occasionally giving me a questioning glance—his open invitation to share my unease when I was ready to. I felt foolish, not being able to put a name to my concern, and kept it to myself. Even so, the sensation grew with each passing day, as we drew closer to the monastery.

We were nearing the end of the fifth day of our journey, my mind wandering aimlessly. The rough, two-track path we had been following since leaving The Hold turned from the north and bore us westerly. The sun was setting before us, bathing the surrounding forest in a dappled gold. We would stop soon and break camp, circling the four coaches, while our battalion bedded down on the ground about them. My thoughts drifted to one of the young handmaidens, brought along to serve her lady. The shameless thing had been flirting with me openly for the last two days, and I occupied myself with thoughts of how I could get her to myself for an hour or two. So far, it had been a mind numbing—not to mention *backside* numbing—trip.

I admit that I wasn't paying too much attention to the trail ahead, or perhaps I would have detected something wrong the sooner. I was partially blinded by the setting sun, which

cast shadows all about me, and I could only make out the silhouette of the knights riding point before me. Still, the briefest glint of...*what?* Something caught my eye—was it silver and not the gold of the sunlight? I stood in my stirrups and glanced behind me, looking for Starski. He was at the end of our entourage, having ridden back to check on a knight whose horse was showing signs of lameness. Somehow, though, at that moment he looked up and caught sight of me raised up from my saddle, seeking him out. A second flash caught the corner of my eye, and I saw the slightest movement ahead in the shadowy woods. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, as I realized this was the perfect spot for an ambush with all of us blinded by the horizontal rays of sunset.

“To arms!” I never second-guessed myself, somehow knowing that we were in danger. In hindsight, though, I would have felt extremely foolish if I had been wrong. I drew my sword and wheeled the mare back toward the wagons. My first duty was to see to the protection of the court, even though everything within me called out to plow directly into the threat, as was the obligation of the knights.

At my cry, the guardians of Kalif came to alert, and within a moment, the forest around us exploded. Seemingly from behind every tree and through the brush came thieves—three score, at least—intent on the wealth within the coaches.

Starski’s blood-red chestnut was beside me in an instance, his sword flashing before me as he barked out orders, directing the men to battle. Just before spurring away, he reined in the dancing stallion to meet my eyes, conveying so much within a breath: *be brave, God keep you safe*. Then he was gone.

A quick check to either side of me proved the other guardsmen had taken their places and completed the circle around the coaches, waiting for any cutthroat who might make their way through the knights. I ignored the frightened cries and call for reassurance from within, too intent on the task before me. Occasionally, a bandit would break through the ranks of fighting knights, but we dispatched them quickly, leaving them bleeding and dying before us on the dusty road.

I watched in horrific fascination the battle before me, every fiber of me desperate to leave my post and join the fray, knowing I could balance the scales before any more of our division were injured or killed. The dun mare felt my excitement and moved forward of her own volition. A bark from the lead guardsman called me back into place, though I grew increasingly frustrated, knowing I would be of more use at Starski’s side. I forced myself to remain calm and stay in formation until I realized I could no longer see him. I again stood in my stirrups, desperate to find him within the many skirmishes. I finally spotted the telltale flash of red as the chestnut raced away from a horseman Starski had downed, toward a footman rushing upon our caravan. The stallion was almost upon the thief when he suddenly turned back, and using his quarterstaff like a scythe, stuck the stallion’s forelegs, sending it plowing into the dust. The chestnut rolled, Starski trapped beneath him. The horse scrambled to his feet and cantered unsteadily away, but his rider lay unmoving on the forest floor.

I had no breath to cry out with as I dug my heels into the dun's flanks, and I barely heard my superior calling me back. I could see the individual battles engaged all around me as we galloped into their midst, but my focus was on the cutthroat before me, gathering up Starski's fallen longsword. *If I could only fly!* The man seemed almost nonchalant as he gripped the weapon, testing its weight in his hands, then turned toward the still figure on the ground. I whipped the reins against the dun's neck, urging her to eat up the distance between us and the man intent on stealing something far more precious than the treasures I left behind safe within the coaches.

My friend's life.

It was a surreal moment. The man's actions seemed to slow as he stood over Starski, raising the sword in a double-handed blow, preparing to cleave head from body. I cannot describe what it was I felt in the instant I realized I would never reach them in time. I watched in horror as the bandit's arm began its downward trail, then jerked to a stop halfway down. The longsword fell harmlessly to his side as he arched his back in burning agony, my dagger quivering against his spine.

I didn't have the luxury of time to ponder the wisp of memory that flashed in my inner eye. For an instant, a much younger shade of myself stood in a courtyard, launching blade after blade into the heart of a target. I felt the now familiar pain creep behind my eyes with the memory, but the ache was welcomed.

My mare's steps never faltered as she rushed past the staggering bandit, and I threw myself out of the saddle. My flight took us both to the ground, and I rolled out of the tangle of the wounded man's limbs, withdrawing my dirk from his back. He made it back up as far as his knees, but I was blinded by bloodlust and the fury that came from exacting justice—I sank the blade deep into his gut, then used my boot to push him off the knife. I didn't stay there long enough to hear the death rattle of his last gasp.

I dropped to Starski's side, drawing my own longsword as I did. An unimaginable relief flooded over me when I saw that he was regaining consciousness, though I didn't know how badly he was hurt from the fall or the stallion's rolling weight. I never got a chance to check on him further because a new man, intent on splitting my skull with a mace, rushed me. Rising and planting myself over my partner, I battled away my opponent, neatly severing the hand that bore the barbed staff in my direction. Above the din, I could barely make out Starski's gasping, "*behind you!*" before the downward stroke of a broadsword sliced through the end of my cloak where my back had been only seconds before the warning.

The man who now engaged me was well my match, and I found I was hard pressed to take the advantage. Just after I parried a well-aimed stroke at my ribs, I found myself ducking to avoid having my head dispatched from my shoulders by a second swordsman. *Hades! Now I'm in some deep shah!*

No sooner had that thought escaped me, when a third blade fled past. But this time, it met the stroke of the second assailant, forcing him back. “Well, don’t just stand there!” Starski rasped at me as he engaged the bandit. I liked these odds considerably better and pressed the offense against my original opponent.

I don’t know how long we fought like that, side by side, and often back to back. It seemed like an eternity, though it only lasted perhaps half an hour. When the field finally stilled, there were three guardsmen dead, five seriously wounded, but not a single bandit left alive.

I dropped my sword to the ground and doubled over, resting my hands upon my thighs, exhausted beyond measure. Starski slumped to his knees next to me, then onto his backside. I felt as if I should say something, at the very least, thank him for saving my life. I wearily lifted my head to speak, only to find him looking back at me, seemingly trying to find the words as well.

The eyes that bore into mine spoke for him, touching my soul with so much. We said nothing. We didn’t have to.



Starski—surprisingly—would have made a good diplomat in his own right, as he calmed the fears of the high court and reassured them that they were safe. That night we set up camp not too far from the battlefield, with the bulk of our remaining ranks staying at the site to guard the coaches and tend to the wounded. The rest of our division, Starski and me included, went back to bury the dead.

After the cairn was built for the fallen knights, one of the friars accompanying us was asked to say Mass for the dead. Starski and I stood at the back of those gathered, only partially listening to the reading of the Psalter, while keeping watch over the surrounding woods. We would not be caught unaware again.



Starski and I took the first watch that night, huddled around our small campfire. One man was required to stand watch at each of the four points, and I, being the newest guardsman, was assigned the north. Starski quietly insisted that he mark the time with me.

More than once I saw him pause as he untacked the chestnut, almost as if something inside of him “caught” with his movements, causing him pain. The stallion had not run off as I had assumed he would, but instead stayed near the battlefield until he was led back to his master. Starski had checked the horse over thoroughly, fearing damage to his forelegs, but the stallion was sound. After he hobbled the chestnut, Starski sank gratefully in front of the fire and leaned gingerly against his saddle. We sat in silence, watching the flames dance before us. My partner wore his mask well, but I could sense

his hurt as surely as if it were my own. Looking past the fire, I could see the mottled bruises at the throat of his shirt. My eyes traveling further could read the pure exhaustion on his face, his brow pinched with pain.

“You’re hurt,” I said it quietly, protecting his pride from any that might still be awake. I had seen before how he had acted around others after taking the sword stroke to his leg. He had brushed it off, stubbornly refusing to show any sign of weakness around his division. I wondered why, but never asked him, attributing it to the fact that my friend was a proud man.

Starski’s eyes never left the fire, but a small grin lit his face. “You try having fifty stone of horse roll on top of you and see how you feel.”

It was the closest he’d ever come to an admission, and we both knew it. I drew my cloak from my saddlebags behind me. “Lie down.”

That got him to look at me. “What?”

“I said lie down. Sleep, Starski. I can keep watch; I don’t think I could sleep tonight if my life depended on it.” His gaze locked with mine, gauging me. For him to sleep right then would mean he was weak, vulnerable, less than ready to perform his duties—though only in his eyes, I knew. I could see his pride warring with his pain. “Starski, let me do this. Trust me. I’ll keep watch, I promise. And if I see anything...”

“You’ll wake me.”

“I’ll wake you.”

He was torn, I knew, but finally succumbed to the bone-weariness. With a small nod, he stretched out, though not comfortably, using his saddle for a pillow and pulling his cloak around him. Instead of draping him with my own as well, I folded my cloak lengthwise and placed it at his back, cushioning his bruises and supporting his tender back. “Lie back.”

He looked surprised and acutely uncomfortable by my helping him. I saw his eyes dart around, belying the battle in his mind, until he finally rolled back against my cloak. I sat down, not wanting to make him any more self-conscious, and resumed my watch.

“Thank you.” A whisper.

“Rest easy, my friend.”



It took us an extra day to reach the monastery, though we knew that the chancellors, advisors and courtesans were spooked by the thieves’ attack, and would have liked nothing more than to have raced day and night to make it to the safety of four walls. As

we began the last leg of our journey, Starski called me forward, and I scouted ahead with him. I could tell he still ached, though he hid his pain well behind the fluidity that he sat his mount. Most of our sojourn was in silence, but my mind was far from peaceful. I would have thought the sense of unease that had plagued me from the start of this journey would have been satisfied by the thieves' ambush, but it returned in force with each league as we made our way to the college.

Starski and I topped the rise opening to the valley of the Trappist Order. "Are you all right? You don't look like you're fairing well."

I didn't want to talk about my misgivings just then. "Thank you for the compliment. I'll have you know, you're no rose yourself."

Starski rolled his eyes and turned the chestnut back toward the rest of the entourage, leaving me to stare at the stone walls surrounding the large chapel. *Why did the monastery fill me with such dread?*

A page for the monastic brothers rode out bearing a white flag of peace to greet our group as soon as we were mid-field before the gated walls. As the highest-ranking officer, Starski cantered forward, brandishing the banner of Kalif before him. Something within me rose with hope and pride as we watched him ride out, the blue and gold of the crown streaming above his head. Here was a man I could follow into battle, serve with my life for a cause and country we believed in. He was a man of virtue, a man of honor.

A man I called brother, friend.

He reined in the stallion, the horse's blood-colored coat dancing in the sunlight, adding to the beauty of the moment. Starski then spoke with the page, a formality they went through every year at this time, but it honored the Trappist Monks, this pageantry. The boy and knight clasped one another's wrists, then exchanged flags. The page returned to the walls to prepare our way, and Starski urged the chestnut back to us.

"Guardsmen, advance the coaches. We are welcomed into this House of God and Higher Learning." The guardians whooped in return, glad the long and treacherous journey was over and looking forward to a few days of doing nothing more strenuous than cleaning their tack and sharpening their swords.

I could sense that Starski turned and smiled in anticipation at me, but I was too preoccupied staring at the walls surrounding the monastery. The feeling of dread that had been roiling around in my gut for days now burned within me, bringing its fire up my throat. *Why this fear? How can I explain this to Starski?*

I glanced over at my partner, his face shaded with his concern for me, a question in his eyes. I had no answers for him.



We met the Brotherhood of the Order en masse at the evening meal. They were a pleasant enough sort—for monks, anyway. I was engaged in a lively conversation with a brilliant youngster, and I surprised myself in holding my own in a battle over the merits of Aristotle and Socrates, the knowledge I needed seeming to arrive from nowhere. Again, how I knew of these things, I had no certain clue. All I knew was that my points rang true, and the young man conceded to some of them.

When the evening drew to an end, the high court was led to their chambers on the second floor reserved for them, and we—mere guardsmen and knights—were made to bed down on the floor and benches of the dining hall. At least, we were given bedrolls, though they were made from the same scratchy wool as the monks' dirt-colored robes. Starski rolled his out underneath one of the hall's ample windows and was asleep within moments. Exhausted as well, I wadded up my cloak to use as a pillow and stretched out nearby, positioning myself to lie on my side and watch the stars through the opening. I tried to recall the names Starski had taught me of the constellations, but drifted off before I could find Orion and his bow.



*Falling.*

*I was falling into an endless blackness that threatened to swallow me up and smother me. The pain that made up every fiber of me screamed against the stinging salts of my own sweat rubbing against me, burning me raw. Arms twisted behind me, I'm pushed again and again until I stumble and can go no farther. The smell of wet wool is mixed with the sea air, the scent of pain. A cat-o-nine tails slashes across my naked back, ripping away my flesh. A coarse rope is slung around my neck, its end thrown into the heavens and becoming taut—I feel it crushing my throat—I cannot...*

*And then I'm falling again, into a blackness that will not let me breathe.*

The sound of my own frantic gasps woke me. I was covered with sweat, shaking from head to toe, sitting up on my bedroll in the monks' hall. At first, all I saw was blackness; the musty, earthy smell of rough wool lingered around me. My eyes cleared and I could see the stars through the window and make out the lump that was Starski nearby at my right. The sweat that covered me began to cool in the evening chill. Even in the calm, I began to panic; I couldn't stay in that place a minute longer.

Snatching my cloak, I all but ran from the hall, trying to not wake the others, but not much caring. All I could think about was getting out of the monastery—*now*.

My race to the stables was but a blur—I was mad, mindless—but I found my way. Belle was in the paddock with the other guardsmen's horses, and she whickered me a greeting as I approached. My frantic scramble into the paddock scared the other horses and they snorted and danced to the other side. I saddled the mare right there, clumsy with the girth and bridle, then finally led her to the gate—where Starski was standing, watching me.

He didn't say anything, just watched me calmly. I was too shaken, too frustrated to explain. It wouldn't have mattered; I didn't know what to say to explain my actions. "I can't stay here."

He nodded, maddeningly calm in the face of my turmoil. "Saddle the chestnut. I'll be but a moment."

I stood there with my mouth open while he walked away, wanting nothing more than to vault onto the dun's back and be free of the walls that surrounded me. I couldn't explain the madness that gripped me, but my fear was real and overwhelming. I froze there in the dusty paddock, gripping the reins and saddle, one foot in the stirrup to draw myself onto the mare's back, needing to pound away from that place.

Instead, somewhere I found the strength to drop the mare's reins, retrieve Starski's saddle and tack up the chestnut.



The horses sensed my turmoil, making us continually rein them in to keep at a steady trot. I was blind in my need to give the mare her head and gallop out from under the choking walls, but I kept myself in check, biting back my fear. Once Starski and I had passed the tower guard and cleared the gate, we released the horses, letting them run out against the fear I projected and Starski's concern for me. More than once I saw him pull back the stallion, allowing Belle and me to keep up, then follow where I directed the mare.

We were more than a league away when I finally pulled her in, rational thought returning. I knew the dun could have run farther, but we were leaving the grassland and approaching the woods. A headlong flight through the brush could result in either horse breaking their leg in the darkness of the forest. We soon came to a stop at a clearing alongside a brook. Looking back, we could see down into the valley and the blackened shadow that was the outer monastery.

Starski dismounted and tethered the stallion, then went about the business of picking up branches and kindling. He remained silent as he withdrew his flint pouch and, within a few strikes, started a small fire.

I stood aside, fumbling with the reins, feeling acutely foolish. The blind panic that took hold of me inside the Order's wall seemed to have blown away with the wind of our wild flight, though the metallic taste of fear was still bitter on my tongue. "You haven't said anything since the paddock."

Starski glanced up at me as he calmly stacked wood around the small blaze. "What would you have me say?"

"Hades! Don't do that! Don't answer me with more questions!" I slammed my fist against my thigh, spooking the mare to dance at the end of the reins, rolling her eyes. I let her go, hoping she wouldn't range far.

“All right.” Starski rested his arms on his legs, as he remained crouched before the fire. “Your dream, then. What was your dream about?”

*Damn him.* Another question. “I’m not sure.” I threw myself down opposite him and stared into the flames. “I don’t know if it was a memory, or just...a dream.”

“Tell me.”

I stared hard into the flames, as if I could see the images there. “I couldn’t breathe. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t. I think...I think there was someone there. I was beaten, struck again and again...yes, someone *was* there. But who?” I looked up, as if he could give me an answer. Instead, Starski sat quietly, staring into the flames as if he, too, could see what I had. “You must think me a coward or mad.”

His reply was soft. “No, neither of those things. If it was memory, it might explain how you came about your injuries, tell a bit of what was done to you, why you can’t remember. If it was nothing more than a dream...” He looked up at me then, his eyes full of understanding and loss. “I know how real a dream can seem. It can send a man out into a storm with nothing more than a boy’s foolish hope...”

*Of course.* I nodded, grateful for his acceptance of my insanity. “So, what did you tell the others? That you and I were going out to chase moonbeams?”

He snorted at my poor attempt at humor. “Nothing quite so creative. Several of the men were wakened by your nightmare as well. I told them that you had a premonition about thieves coming to retaliate for their fallen comrades, so you and I were going scouting tonight and would report back in the morning. It’s well known that the folk from Brookillyn are a superstitious lot. I then put three more men on watch tonight, just in case.”

I groaned. “You didn’t.”

“I did. It’ll do them good, staying up all night. Builds character.” The last statement was punctuated by a yawn.

“Go to sleep. There’s no sense in both of us being up all night.”

“You need to build some character, too?”

“Jackass. Shut up and sleep.”

Yawning again, Starski stretched out and rolled over, his back to the fire. His words were muffled by the cloak drawn up to his chin. “Give us a story.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Not yet. A story?”

“I don’t know any stories.”

“A song then. Give us a tune.”

“Starski, shut up and go to sleep.”

“Come on, sing something.” Another yawn.

I sighed, searching my mind for any snatch of song that I could recall, knowing that he was humoring me, trying to distract me. Fine. I would play along. There was one song I had learned in the tavern weeks ago that I found particularly catchy. Before I drew my breath to sing, though, the stillness was broken by Starski’s snore.

I sighed again, then folded my arms across my knees and rested my head there, watching the flames dance before me.



The week at the Order passed more quickly than I had hoped. We filled our days with sport, challenging each other in everything from arm wrestling to foot races to lifting rocks and logs to see who was the strongest. It was a good time of camaraderie and friendly competition, and I got to know the others in my division better. Starski and I continued to “scout” the parameter at the end of each day, sleeping under the blanket of stars, rather than under the roof of the monastery. The nights were filled with talks about everything and nothing, quiet laughter, and, yes, even song.

Our trip back to The Hold was uneventful, other than a second Mass at the gravesite of our fallen men. The bodies of the thieves had been set afire when we had left that place, and there was nothing left but the remains of their ashes, what the wind hadn’t blown away.

I did manage to spend some time with the flirtatious handmaiden, though certainly not as much as I would have liked. At least, I had gained some ground, with the promises of things to come once we returned to the castle.

It didn’t take long for word to get around The Hold about our having been set upon by outlaws. Starski lodged a formal report with Captain Dobae, detailing the course of events and the loss of three of our own. I was later called into the captain’s chambers, where I surmised that I was expected to give my own account of the assault, since I was the first to cry the alarm.

I couldn't have been in his quarters more than a few minutes when I was dismissed. I walked falteringly out of his chambers, straight into Starski and his face-splitting smile. "So?"

I looked at him dumbly. I couldn't have been more surprised if you had told me the sun was purple and that cows birthed kittens.

"I'm to be knighted!"



I never believed I could be this happy again. The memories—the glimpses into my former life—all seemed to be filled with a sort of indescribable darkness that had nothing to do with their elusiveness. But here, tonight, in this place, I was filled with a joy and contentment that I seemed to have been waiting for my entire two-score and unknown years. I turned and looked down either side of the tables. Seated to my right, King James and Queen Rosealyn, embodiment of the country and crown I was now sworn to serve with my life. Next to them, my captain, a man I would follow willingly into any battle. Other men to his left: good, honest knights that would stand next to me, fight next to me. Before me a hall made full by the court of Kalif, all there to honor my bravery, my knighthood. And to my left...

To my left was Starski. He must have felt my eyes upon him, because he turned from his conversation with the page serving him. There was a hint of a question in those blue eyes, but it promptly fled as his grin broke free, mirroring my own. The pride in his eyes affirmed me more than any ceremony of knighthood.

"Sir Hutch," he said it as if to taste it.

"Sir Starski." I felt like laughing aloud with pure joy.

Starski's smile warmed further. "Partner."

His abrupt rising startled me, as I was heady with both wine and the day's events. His voice rang clear and bright as he raised his glass. "My lords and ladies, your majesties, by your leave—a toast!" He reached down and took me under one arm, hauling me to my feet.

"A toast!" the court echoed him, raising their goblets to salute me.

"To Sir Hutch d'Brookilyn, may you..."

His charge to me was never finished. The blast of trumpets from the back of the room turned every head to the entryway. The king's herald strode to the center aisle-way. "My Sovereign Majesties King James and Queen Rosealyn, lords and ladies of Kalif, I present to you, their Majesties the King and Queen of San Dia Aggio."

I tried to see the accompanying royalty, but there were too many people standing already, and my view was blocked. I stood up beside Starski to ask if he had caught a glimpse of them, but when I caught sight of his paling face I became concerned. “Starsk, what is it?”

“We’ve got to get out of here—*now!*” Starski grabbed my arm and made to lead me off the platform when Captain Dobae’s voice hissed out from behind us.

“Starski! Hutch! What in blazes do you think you’re trying to do?” The captain’s strong arms pushed us back toward our seats, but Starski was desperate.

“No time to explain now, Captain! Trust me, we have got to...”

“*You!*” The bellow came from the center aisle, the hatred and anger in the single word was enough to silence the entire room. I looked past my partner to see who the speaker was and to whom he was speaking, and my eyes traveled right to the face of the king of San Dia Aggio.

It was the face of the devil himself.

My jaw dropped, and I felt my entire body begin to quake. My chest tightened, stripping me of all breath. A feminine cry to his right forced my gaze there, to look upon *her*. *Dear God, it was her!*

Then there was blackness.



I sputtered as the water brought me back to consciousness. I spit out what landed in my mouth, just as a second bucketful struck me again, somehow colder than the first. I was unceremoniously hauled to my feet by two of my fellow guardsmen. I shook my head to clear it, trying desperately to remember what in Hades’ name had just happened, when I saw her worried face. *Her frightened face*. I felt myself slipping away again, only held upright by the men on either side of me. A backhanded blow from *him*, the king of San Dia Aggio, snapped my face to the side, clearing my mind and bringing the taste of blood. As soon as my eyes could focus, I made out Starski a few yards away, being held back by three knights. There was blood on his brow. From the looks of things, they were having a difficult time keeping him at bay.

“*You!*” Again, the single word spat in my face with so much venom, it could have killed me from its poison. I blinked furiously, trying to focus on his face—the face of the king.

Bennjamin Forestte, Sovereign King of San Dia Aggio.

And in a moment, it was all there—every memory, every moment of my life before. Who I had been. Who I was. How I had lived.

How I had died.

And then there she was. Jeinni...my sweet Jeinni. Jeinni, his queen. *Jeinni, my love.* Her tears. Her bruises. The sweet, tender, stolen moments of our love. Her broken body at his hand. When I had discovered the truth, the crimes of the crown. How my pleas to the clergy had fallen on deaf ears. How the king was exempt from the country's moral standards. Her hysterical pleadings for me to protect her, steal her away from him, find a place where no one would know us, where we could start over—together.

I looked at the tears now filling her eyes—the guilt, the shame, the futility.

We had almost made it across the country, a desperate flight to hide then slip away to another land, but within a day's ride of the coast, the king and his men caught up with us. She begged him to spare my life. I had held the high court's and my countrymen's favor for many years as the highest ranking knight of San Dia Aggio, a knight of the White Order—the Queen's Own Protector—commemorated for my bravery and service to the crown. He consented, but we both knew he was lying. There was no forgiving what I had done, regardless of the king's secretive abuse of his wife. She was little more than chattel, an ornament at his side. What he had or had not done—after all, it was our word against the king's—was of no consequence. I was silenced, no one ever to know of the bruises upon the body and heart of the queen.

I was humiliated before the court. Stripped of my rank and publicly flogged. My crime was treason to the crown, and my sentence—death. Still, my popularity with much of the court and common folk held some weight against the king's decision. To kill me outright would bring to a head the unrest among an already unstable country. The threat of civil uprising had been in the air for years, and something like the killing of one of their favorites, especially against the unpopular monarchy, could have been the spark that ignited the flame of their uprising.

Instead, King Bennjamin sent me away on a ship, his wisest councilor, a Vacillian Monk, my watchdog. The memory of the scent of his woolen cowl turned my stomach with just the thought of it. The similar musk had sent me into an unknowing panic from the monastery weeks before. The court and people of San Dia Aggio were told how my life would be graciously spared by the mercy of the crown. Instead of death I would be sold at the traders port at San Bernen Diano—a fitting punishment for the man who had once willingly enslaved himself in service to the crown. I knew my being shipped off was a ruse—a facade—for the court and masses, and that at mid-sea, the monk would hang me from the crow's nest and let the gulls pick at my body, then toss what was left of my carcass overboard to feed the sharks.

All these memories swept over me in an instant.

“Silence!” The roar that echoed through the hall came from Kalif's King James. Within moments, the rumblings of the court diminished. His eyes bore into me as he

approached, then he turned to King Forestte. “You accuse my man of treason. By what evidence do you do this?”

“*Your* man? Do you know who this...this *scourge* is?”

All I could do was numbly watch, relying on the biting grips of the men who held me to remain upright. King James searched my face, a rage growing in his eyes. “He is Sir Hutch d’Brookillyn, in my service since spring and knighted just this eve.”

Forestte’s bark of laughter held no mirth. “And how do you know this to be true, hmm? Does anyone from Brookillyn truly know of this man or his family? Who has spoken for him?”

My eyes flew to Starski’s, begging him *not* to speak, but I was too late.

“I speak for him! *He is my friend.* There is no more honorable man in this room than he.” There was a challenge in his voice, his anger screwing his face up like a mummer’s mask of rage.

Forestte’s voice was soft, but carried throughout the hall. “You are a fool then, Sir Knight.” The king swung to face the audience. “Good people of Kalif, you know who I am, and no doubt the account of the betrayal to my crown has reached even your shores.” He spoke in a lilting tone, courting their sympathy, but I felt the edge in his voice as surely as if it were a knife twisting in my spine. Forestte reached behind him and dragged the queen to stand next to him. “You all know of my love and devotion to this woman—my beautiful queen. But, anon...” His finger traced her cheek, though I could see her flinch and tense away from him. He turned back to the crowd, playing them for all he could. “There was a moment of weakness, to my shame, to the rending of my heart. The Queen’s Own, sworn to protect her with his life, saw that moment of weakness and took the advantage!”

A collective gasp and chatter rippled through the assembly, including from the majesties of Kalif. Forestte had them now and surged ahead. “Yes! That’s right—the Queen’s Own, the White Knight of San Dia Aggio—defiled the queen, abusing my trust, and tarnishing the very crown itself and all my country holds dear!”

Another cry went up from the court. “No!” I breathed, no more a feather in a windstorm. I looked around desperately for help, but all I saw was righteous indignation and disgust on all the faces before me. Except for one.

Starski struggled against the men that held him back, and it took all three of them to control him, finally forcing him to his knees.

King James grasped my jaw, forcing my face upward toward his. “Are these accusations true?”

“My lord, the King of San Dia Aggio has no honor! He himself defiles the crown. More than once he beat the queen senseless for no offense but by his own perversity!” My audacity earned an uproar from the crowd and an arm around my throat by a once-comrade at arms.

“Sacrilege!” Forestte hissed.

King James extended his hand, holding back both the visiting king and his men, then returning his attention to me. “Speak carefully, man. More than your honor is at stake here.”

I raised my eyes to my king. “My duty was to protect the queen—from *any* who would harm her. If that was my crime, then I am guilty as they say.”

Anything more I might have said would have been drowned out by the fervor that ripped through the assembly and by Forestte. “Lies! How dare you still defile her with your words, and defy the crown!”

My arms were jerked farther behind me, and I felt them being roughly bound. I was living the nightmare all over again. I turned wildly to the King of Kalif. “Your majesty, please hear me, not for my sake, but for hers. He would have killed her and nearly did. She begged me...”

The king cut me off and turned to Jeinni, who stood trembling and pale beside her husband. “My lady, is this true?”

“Yes, my love,” Forestte oozed, drawing her closer still to his side. “Tell us. Tell these good people that I, who loves you more than my own life, that I would harm you and *force* you to flee me.”

There was silence within the hall; all eyes focused on the frail woman. She stood there, her face downcast, refusing to look up into the probing masses. I begged her with my eyes to tell the truth, not for fear of my own life—that was of little consequence. But if she spoke up now, admitted to suffering at his hands, then she could claim asylum in Kalif. “Jeinni—please! For *your* sake!”

“Silence!” I was struck again.

When her eyes finally raised to meet mine, I knew what she would say—all I read there was regret.

“I was weak,” she whispered, “but my sovereign lord has forgiven me.”

The crowd erupted in fury. Still, above the din, I could hear Starski’s furious bellow. “No!”

King James stood before me. “Man, by whatever name you have called yourself, you are guilty of high treason against the king and crown of San Dia Aggio, and treason by deceit to the crown of Kalif. I hereby order you to death. May God have mercy upon your soul.”

As I was dragged away under the roar of the crowd, I could see Jeinni being pulled off the dais by Forestte, finally protesting. I realized that, once again, by making a false statement of the event—downplaying her pain—she had hoped to spare my life. As with the last such trial, it would not work, though this time my death would indeed be public.

Before being torn from the hall, I caught a glimpse of Starski, breaking free of his captors, only to be downed by the pummel of a sword. I knew the last memory I held of him would be his dropping to the floor as if struck dead.



A small amount of moonlight poured through the cell window, the bars slicing into the meager light. By its angle, I knew it was just past midnight. I shifted uncomfortably, not even bothering to test the strength of the crude iron shackles again. I was manacled to the dank cell wall, my wrists bound together by a loop of chain tethered above my head. My feet barely touched the floor and my calves had long since cramped. I ached from the beating I had withstood, though nowhere near as much as when I had washed ashore months prior.

Once again, I had no hope that in the face of the storm, I would see the breaking sun. As much as I dreaded the coming morn, the night before me seemed endless.

As I hung there, my thoughts drifted across the years and leagues of my memories, each one rich and beautiful to my inner eye: family and friends, the women I had loved, the men I fought beside. The pride of my village when I was knighted, then later earned the honor of Queen’s Own. The shame in those same faces as I was stripped of my duty and flogged before them, then shipped away in chains of disgrace.

More recent memories came to me, of the bond I had formed with Starski—the partners we had become. I was comforted with the recollection of his laughter ringing in my ears, his warm grip upon my shoulder, his kindness to me. I was grateful and more than a bit perplexed by his commitment to me, even when I was disgraced before crown and court. I smiled a bit at the wonder of it.

I lifted my head against the bombardment of retrospection, tilting my face to the moonlight’s caress. Whatever lies were told, whatever hideous sins the crown covered up, I would go to my execution knowing I had fulfilled the true purpose of my duty, even unto death.



From the fall of the moonlight, I discerned that another two hours had passed when I heard the key scrape within the lock. Through the door's barred window, I could make out my jailer's pale face. It wasn't until he was thrust stumbling into the room that I understood the reason for his pallor—Starski's longsword tip remained firmly pressed against the man's spine.

The jailer quickly picked up the dropped rushlight, though there was no threat of it catching afire the damp straw at my feet. Starski's eyes flickered to mine as he raised his hand to his mouth, silencing me. A shove with the flat of his blade sent the guard scrambling to thrust the rushlight into the wall mount, not too far from my head. He hissed in fear as he did so, then began frantically searching his ring of keys. "All right, Starski, all right! You don't have to slice me open like a hog, you know."

"Hush, Berny." Starski took a second to look me over, his voice soft. "Are you all right?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." In the dim light of the room, I could make out dried blood from the first blow he had received to his temple, as well as the bloody river that ran from behind his right ear, staining the base of his tunic and cloak. I didn't like Starski's paleness or his rapid breathing, and I'm sure the glassiness of his eyes had nothing to do with the dimness of the cell. "Starski, leave. Don't..."

"Don't what? Don't get you out of here? Don't stop those hypocritical fools from killing an innocent man? You were condemned because you did what was right. How can you ask me to do anything less?"

As long as I live, be it another hour or thousands more, I'll never forget that moment in my jail cell, staring into the face of honor itself. Starski finally looked away and glared at my jailer.

"I think...that this...is...it." Berny's last word ended with a satisfying *snick*, as the key turned within the manacle, and I fell free from the first enclosure into Starski's arms, though my right wrist was still bound, and pulled back by the length of chain. My legs roared as the muscles that had been stretched for the last four hours changed position, and I was grateful for the support, though Starski, I think, wasn't in much better shape.

Even without the prompting sword at his back, Berny freed me from the second cuff, and Starski eased me to the ground, encouraging me to rub some feeling back into my hands and legs. A wave of nausea, perhaps sparked by the beatings I had taken, caused me to heave my guts, though I hadn't eaten anything since midday.

Starski knelt next to me, his arm curled around my back as I clung to his waist shamelessly, half draped across him for support, heaving.

"My God, Starski, he..." I could hear the jailer nervously fidgeting with his key ring.

“Shut up, Berny, just shut up.” Starski gripped my shoulders encouragingly, then helped me to stand. He raised his longsword menacingly. “I’ll handle it. This didn’t happen.”

“You know that I can’t...”

Berny never got to finish his statement. Like a lightning bolt, the sword pommel flashed forward, striking Berny across the temple and felling him like a speared boar. Starski propped me against the wall, then bodily hoisted the unconscious guardsman upright. As soon as Berny’s arms were in reach, I clasped a shackle around each wrist, then for good measure, tore off a piece of his tunic and stuffed it in his mouth. Starski nodded his approval, then extinguished the rushlight.

I staggered a bit as I pushed myself away from Berny’s prone form, and Starski caught me again. “Let me help you.”

“No, I’ll be all right. I can’t ask you for more than what you’ve already done.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Starski, you’ve just committed treason! Perhaps, if you explain to Captain Dobae that you were addled—the blow to your head...”

While he flinched at the word “treason,” I could see I hadn’t changed his resolve. “Hutch, tonight the king wouldn’t listen to the truth. Nobody would—not the court, not the guard. I...I thought at least the king would have. After you were brought down here and I finally woke up, I went to him.”

“You did what?” To argue such a thing with a sovereign ruler—a sentence handed down before the entire court—was unheard of. *That he would do this for me...*

“He would not listen to me, Hutch. He...he did not care about truth, or honor. I could not...” Instead of finishing the thought, he slipped an arm under mine to support me, then grasped my right wrist when I draped my arm across his shoulders. He sought out my face in the moonlight, making sure I was up to the flight we were about to embark on. I was overwhelmed by the sacrifice this man had just made.

“Starski, what about the other guards?”

There was a bit of sadness and perhaps regret in his face. “We will avoid them. If not...” I felt a lump forming in my throat as I took in the sight of this one man, willing to risk everything because he believed in me.

My other arm encircled him, drawing him to me. I immediately felt him return my embrace. “Thank you.” So simple a phrase, but I had nothing else to express what was in my heart.

Leaning heavily on him, we limped from the jail cell, locking it behind us and staggering into the night.



The darkened tunnels that ran the length of the castle's dungeons were a maze that no sane man could have devised. Naturally, I wasn't surprised when Starski steadily made his way through, never hesitating or mistaking his route, to the stairs that led up to the guardsmen's barracks. The dimly lit path had been quiet, as well as the stairs, and I was about to comment as much, when Starski eased open the doors and motioned me through. He quickly scanned the seemingly empty commons room, then motioned for me to join him. We were about halfway across to the door leading to the exercise yard when a familiar voice rumbled behind us.

"Starski."

He whirled toward the sound, his longsword seeming to collect the meager light of the room on its blade. From out of the shadows, Captain Dobae emerged. His shoulders were slumped, but his face was determined.

"Captain..." Starski's blade wavered, then lowered to the ground. While it was no longer threatening, I couldn't help notice that he did not sheath it, either.

"Are you mad? No..." The large man chuckled without humor. "...no, don't answer that. I already know."

"Please, sir, understand..."

"I do, son, better than you might think. Go. The men..." Dobae rubbed a hand across his upper lip. "The other men had an alert called from the north tower where the visiting royals are housed. Go quickly."

Starski extended his free hand to the captain, who clasped it in a soldier's grasp. Dobae pulled Starski roughly into an embrace, pounding him on the back before releasing him. When my superior turned to me, I extended my hand as well, though I was uncertain if he would take it or not.

I shouldn't have worried. The captain clasped my wrist firmly. "Godspeed. May you find a place in this world to be safe, and serve with honor."

I could not find a way to reply around the lump in my throat. Fortunately, Starski's sense of urgency was renewed, and he tugged me away from the captain and into the blackness of night.



The next hour was a desperate flight from within The Hold to the outer walls. We headed west and spoke little during our mad dance in and out of the alleys and side-streets. I know we were both relieved when no cry came from within the castle, discovering our escape. We made our way to the outer gates where Starski had first sneaked me through to the inn, and I was surprised to find them unguarded at the moment. It didn't take long to see why: Molly, the innkeeper's saucy daughter, was sharing a jug with the two guardsmen, leading them on a merry chase through the shadows with all sorts of promises and innuendoes. I wondered how Starski had managed that small miracle in such a short time.

We slipped through undetected, and within half a league, came upon two horses Starski had secured, though they were not Belle and his beloved chestnut. Still, the bays were steady and blended well with the shadows as we raced south, and then finally turned east through the forest once we cleared the sight of the castle. The knot in my stomach grew as I looked to the sky. In the horizon the blackness of deep night was taking on a lighter shade of blue, promising the coming dawn, and with it, the discovery of our escape.



Our desperate flight took us many leagues away from the castle, as well as the shoreline and ports that made up Starski's southwest watch. The course took us farther south than I had been before, and as we crested a sharp rise, I was surprised to see a port I had not been aware of. Starski's nod assured me that this was our destination. It couldn't have come any sooner, for as we neared the water's edge, dawn was beginning to break along the split of sea and sky.

Starski reined in behind a netter's shack and swung to the ground. I urged my horse to a stop beside him a second later, just in time to see him crumple to the ground.

I hissed out his name as I leapt down, then turned him over onto his back, cradling him against me. When his head lolled to the side, I repositioned my arm and was startled to find it slick with fresh blood. "Aw, Starsk...what have you done?"

I was at a loss as of what to do when his eyes fluttered open, then focused on me. "What are you doing up there?"

My voice caught when I replied. "I think the better question is 'what are *you* doing *down* there?'"

"Oh."

"Oh. You idiot, what possessed you...?"

"Quit grouching and help me up."

"Starski, you can't..."

He grasped my tunic and surged against me. I helped the stubborn fool to his feet, then steadied him as he staggered, one hand to the back of his head. He waved off all my other protests. “Look, we don’t have much time left. There’ll be plenty of time later to sleep this off.”

I whirled around at the sound of hoof beats coming up behind us from the west. I drew Starski’s sword and edged to the side of the shanty just as Hughley slung himself off a monstrous gray charger.

“If that’s Hughley, he’s here to help,” Starski whispered from my left. I ducked my head out around the corner just far and long enough for Hughley to catch a glimpse of me.

“There you are,” he muttered, leading the Percheron behind him. “I was afraid you wouldn’t make it. They’re waiting for you.”

We watched as Hughley dug out a set of seaman’s clothes for each of us from his saddlebags. Starski’s jaw dropped as he looked at the horse towering several hands above us. “Where in Hades did you get that monster?”

Hughley raised an eyebrow and thrust a pair of boots into each of our arms. “Where else? Mearle’s.”



Hughley quickly led us along the shoreline to a waiting skiff, the last to row out to a tall ship waiting in the harbor. When Starski was handed the pack of provisions rather than me, I finally realized the significance of his having changed his clothes as well. I grabbed him by the arm as he started to climb into the small boat behind me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He looked at me as if I were the village idiot. “Hutch, we don’t have a lot of time. Get in the boat!” Starski ignored my protest and turned back to pull Hughley into a quick embrace. “You can’t know...”

“Yeah, I do, my brother. Go, be safe.” The thin man pressed something into Starski’s hand. “Send word that you’re all right. Who knows? Maybe I’ll open up a tavern in a warmer climate.”

Starski turned to climb in beside me, and I put out a hand to stop him. “Starski, I can’t ask you to do this.”

Even in the predawn, I could see his eyes soften. “You never had to ask.”



We boarded “Los Tres Cebras” amid the frantic activity of the ship-to-shoremen preparing to hoist sail. The captain, a wizened old Spaniard named Jonas, nodded as we boarded, acknowledging our presence, then going about the business of weighing anchor.

I didn’t ask the multitude of questions rolling about my head, but rather silently followed Starski back to the bow of the ship, out of the way of the scrambling crew, and leaned against the side, relishing the weak sunlight warming my face. We could hear the captain hollering out orders to his crew; the rough voice made me a bit melancholy, as I thought of the gruff captain of the guard we were leaving behind. A snap above our heads turned both Starski’s and my gaze upward, watching as the sails unfurled and billowed before us, tugging the ship into the cresting waves and away from the island of Kalif. It didn’t take us long to be drawn into the deeper waters and the open sea.

I glanced over to see Starski lean back against the rail, watching his homeland grow smaller and smaller. “You should rest, you know.”

“Later.”

His face was a neutral mask, but I knew better what lay beneath. “I’m sorry.”

He turned away from the receding coastline and studied me. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“You’ve given up so much.”

He smiled at me. “Think about it. What am I really giving up?”

“Everything! Your homeland, your knighthood, friends...what about your dream?”

A trace of sadness flittered across his face. “About the storm?” Starski turned away from the smear on the horizon that was the island of Kalif, and looked forward into the sunlight dancing off the waves. “I don’t dream that dream anymore, Hutch. Somehow I knew the night I found you that Da wasn’t coming back. That dream is over. It’s time to dream something else.”

I joined him, leaning against the rail, looking to the sunlight dappled against the ocean. The blackened waters that had once threatened to take my life—drag me down to its darkened depths—now shone like a sapphire and bore me...*where?* There was so much behind me. No matter what new beginning lay before me, I was still who I was. I was still a man with no country, no home, and a past I wish I had never remembered.

“Here.” Somehow, Starski could sense my disquiet. Taking my hand, he pressed a stone into it. No, not a stone...

The alabaster knight piece from Hughley’s game set.

I looked down at the white marble horse in my hand. Turning it over, I saw the flaw that ran the length of its neck, a souvenir from my fit of rage. Jerking my arm back, I had every intention of throwing it into the ocean as far from me as I could. Starski's firm grip on my wrist stopped me before my arm ever made it past my head. There was surprise and no small measure of anger on his face as I spun toward him, even knowing what he had meant in giving me the piece. "That's not me. Not anymore."

"Look...yes, you've been to Hades and back. But these last five months...I know you, Hutch, better than you know yourself, I think." His grip tightened on my wrist even more. "I know that's *still* you. *You're still the White Knight.*"

"How? How can I be?" I jerked my arm away. "*Blazes, Starski!* Yes, I believe what I did was right in protecting the queen, and I'd do it again if I had to. But it doesn't matter—I crossed the line and fell in love with her. Or at least, I think I loved her. It doesn't matter! I committed treason—defiled the station of White Knight. I can never be..." It hurt almost too much to bear. "Starski, you didn't see...you didn't see the disgust in their eyes when I was stripped of my colors and flogged before the court..." Overwhelmed, my head sank to my hands, the smoothness of the marble piece pressed against my temple. "I am a disgrace."

His response was so soft I almost missed it. "You are my friend."

I straightened slowly and ran a hand across my face. "Starski, you are loyal to a fault. I'll wager that if you had known from the onset who I was and what I had been found guilty of, you would have left me to die in that storm."

I wasn't prepared for the blow that sent me reeling. I was half strung across the rail when Starski grasped the front of my tunic, then dragged me within inches of the wrath on his face. "*Don't you dare!* You arrogant, self-serving bastard, give me some credit! I am loyal, but I'm nobody's fool and nobody's lapdog. I just walked away from a country and crown that my father and I both served with our lives because what they did was wrong, and you toss about my loyalty like it's a whim. *Don't you dare!*"

He shoved me from him and paced away, but only a few steps before he turned on his heel and got right back in my face. "You want to talk about loyalty? About honor? *I knew*, Hutch! I've known since I found you who you were, what you had gone through, and what you had been convicted of!"

The naked surprise, then stark anger on my face, stopped him from continuing. "What in Hades are you saying, *you knew?*" It was my turn to be enraged.

"You had dreams..." His fire seemed to have burned out as quickly as it had ignited. "The first several days that you lay in Hughley's upper chamber—more dead than alive—you spoke in your dreams. Pieces of your life: loyalty, honor, duty. Blast it, Hutch! Don't you see? *You sacrificed your honor in order to fulfill it!* Those first few days when you were finally well enough for me to leave you, I went back on my patrol.

On the docks, I caught whispers of what had happened in San Dia Aggio, the charges against the White Knight—his betrayal to the crown—and I finally pieced it all together with your dreamspeak.”

“And yet you didn’t tell me? *You lied to me!* You said you didn’t know anything of my past!”

“So what does that say about *my* honor, huh? But think of it, Hutch—what if I *had* told you? What guarantee was there that you would have remembered it all then? I think it would have made you daft. No. No, it was better to let you remember on your own than me force you into a game you weren’t ready to play. Besides...”

He rested his elbows on the railing. I could tell his injuries were hampering him, hurting, but I was too incensed. *Damn him!* “Besides what?”

“I knew there had to be more to it. What the sailors said had happened, it didn’t match up to the man I had come to know. The man who had become my partner...my friend.”

The stark honesty in his voice quelled my rage. Such an omission of his deceit was forgivable when I weighed it against his decision to stand at my side, give up everything he once believed in for my sake, for the sake of honor. And we both knew now the mixture of truth within those rumors—I had fallen in love with the woman I was sworn to protect. A woman who could never be mine. *So he knew. What of it? He didn’t use it for ill, never used it against me...never held it against me.*

“You knew. You knew I had betrayed the crown, betrayed my station and everything *you’ve* ever stood for in your life, and yet...and yet you were still willing to be my friend.”

“The only thing you betrayed was a corrupt man who was never worthy to have you serve him or bear the crown.” Starski turned back to me, reaching for my clenched hand. In my anger, I had forgotten that I even still held the piece. I loosed my fingers and he turned over the alabaster knight, showing the crack. His own finger ran the length of the break. “You see a flaw here, I see a scar.”

A scar. The healing of a wound inflicted.

It was exactly what his friendship was doing to the wound in my soul. I wasn’t ready to accept the honor and dignity that Starski was so determined to press upon me, but I appreciated the sincere determination to make me see myself in a better light. I would sort through my self-doubt and the shadows of the past later. This moment was a time for looking ahead.

We both turned back to the wide-open sea that lay before us. *Who knew what we would find over the horizon?* “So, what’s next? I never fancied myself a sailor—a sea scout, perhaps.”

Starski's smile was broad. "Hmm...it's a possibility."

"Where are we headed, anyway?"

"Bolivia. I figured we could find some kind of work there."

"Such as what? They only thing we know how to do is be knights."

Starski's smile turned wicked. "Well, if we don't find honorable work, we could always rob the coffers."

"Rob coffers in Bolivia? Now, there's a thought." I grinned back at him. *What had I done to deserve such a friend?* "I am sorry, you know."

"For what?"

I nodded back toward the crown and country we left behind. "For making you choose."

"Hutch, don't you know it was never a choice?"



"...it's important, but it's mine."

Those were the first words Hutch heard as he felt his body waking. He was propped up on the bed, his back against the wall, a pillow hugged to him. His body ached in a way he had never experienced before, and an acrid taste still lingered in his mouth. How long he had fitfully slept, he didn't know, but he was surprised at the amount of light the small stained-glass window cast about the room, confirming that he had made it through the worst of it.

The pillow was pushed away with a groan, and he rubbed the grit out of his eyes, looking around the room. He wasn't surprised to find Starsky sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, cradling the telephone on his shoulder, one blue Adidas lying haphazardly in the middle of the floor.

"Mornin'." The door slammed as Huggy entered bearing a tray of coffee. "Nectar...or is it ambrosia? I never know which is which."

"Huggy, you're beautiful."

"I know. But you and Hutch look awful."

Hutch watched as Starsky took down the information relayed by the familiar rumbling of Captain Dobey. The other's fatigue mirrored his own, he knew. Still, he couldn't miss

the warmth held in his partner's face when Starsky hung up the phone and their eyes finally met. "Welcome back."

The endless night was over.