

Arise A Hero

Wayne Schreiber

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The Tanarian Chronicles - UK Edition
(Recommended reading age 16)

Book 1 - Arise A Hero

Book 2 - The Crystal King

Book 3 - Usurper of the Gods

Short Stories (on Amazon as "The Tanarian Chronicles - Short Stories")

A Forgotten Wound

A World Long Past

Standalone novels: The Legion of Blood

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MAP



PROLOGUE

The ageing warrior gave a slight groan as he raised his scabbard and sat down on the bench. His armour was not quite the fit it used to be – too much desk duty. The warmth of the open fire started to penetrate his silver plate armour sending a golden shimmer across its protective ridges.

‘Well Bolzat,’ croaked the white bearded figure across the desk, his fragile frame sinking back closer to the fire. ‘Have you come about the boy?’

‘Of course,’ fired back the old Warlord. ‘And your support will help secure my son’s training.’ Bolzat’s tone softened, ‘Come on old friend, help me secure his place?’

‘I fear I don’t have the same sway that I used to have, but, for my old shield bearer I shall try my best,’ muttered the old man. ‘Now pour an old warrior a goblet of wine, the good stuff mind, and tell me how the logistics are faring on the Northern Front. Have we enough supplies to siege or will we need to force a breach?’

Bolzat began to run through the endless lists of stores and supplies until the old man interrupted.

‘I was appointed Training Master this morning by Lord Hadrak, but then you knew that already, else you would not be warming your bones near my fire.’

Bolzat simply nodded, the slight smile on his face gave away his pretence of surprise.

‘You know he is too young, the Su-Katii tradition dictates he should be no less than eight years and be able to lift the ale barrel above his head – he is only five.’

Bolzat bellowed a laugh that echoed around the hall. ‘My boy can lift the barrel, drink the contents and then wipe the floor with any eight-year-old in every one of your puny trials.’ The old man chuckled, ‘Too much of his father in him I think? Very well, I shall grant a favour to an old friend. Bring the boy to the hall in the morning - and he will die.’

CHAPTER 1 – INTO THE WILDERNESS

Athene had cursed the day that she had signed the charter for the convoy to Nordheim many times since they set off two months ago. The baggage train was so mind-numbingly slow and boring as they trundled their way through the increasingly barren countryside. But the money would keep her in lodgings and wine for at least three months after this trip. Easy money really – cook for the hundred warriors and twelve merchants, don't use too much salt, overcook everything and don't poison anyone, then return home to Tanaria without the tribes of Nordheim killing you. Sounded easy. It was easy too, except for the endless stream of delays and the monotony of the trail. Athene chuckled as she remembered her mother fussing around her before the trip.

'Don't take the skirts, do take the woollen leggings, lay off the lip balm there will be a lot of wild and unruly men on the trip.' However, it didn't matter how dressed down Athene stayed, some toothless hero would sit down next to her fire and start with the war stories whilst grabbing some soup or hanging around her on fire picket – 'Oh, my hero,' was usually enough to make them think that their story had impressed her – 'Now bugger off and leave me to cook,' was what it really meant. Athene stoked the evening fire to keep the stew warm. The nights had been getting progressively colder with the altitude of the mountains, the men around her had erected their weathered tents in the usual fashion against the sides of the wagons in preparation for the night and the first perimeter patrol was due back shortly. She had noticed the numerous mercenaries that accompanied them had stepped up their activities and patrols now that they had entered foreign lands; even if they had been invited into Nordheim it was still in the back of their minds that this time last year they had been close to full blown war.

Ralf gingerly approached the fire to warm his hands, the fire giving his boyish features a warm glow. Athene had developed a bit of a motherly soft spot for him over the last few weeks on the trail. At sixteen, he was the youngest of the three Balmore brothers. She liked it when Ralf was on guard duty, as he looked comical dressed in his oversized leather breastplate and a longsword shoved in his belt that occasionally dragged its tip across the ground. His cheeky smile and rosy cheeks made the lad seem out of place against the gruffness of the older and serious men on the trail. He was a nice lad but she doubted his ability to carry out his duty of protecting the wagon trail effectively. It was more likely that his brothers managed to sign their contract as a trio, but then everyone needs to start their first proper employment somewhere. After all she was no different, this was her first trail also.

As Ralf came into the light of the fire he angled his face away from her then as he turned to leave, a swelling bruise around his eye could just be seen.

'Ralf, my dear boy, what has happened to you?' Athene enquired worriedly. Ralf hated being called 'Boy' but never showed his displeasure to Athene; she somehow made the word easier to stomach.

'I don't want to talk about it Athene. Can I get some soup?'

'But Ralf, this is the third time I've seen you with unexplained injuries, I'm going to talk to your Captain.' She was beginning to think that being friends with one of the only two women on this journey was bringing Ralf a lot more resentment from the other troops than he really deserved.

'No,' Ralf begged. 'Please. You will only make it worse. My brothers have told me that your first trail makes a man of you.' His brothers were of a different breed to Ralf altogether and blatantly avoided Athene but from what she had overheard from the many loose tongues that were willing to gossip with her; they were a reasonable enough type. Harsh but fair.

‘... Or your first trail might break you,’ replied Athene. ‘Was it Adie again?’ she asked. She could see by his expression that Ralf considered lying to her for a moment, but eventually he swallowed his pride and nodded.

‘I cleaned his sword and armour just as he told me, but I refused to do his shift for him, the lazy toad wanted an extra hour in his bed-roll. When I finally managed to get him up, he flew at me from his pit like the devil himself and cracked my head open. ...and worst of all my brothers won’t do a damn thing about that stupid dung herder. They just say that I need to sort things out for myself.’

Athene had seen Adie bully and shove a few of the youngsters around during the trip, he was a tall, plain featured man with matted and unkempt dark hair and broad shoulders. He was much older than the others, but still of low rank, the type who thought that his years of service had earned him the God-given right to do as he pleased. Athene had always just laughed away his vulgar sexual comments that he made towards her when collecting his meals. She had grown up in a busy tavern, so was no stranger to such comments, but she knew all too well that if she was stranded alone in the middle of nowhere with only Adie for help, that repugnant greasebag would have made good his joking words. The thought of Adie slavering on top of her made Athene gag, she quickly pushed the sickening thought from her mind.

‘Are you alright?’ Ralf enquired, tentatively touching her hand.

‘Yes,’ Athene replied softly, clearing her throat. ‘Yes of course, I’m fine; it’s you I worry about. Now don’t take any more shit from that man. If I see him touch you again I will report it to Capitan Henrick. Now have some soup to warm yourself up and have a good shift tonight.’

The next night Ralf came running frantically into her baggage tent unexpected, the cold air following him in.

‘Athene I need a stew pot quickly,’ he panted.

Puzzled, she handed one over and he quickly left the tent. The sound of laughter from outside made her peep through the gap, to see Ralf marching up and down the path with his sword drawn across his shoulder and the pot balanced on his head. Adie was amongst the jeering group of soldiers shouting above the others.

‘Now you have your new armour; you will wear your new helmet every time you report in, boy.’ Athene closed the flap in disgust – she was not in the mood for camp jests tonight.

At last the long days on the trail had drifted to an end as the convoy approached their destination, Crowenheim, the town that the barbarians considered their capital. The town of Crowenheim was formed from a collection of villages that had grown with time, encircled with a large timber wall for defence. It seemed rather primitive and would merely be considered a large outpost fort by Tanarian or Aristrian standards.

They had stopped at several mines along the wagon trails journey, picking up a fresh cargo of different coloured crystals at each stop. The widespread discovery of crystals containing what could only be described as magical powers had already made a lot of merchants and land owners extremely rich. Before their discovery en-masse, people had known of the odd stone here and there containing unusual powers, but now they were quickly becoming common place items providing the most basic of functions. Each mine seemed to produce its own unique strain of the coloured crystals, and these made up the majority of the cargo that the merchants required for export and which they now transported for profit and trade. Athene had hated the past days when they had arrived at the mines, as there always seemed to be so much hanging around whilst the paperwork was being approved or the crystals being recounted, all she could think about was

getting her final pay cheque and proving to her mother that she had been wrong – she could make it on her own.

Also at each mine stop the insistence on being searched every time you entered or left the facility had driven her mad, it had been humiliating to her, especially when she had only entered to restock some cooking provisions. The merchants running the wagon trail could have easily ordered some of the men to restock the provisions, but instead they insisted that she and Greta do it and she had nothing to do with the food at all, she was involved with the accounts scribe. After starting her employment all sweet and innocent, she had soon learned a measure of distrust on this trail and suspected the merchants were getting a kick back from the mine's guards doing the body searches. Judging from the lascivious expressions on the miners' and guards' faces when she arrived through the checkpoint; there weren't many women working in the business yet.

Mining had once again become a prosperous profession with the wealth of the crystals fuelling the economy in all areas.

They had long since passed the Great Gate – a huge iron-riveted structure that guarded the only pass through the mountains and marked the end of the civilized world, Athene had noticed a lot more tension and activity from their armed guards after passing through the gate. Under the trade agreement the Nordheim outriders had been escorting them through the impressive and breathtaking views of the snow-peaked mountains and down into the greener pastures of the valleys below. They were told that their barbarian friends were only there to ensure their protection and lead them in to Croweheim safely. One of the outriders had been conversing with the Convoy Master, Bazil, about the best route he should take in to the town, but the barbarian's thick tribal accent made him difficult to understand.

'At least this savage had made the attempt to speak a more civilised tongue.' Bazil thought to himself feeling somewhat at a loss for not understanding a single word of the Nordheim natives.

As the convoy approached the roughly-cut wooden gates of the town, the head Carl (Bodyguard) of the baggage train, a distinguished man known as Henrick mounted the lead cart and let out a mighty bellow. '*Tanarians Halt.*'

In stories told around the camp fires during the trail she had overheard that in his prime he had been a 2nd Lieutenant in the elite Tanarian Lancers and had seen a considerable amount of action in the constant border skirmishes. He was of the old school, a cavalry man through and through and now Head Mercenary – unusually for an officer the other lower ranking warriors seemed to greatly respect him.

Today he was dressed in full battle armour that sparkled in the sunlight, with a six foot spear and plumed helm he was quite a sight and Athene could hardly keep her eyes off him. Around the camp he had hardly stood out apart from his height, being of average build with long dark hair displaying the first flick of grey, his square warriors chin and looks were commonplace amongst the men at arms. But as soon as he donned his impressive battle armour he was transformed into a different man, a man that could instantly hold a lady's eye, a man who stood out above others and moved with a natural and distinct air of command.

Years ago, when she had been a teenager and had seen nothing of the real world she had always swooned to gain the attentions of the men in uniform that entered their establishment. They had stood out from amongst the locals and were frivolous with their coin, but it was not long before she had discovered the error in her judgment, they being, on the whole, heavy drinkers and poor lovers. Having spent her early years cooped up in her mother's inn, she had grown up for as long as she could remember without knowing her true father, sure there had

always been a different man about the place at one time or another - with a thriving nightlife, copious amounts of alcohol and an attractive mother owning the place, this was guaranteed.

Today however, as she watched Henrick, she decided that he had a different air about him to the soldiers that she had encountered in the past. She sighed unwittingly as she watched him. He even moved differently to the other armoured men of the trail and seemed very comfortable in his armour, almost as if he had been born in the steel suit. With military precision and little disturbance to his bearing and posture he jumped down from the cart and mounted his waiting pony in one fluid movement. Athene's attention was quickly dragged away from her little daydream as the Nordheim drums began to sound from Croweheim and the gates swung open. A mass of armed men filled the open gap, facing them in silence with weapons at the ready they waited in battle formation – an interlocked shield-wall.

Tanarian hands instinctively reached for sword hilts.

Henrick noticed the shuffling and unease behind him and turned.

'Steady men, do nothing rash. Nordheim trade negotiations are always made under arms, it is just their way.' Keeping his voice low he whispered to a nearby trooper, 'Make sure the merchants have shield bearers next to them in case it all kicks off,' he instructed.

A huge bear of a man stepped forward from the massed men and wall of elaborately painted shields depicting dragons and mythological creatures that filled the open gate. A cloud momentarily blotted out the sun allowing her to stop squinting towards Croweheim. With a better view of the town Athene now realised that the silhouetted shapes above the town gates were actually severed heads. She bumped into a cart as she backed away from the gruesome scene, fighting desperately to hold down the taste of bile and panic that started to rise from her stomach into her throat. To her immense relief she won her battle and was able to hold back her sudden nausea. The dread of knowing that she would forever be known on the trail as the maiden that vomited before the trade agreement or perhaps even the battle that might come, helped to quell the urge to revisit her breakfast. She soon forgot the episode as her gaze dropped to the imposing figure advancing towards their line.

He wore a gleaming winged helm and great steel shoulder guards that seemed to double his size. The man's bulging arms were the size of her thighs. Athene's gaze was riveted on the man or perhaps he was actually part bull, such was the size of his chest. It was not his gold engraved armour that made her eyes bulge as she studied the man with her jaw a gasp, but the terrifying battle axe caked in dried blood that he held. This man was definitely no square-basher or administrator.

'Welcome guests of Croweheim. I am Corvus – King of this land.' The imposing figure spoke in poor Tanarian, mispronouncing the start of the 'Welcome' as a string of V's.

A balding merchant stepped up into the protective aura that Henrick seemed to project, 'I...I am Basil – Convoy Master,' stuttered the merchant. 'We bring the magic crystals from our lands in trade good King, and would gladly welcome your hospitality.'

Corvus raised his axe high into the air and one hundred hearts missed a beat anticipating bloodshed to follow, then he drove it deep into the ground as was the tradition of the Nordheim people - to symbolise that no weapons should be used and to signal the beginning of trade.

'Welcome foreigners. Welcome – come out of this winter's day and into my warm halls - let us talk business and feast, let us start a new chapter in Tanarian relations.' An audible sigh of relief passed through the Tanarian ranks.

The cloud looked just like any other that floated through the sky, maybe a little darker than the rest, yet unlike the others it now remained static in the sky above Croweheim. Unnoticed by

the convoy, it had been following them overhead the past day magically controlled from afar. It sank lower in the sky as the Tanarians' crystal cargo was unloaded into the trade halls. Hundreds of leagues away deep in the Aristrian mountains, the acolyte sat in a small cave chanting the vision spell, maintaining his master's magic. Two powerful Spellmasters stood behind the hooded acolyte in discussion, any onlooker could have easily perceived the two as courtiers rather than magicians, with their lavish clothing and casual tone discussing their previous night out, such was their ease and tone of the conversation.

'Why do you always insist on such dark and dank surroundings to cast your magic Bellack?'

The other man gave an audible sigh, 'Did you learn nothing from your time spent with the Brotherhood, Saznack? The channelling location can be as important as the spell itself, I know that I have three years seniority on you Saznack but I don't expect to have to tutor you in the basics again. This place will magnify our magic ten-fold.'

Saznack looked around disapprovingly at the rough cut walls and the slight glimmer of crystal embedded in them.

'You must be getting weak Bellack, perhaps I should now lead the Brotherhood, I need no cave to amplify my magic, besides this mud smells like your mother's dung. I paid thirty silver for these boots and now they are ruined, the finest buckhide leather now impregnated with the fragrance of your outhouse – just perfect.'

'Oh hush yourself Saznack, I'll have my slaves lick them clean for you when we get back if it is that much of a problem to you. Now observe closely through the cloud; I now command the powers I have absorbed from the book of Magnus, it is almost time for us to take another step closer to our place by our Queen's side; well stop scraping the crud from your shoes and come and help me channel the spell you fool. This is going to be amusing.'

Athene had been looking forward to being waited on at the feast for a change, but as usual a cook's work is never done. Thanks to the fat merchants bragging about her good trail food over the past months, Athene had been unwillingly dragged into some strange cook-off for the banquet feast, or as the Head Merchant Tulbak had put it in diplomatic terms – an exchange of cultures, trade and tastes. As she began her protests he had pulled her in close and whispered into her ear, 'Stop your whinging woman – you've been paid well, don't mess up this trade deal for us now, I will personally give you a bonus if you do this one task for me now and the trade goes well.' His spittle showered into her ear, 'Come on girl I can't back down now, show them how it's done the Tanarian way and I'll see you good.'

Athene knew the words were spoken with hollow intent; there would be no escape from ending up back in the kitchens again whether she liked it or not, so she decided that she might as well show some willing. On the plus side the judging was to be done at the head table where both Henrick and Corvus sat. Something about that man both terrified and captivated her at the same time. Corvus had bounded around his guests seemingly excited at the new company. Now, up close, she noticed a lot more about the man than her initial view across the field, he sported a light scar over his right eye, but this only served to enhance his rugged looks. Unlike a lot of the warriors she had encountered, Corvus had warm eyes, with a twinkle of boyish jest in them, he was led about the hall by his entourage of advisors and was briefly introduced to Athene, but after discovering that she was just a cook they deemed her to be of little importance in the negotiations, he was quickly whisked away from her. His close presence sent an unnatural shiver down her spine. Was it terror or excitement? She really didn't care which, the new sensation was overwhelming, after the brief introduction she needed to catch her breath briefly turning away to fan herself. Her gaze was soon back on him, glancing up she noticed that he moved his

considerable bulk through the busy revellers in the hall with the grace of a cat and his long blond hair and golden beard only enhanced the theory forming in her mind that he was indeed part-cat, as his beard and locks gave him the appearance of a lion's mane.

In comparison Henrick who had caught her eye earlier in the day, was efficient with his movements; he seemed to lack the excitement that the others in the great feasting hall felt. It was as if he had seen it all before, his only movement was to raise his ale mug to his mouth wetting his lips every so often. He kept his chin held high and his every move was filled with confidence, unlike the merchants who cringed away from any of the merry locals that fell about them as they staggered about the hall quite drunk. 'Yes,' she thought to herself, as she fumbled through her baggage to find her emergency lip balm, it would be an interesting night ahead of them.

She threw her bag of provisions and utensils that she had gathered from her wagon into the corner of the basic Nordheim kitchen.

'Have you got some cider vinegar?' Athene asked the Nordheim kitchen hand who had been assigned to help her but now looked back at her uncomprehendingly. Athene gave a loud sigh, 'Have you Sss-iiii-der Vinnn-egg-aar,' Athene repeated her sentence slower and a bit louder feeling her temperature rise at the shrugging of her assistants shoulders. 'They have given me a donkey to win the race.' She was rewarded with another blank look. She kicked over the pile of sticks used for the nearby oven in frustration.

'This is going to be impossible,' she screamed now striking her bag of cooking supplies that had been brought to her. Athene rummaged through her ruffled gear, yes there was hope at last. She had kept the empty bottle – the smell should be enough to stir recognition into the gormless kitchen hand assigned to her. After waving the topless bottle under the young man's nose he cried out.

'Tobla cuba,' and then ran off as if his apron was ablaze.

Athene guessed that the gruff 6' 4' one eyed warrior in chainmail was standing watch by the kitchen door to make sure the king's food was not being poisoned. With his double headed axe at the ready she noticed that he followed her every move. She thought it strange that they had sent a warrior with just one eye to watch her, the good eye glistened a light blue whilst the other was badly scarred and white. She did not stare long at the man's battered appearance, she had plenty to be getting on with. However, it was soon apparent that he was there for more than one reason, for when she bent down to place her dish into the low iron stove she heard the excited tone of voices from the other Nordheim kitchen hands that populated the room, she didn't need to be a linguist, she could understand jeering and ogling in any language. It was at this point she realised that only men filled the kitchens in this unfamiliar land. When she arose, with her cheeks blushing red, old one eye was dishing out seemingly harsh words by his tone in their cursed foreign tongue and when two of the locals answered him back he dropped his axe, storming over to bang the lads' skulls together. Perhaps she had actually been assigned a rather large guardian angel?

With a renewed quietness in the kitchen and a smile on her face the real work began again. The Nordheim cooks worked frantically alongside Athene and had the tall warrior not been there, the competition between them could well have resulted in a little Tanarian sabotage. Her pot of chilli powder could have easily been slipped into one of their unattended pots. The completed meals were soon finished and consumed at the head table. The cider-broiled hog had gone down well, as had the roast swan and sweet potatoes. Sweating and nervous she was called over to stand before the table with her Nordheim opposite by Tulbak, with all the stress and excitement a

wave of tiredness came over her, she just craved a dark corner to huddle up in. She was not shocked by the judges predictable outcome.

‘We’ll call it a draw,’ declared the fat merchant as he winked at Athene and applauded over-enthusiastically. The merchant resembled a clapping turtle she thought with his fat body and skinny neck. Repulsed by her employers, Athene slipped away from the brief attention and rested herself, slumped at a side table with a clay cup filled with a strong mulled wine.

With the ale flowing freely, a selection of mixed crystals were randomly selected from the wagons and brought before the head table for inspection and more importantly to agree prices.

A year after their mass discovery the crystals had proved to be a most useful resource. When picked up they would seem no different to any other rock apart from maybe the colouration. However when cracked, their true powers became more apparent. The yellow ones radiated a strong amber light for around thirty days, much to the disgust of the torch makers. The blue ones provided incredible warmth; several could heat a large room, and the red crystals, when held close to a wound could aid recovery. The first signs of their powers had been discovered when a miner accidentally sent his pickaxe through his foot and smashed the red crystal below, hardly any blood had run onto the floor as the wound had immediately started to heal. Questions with regard to the crystals’ properties were soon raised and many experiments were alleged to have been conducted by the council before certifying them safe for public use and export. Tulbuk was one of the few merchants in Tanaria to hold an official crystal export license.

They had also transported a smaller consignment of green crystals which appeared to have no special ability but they still made good ornaments. These unusual properties had made the crystals much sought after and very expensive as they had only been discovered in Tanarian lands, therefore also extremely lucrative. But there were some who had voiced concerns that not all of the crystals’ powers had been discovered yet.

Tulbak had had a long slow climb over the years to get to the position of Head Merchant. Unlike his peers, who made rash and quick decisions and either climbed or fell through the ranks quickly, Tulbak had slept on every major decision. Everything in his life had been carefully calculated, his promotions, his marriage to a wife of a higher class and their children to bring closer ties to her noble and influential parents. They had all been factored in as an equation to his master plan. Now, after many months of planning and negotiation, he had secured his license and the continued supply of crystals to the Nordheim trade routes. Damn he was good, he thought to himself as he continued feigning his interest in the Nordheim negotiator’s life story, he let the man talk as he took in the surroundings of the hall. People freely gave away far too much information on how best to close a deal from their everyday surroundings. The first rule for his success in negotiation was always to have the meeting in their territory not yours, uncover everything about them without exposing anything of yourself. His second rule was - if they had to come to you, hire somewhere different, make some excuses and meet on neutral ground. These basic rules had served him well so far. Glancing around at the weapons and painted shields that lined the ornately carved timber walls of the hall, it was quickly apparent to him that these Nordheimers’ were a nation of thick skulled warriors with their only trade experience in timber and lumber, they would be easy pickings for a man of his experience. It was obvious that the blue crystals would fetch the highest price, with wood used in nearly every building it was their largest commodity. Having the ability to heat their homes without using wood would be priceless. He just had to be careful not to upset them and maybe throw in some worthless extras to make it appear he was giving an incredible deal. Don’t rush him to the final prices, just take your time and I will be a lot richer he thought. Keep smiling and nodding with feigned interest.

The military men had quickly grown bored with the ongoing negotiations and decided to drop a compliment to the cooks. King Corvus had just wanted to have a closer inspection of the exotic dark-haired chef who had prepared the tasty meal for them and badgered Henrick into introducing them again. As he approached, her hazel eyes immediately fixed on him as he closed to her through the crowded hall. She was far from unattractive, full glistening lips and a look of innocence about her, he had seen several more attractive women in Nordheim, but her striking jet black hair drew him in. All the native women of Nordheim were blond or now grey. Corvus had been happily married over the past eighteen years but he still could not resist a flirt, especially since Amiria his wife and Queen had elected to stay out of the way during the men's business.

He tripped over a helmet that had been placed on the floor clumsily smashing into Athene's table sending their drinks flying but still managing to proudly keep his own tankard of ale from spilling. He smiled down at his splattered wet guest and shrugged. Not the coolest of introductions he thought.

Slowly the unusually dark cloud drifted down against the wind, lower and lower into the town.

CHAPTER 2 - TRESS

The slender female figure moved with great care and stealth through the night, picking her route through the twisted branches and thick prickly bushes without leaving any sign or trace of her passing. Tress drew in her brown enchanted cloak tightly around her and instantly faded into the tree line as the undergrowth was disturbed by something close behind her. Her pounding heart could still be heard inside the cloak but its magical powers retained all sound and body heat within its enchanted folds. She stopped and listened, even though the overpowering urge to run was screaming in her mind, her years of training could contain such urges. Her unknown pursuer was now very close, but it would be unlikely to find her with her magical cloak of concealment. Had her pursuer been human she would have had very little to worry about and would have already been back untethering Patch her pony and riding off into the night. Unfortunately for Tress it was not.

Anak was an exceptionally old and twisted magician, he had seen and done things that even he would like to forget. He was the oldest member of the Brotherhood of Keth and should have died years ago, but through the mastery of the powerful dark arts of blood magic, combined with the perks of renewed youth that the Brotherhood could provide, his life had been preserved. In truth it was his pure bitterness and hate that dragged him through each day. He should have been the leader of the Brotherhood years ago, but now after one little misunderstanding with his order he had been banished from returning to his God and Queen. What a fool he had been all these years carrying out her dirty work whilst she remained powerless and dormant trapped forever in a timeless rift. His only revenge was the knowledge that his continued survival immensely irritated those that he once called friends.

Now that he had at last recovered from the shock of losing the better part of his left hand to Tress's blade he awaited the satisfaction of his beast ripping her flesh apart. His thoughts of vengeance blotted out the pain as he looked down at his hand and laughed insanely. The vicious blow had severed the last three fingers with surgical precision taking him completely by surprise. Tress's sabre had flashed out from nowhere slicing his ring and fingers from his outstretched hand as he reached across for a manuscript in the apparent safety of his library. As the magician had recoiled in pain with his blood pouring onto the ancient papers, the masked intruder had scooped up Anak's fingers and ring, completing her mission, then vanished once more into the night. This was not the first time that Anak had endured a severe wound; his scarred body was testament to that. The majority of his wounds were however self inflicted, hazards of the trade, but then blood magic demanded a high price be paid for its use.

Anak was filled with a burning rage of a type that he hadn't felt for at least a century, which only served to further fuel his considerable powers. He felt affronted that his inner sanctum had been infiltrated; the powerful seals of protection that he had personally placed had been disarmed, inconceivable by one so young. Why would that bitch go to so much trouble for his ring? He would consider this later, for he knew that he needed to act quickly if he stood any chance of exacting revenge. This 'Tyranny of Wizards', as she had been named by the Brotherhood, had acquired quite a reputation for striking quickly, then silently slipping away again into the night. He had called upon his dark powers once again and offered further sacrifice from his own blood to tempt out something from the dark places that held unknown terrors. He soon called forth one such terror with the scent of his blood, a scent that would lead the beast to his missing fingers or if it failed it would instead come looking for him. He immediately raised his household guard and began creating his defences. He would kill them all for their failure if they returned without her.

Tress had heard the magician's further screams of pain behind her – this meant only one thing, something evil was now after her.

The rustling bush behind her was the first indication that something was near, perhaps a badger? No, not so lucky – this was bigger and now it was close – really close. With the slightest of movements Tress adjusted her view from within the deep hood of the cloak, she had used the enchanted cloak on many previous missions and each time it had been crucial to her success, keeping her hidden and out of harms reach. However, its use in the past had always been against men – she had picked one hell of a time to field-test its powers against creatures from the void.

The beast's pale eyes could now be seen, reflecting through the moonlight that penetrated the forest canopy, its hairy dark mass disturbing the undergrowth as it closed. It moved on all fours slowly, slaving and expelling a misty breath that held small particles that glimmered and reflected the moonlight, marking its position in the night. The rummaging creature was the size of one of the larger breeds of hunting hounds; its bony exoskeleton also reflected the faint moonlight that penetrated the tree canopy. The beast huffed and growled its way past Tress, the cloak's magic was indeed strong as the demonic beast passed harmlessly by her feet. A trickle of sweat ran down her neck as pure terror filled her belly and her grip tightened on her sabre's hilt with grim resolve. The beast was now so close that its pungent breath caught the back of her throat. The putrid stench of decay sent her to her knees in convulsions. As she fell retching and gasping for clean air she managed to unsheathe her sabre as the beast turned quickly revealing large fangs that protruded in every direction. Sensing victory it turned and advanced on its incapacitated prey, surprised to note that instead of being in the final death throes from its deadly breath this one still had some movement left in her. Still, it would soon be feasting on the lady's entrails - flavours that it knew and enjoyed for it had visited this world once before.

A blinding light from the runes etched in the sabre's blade suddenly illuminated the forest, its magic filling the creature with a new emotion. The beast stepped backwards confused. It had never before known fear.

It was a short-lived emotion as Tress found the strength in her trembling body to twist on her knee and send the point of the vorpal blade through the creature's throat. The night hid the awful sight of the demon's dark blood pumping from its mortal wound. The hound's final attempts to howl just resulted in a grotesque gurgling sound as the dying creature spun in circles splattering further blood on the forest floor. Tress's second strike severed the oversized head from the beast. Anak would need every ounce of his great power to survive the loss of this creature from the void, Tress knew all too well from her own teachings in magic, that the master of a summoned creature shares a special bond with the creature in order to maintain control. Even if he still lived he would be severely weakened, so she knew the pursuit would effectively be over. More interestingly her sabre had at last revealed an insight into its runic powers that had remained dormant since the Magician had presented her with it, although she always preferred to complete her missions without needing to use its sharp edge. Her blade had sent a wave of fear into her enemy, which had given her the vital seconds required to slay the beast. Remembering her training she changed her original direction once again and resumed her stealthy and indirect route to her waiting pony. She was far from being out of danger yet. This would still take some hard riding and time before she could relax, she thought to herself - but then again, the living have time.

The rush of the fresh morning air had helped to clear away much of the stench from the beast, which had annoyingly managed to linger in Tress's throat and clung within the fibres of her clothes. Patch, her pony, was also pleased to stretch her legs again after the cold night spent

tethered in the dark makeshift corral. She eased the reins – reducing the gallop and patted Patch’s neck.

‘Better slow down girl, we’ve a long way to go. I’ll give you your breakfast once we are over the next peak, we can relax a bit then.’

The close tree line that followed the path and led out of the valley could be better scanned at this slower pace, the dark shadows that loomed between the sweet smelling pine trees could easily hide an assailant laying in ambush. Tress knew her cloak would offer no protection whilst on horseback, so she did not bother to whisper the magic words that triggered its invisibility. Besides it was a bad practice to use magic longer than necessary, she was a hunted woman and most who sought her would begin their search looking for the signature of magic being used, even the use of her cloak could be tracked if you had time to study its powers. For now she would have to rely on her astute wits and survival instinct, as this was the only way out of the valley. She had already travelled this route twice before this month in preparation for this mission; nothing was left to chance once her mark had been acquired. Another hour winding around the uphill path would take her to a good vantage point that had an unusually fine view of the valley, including the woods and paths below. She knew beyond this point she had a further two days’ ride before she and Patch would be through the Great Gate of the Tanarian pass and then home free.

The ring of Anak was of no real importance to Tress other than a large purse of gold, although since escaping slavery she had spent a great deal of time in her own personal interest of acquiring other items of power, first it had started through a necessity to survive, then later as her career progressed and she became more established she would freelance and steal for personal order and profit. Harnessing the powers of blood magic in her experience often meant trouble and the use of these tainted items were often unpredictable. No, this one would not be for Tress, but her employer’s agent had paid a convincing advance sum for it. Forewarned with the knowledge that a manhunter was now on her trail, Tress hoped the magician would keep his word with the promised amulet and the hundred gold crowns on receipt of the ring. The problem with these deals that sounded too good to be true was the predictability that they would usually result in some form of disappointment, so naturally Tress expected a double cross at some point further down the line, but she would prepare for and deal with it once she was safely back in Tanaria.

With the reputation that was associated with her work she always used a trade name when dealing with clients: Tyranny – master thief and relic collector to the rich and exotic, she had always found her success to be in her anonymity and the knack of keeping her dealings away from prying eyes. As a hunted woman she had always led a double life to cover her activities, most of the time she lived a mundane life as an anonymous travelling rope and hemp merchant, a truly thrilling career compared to the years that she suffered in slavery.

Despite her immediate concerns about the fantastic offer that the magician had laid out to her, Tress had almost been forced into taking on this job. Her new employer had entered her dreams without any problem, but at least with the magic amulet as a prize for this job, there might be a chance to stop its reoccurrence, this was of course based upon his words being true. A month before, she had lain on the uncomfortable bed, tossing and turning, attempting sleep, but the cheap inn’s straw mattress scratched her back and the thought of some of the stains that marked it were better forgotten. She wished she had spent a few more coins on a better room with a less flea-ridden mattress, but this kind of place drew fewer questions and gathered less attention. She had learned her trade well.

As sleep eventually took her, a voice in her head pushed its way to the front of her mind. At first quiet, it slowly grew louder and louder.

‘Tress, Tress do not be alarmed, you are not dreaming – I am using my powers to contact you from afar.’

She thought to sit upright, but her body still lay motionless in its slumber on the bed. ‘How do you know my name? Who are you?’ She questioned inside her dream, beginning to feel her anger rising at the helpless situation. How could the voice know her name? How could this person enter her mind? She had read of such abilities but never encountered them before.

‘Oh, you know the answers to these questions Tyranny,’ a lump caught in her sleeping throat as her trade name was used and she realised that her current thoughts were being read.

‘I am a practitioner of the arts, but don’t be alarmed, I am not from the Brotherhood or amongst those that hunt you and I have no intention of revealing your whereabouts or cashing in on the substantial reward on your head. I’m sure the town watch cares nothing about the items that you have stolen from all those magicians. In fact I imagine they would probably chip in a few coins, to pay for your continued harassment. Is it working out for you being a thorn in their sides?’ asked the mysterious voice in her head.

‘Perhaps I may be one in yours?’ Tress proposed tentatively.

‘No, I can assure you, you won’t be,’ the voice vibrated through her head confidently.

‘Do not tar me with the same brush as the other magicians you have encountered, Tress.’ The voice began to laugh, but not unkindly.

‘In fact Tress it is quite the opposite, you have already started along a path that shares a mutual interest with my own, although you may not have been aware of it; you have already completed one task for me. Do you remember the Soul Vase of Tridus... well, more to the point, the merchant ‘Regus the Fat,’ secretly - he was working for me.’

He chuckled again. ‘You also refused my employment on several other jobs, but now I don’t have the time for such subterfuge. Several times in the past my agent tried to hire you, but you suspected a trap and flew the nest. Know now that I can find you at any time, as I have done so tonight, also know that should I have wanted to cause you any harm I would have done so by now rather than chat. Fear me not my little slave girl, the Tyranny of Wizards, I only ask that you continue to bring retribution and irritation to those who deserve it and undertake another task for me, I ask for only one thing - which is to steal a magic item from an old friend of mine. In return I will pay you an agreed amount of coin and also supply you with an invaluable gift for an up-and-coming thief. I have an amulet that can hide you from the magic and the man that constantly seeks to find you. It is yours if you complete my work. You know that I found you without too much effort, even with your magic cloak that hides you from sight. It cannot protect you from the kind of mind seeking-spells that I and others of my art can use. To be honest I am surprised that you have lasted so long on your own.’

‘I’m one slippery fish,’ replied Tress defiantly.

‘You know that such an item could ensure the long term freedom of an escaped slave girl and it would stop meddling wizards like me from ever finding you.’

‘I was free before I was enslaved and I have my freedom back again already – you offer me nothing I don’t already have wizard. This amulet, if it exists at all, might be of interest to me, but before I make my decision, answer me this. What would a great enchanter such as yourself require of an escaped slave girl, turned to thievery? You could also start to win my trust by telling me everything that you know about those who hunt me?’

‘I can certainly shed some light on these questions,’ returned the dreamy voice. ‘Firstly I must point out that I do not employ slaves, all those that assist me do so willingly and are well remunerated. However current events have stretched my resources further than I initially foresaw, so I have decided that it is time to bring in some new blood, you will be pleased to know

that I only recruit the talented. You are no stranger to me, I have been following your career for a while,' he continued. 'Unfortunately so have several others – your former master, Zerch is at the front of the long queue and his net is slowly closing in on you. Don't get me wrong, you have done an incredible job to evade him for so long, two years hiding from someone with the talents of Zerch is amazing, but I must take some wind out of your sails – it has not been without a little help and misdirection from myself. However, what you really need to know is that after upsetting the others in the Brotherhood, they have now combined resources and also hired a killer to hunt you down. I suspect he is in the city right now.'

'What, Who is he? What does he look like?' questioned Tress.

'This I cannot answer, as he evades my sight, but I have seen the results of his work – deadly. The mob of a dozen thugs and renegades that I paid to intercept him before he reached the City now lie in little pieces on the road side. I suspect him to be a Su-Katii for only they possess such skill, although I can account for all twenty of their order, so perhaps he had just had partial temple training at some point, there has been some talk about half trained students dropping out of their order and earning their fortunes in the arenas, so I urge you Tress, for both our sakes, please take up my offer and get out of the city quick, this man is seriously dangerous.'

Tress weighed up the situation. 'You know you don't need to be a magician to foresee my answer. I knew I was hunted but I didn't realise my situation was quite so dire or perhaps you are just very convincing. One further question, before I give you my answer – what is your name?'

'I have gone by many names before,' he said, 'But you, my dear lady, can call me by my real name – Tamar. If you survive the night I will come to you in your dreams with the details of your next assignment. Now awaken Tress and live.'

Patch was rapidly approaching the top of the ridge line and Tress's mind snapped back to the present. She knew cresting the hill at this point would silhouette her figure making her visible throughout the valley, so she quickly dismounted and selected the best route around the peak. After securing Patch to a strong branch and leaving the pony happily munching on her nose bag, Tress returned to the ridge line, concealing herself with her magic cloak once more, she found a nice position that offered full visibility of the valley below. Instinctively she still stooped as she crested the peak, although the magic weave blended her form perfectly with the blue sky beyond. Her busy eyes worked their way through every feature far below methodically looking for the slightest signs of movement.

Tress's attention was diverted by a hawk which swooped down close by, bringing an end to a hapless vole. She began to rescan the area. This was part of her procedure on high ground and she had more cause than usual to stick with the practices that had saved her life in the past. It was amazing what an overactive mind could see in the ordinary shapes below. A large flock of birds flew up from a heavily wooded area and caught Tress's attention. Something must have startled them. She re-scoured the area and Tress bit her lip as the small dots that were riders emerged on the path. Damn – how many were there? Her best estimate was between ten and twelve riders as the trees obscured her full view, even from this distance they looked like the kind of mercenary scum that Anak would have employed. Anak must have survived long enough to send men out after the failure of his void terror, it was a common practice for most magicians to also employ some hired muscle for the more physical work, or as a bodyguard. His building had been extensive and could have easily housed a regiment. She cursed the evil wizard; she should have cut his balls off and finished him when she had the chance – rather than just his hand. Why her client had demanded that she cut him was beyond her, but they were paying good money.

She wished that she had the stomach to take life more freely; it would have made her getaway easier on several other missions, she had been trained to kill without mercy but a little of the softness that existed in the young girl before her slavery still existed, it had been dormant for many years but she was unsure if it was a good or bad thing that it still existed. She calculated that she had maybe two hours' advantage over the riders as she ran back to Patch.

'Come on old girl – snack time is over; back to work.' Patch resumed her pace and the heather and scrub land flew past their faces as they took flight. It was a few leagues of exposed land downhill from the ridge line and they had to make good time to reach the next set of cover that the terrain could offer. If the riders spotted her in the open they would increase their pace and the land was far too exposed to attempt to dog-leg around them. Out running them would be the best policy for now, the Great Gate to Tanaria may now be perpetually left open in these times of peace as a good will gesture to the barbarians, but once inside its lawful territories its policed trade routes and roads would soon deter a band of armed men from going far. At best they would need to split up to continue their pursuit and then no single man would be the match of her.

As she rode her throat still itched and burnt, she reached up and pulled at the red crystal necklace that irritated her and threw it far from the track. It was of no real importance just a pretty gift from another lonely soul. Mind, that night had turned out to be a surprising pleasure. She had awoken early with a thudding hangover yet still craving more, only to be met with the parting gift of a crystal necklace placed on the pillow and a cold empty bed. Surprised with herself at failing to notice his departure as she was normally such a light sleeper. She had immediately sprung from the bed and checked her purse and possessions. Fortunately everything had been exactly as she had left it. The coloured necklaces had become all the rage since the discovery of thousands of the small stones in the Tolian mines. Deep in the scrub the poisonous vapours of the beast swirled about inside the discarded crystal necklace, its untapped power having reacted on contact with the lethal gasses as it had drawn them in saving her life.

Tamar had needed to get very close to Tress in order to delve deep into the places of her mind that he needed to explore. His many years of work may yet depend on this woman working for him, she had been crafted into a tool by another, almost as dedicated as himself. Although, before this could happen he needed to know that every fibre of her existence could be trusted, and then he could steer their path to victory, even more so because he had noticed that she bore the branding of Zerch on her skin, he had never met the magician but knew that his powers rivalled his own. Her upbringing was indeed unsavoury yet perfect for the work ahead. He decided to use his powers of illusion to take on an attractive new form, this way getting close, but without stirring any suspicion from the astute Tress. Through wearing the dragon toothed necklace, his magical signature was effectively concealed from any who would otherwise detect magic. There was often a thin line between right and wrong and occasionally you need to cross that line to reach your goals. He had felt the stress from her missions in her when he had originally entered her mind, but unable to read her fully at that long distance he had used this information to formulate his new plan. His original intension had been to just get close to her in the tavern and read her mind from within the room. But as he sipped his wine and watched her, he found it difficult to gain the leverage into her thoughts that he sought. It takes emotion to fully release the mind. As she sat with her back towards him, her sleek shape filled his eyes with a desire that he had not felt for a long time. Was it the wine or her silky smooth thigh exposed under the table? With his need to fully read her mind and at the same time address his growing urges, he decided that their mutual pleasure and lovemaking would satisfy all of these demands, besides he had a

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