

## *Wolf is dead!*

He gave me the chance to run and live, surrendering himself to save me. If I went back, even to save him, his selfless sacrifice would be in vain. I knew the two of us stood no chance against the numbers and strength of the Shekinah Tongu. Wolf knew it, too. He ordered, no *commanded*, me to run, to flee, to escape. He gave his life for me. How dare I throw that away in a fruitless attempt to avenge him? Should we meet again in the afterlife, I would be ashamed to admit to him how I disrespected the most precious gift he had to give.

I whirled, my hair streaming over my face, half-blinding me.

I ran.

On I ran, heedless of whipping branches and stiff brush thorns raking my bloody naked body. I ran, not feeling the agony of my sprained ankle. I ran, not caring if the sharp rocks ripped open my feet. I ran. And I ran. And ran and ran.

I ran. I sobbed as I ran.

I left him behind. Oh, Lady of the Stars, forgive me. Wolf, forgive me. On I ran, ducking low oak and pine branches, thrusting through balsam and thickets of thorn, heedless of their scratches. Nothing could ever hurt as much as my heart hurt at that moment, running away in panic from a fight, leaving a good man behind. No matter Wolf commanded it of me. No matter what he sacrificed so I could live, free from Brutal's vengeance. I ran. Like a bloody coward, I ran. I had no choice. I left him behind. My tears streamed, my throat raw from crying and running and panic. My lord commanded me to run.

I ran on and on and on.

Into the rising sun I fled, my tears and hair and the new sun's rays blinding me. I don't know for how long or for how far. Only that my lord commanded me to run, and run I would. Until my feet no longer carried me forward. I would run until I collapsed from sheer exhaustion. I would run until death took me.

Until I stumbled headlong into a low thick oak tree.

Whichever came first.

The impact sprawled me on my uncovered backside and back, awakening a flood of new awareness and stilling the hot taste of panic. I staggered to my feet, fending off thick branches, tripped over sharp, moss-covered rocks, tempering the flood of fear. Pain, held in abeyance until that moment, slipped its collar and swamped me in a rising flood. The pain of my ankle, a white-hot agony, and the lesser scratches, cuts and abrasions from rocks and

thorns triggered some semblance of intelligence. I drew in ragged gulps of air, looking about me, appraising my situation.

At long last, the warrior in me finally took charge and I began to think.

The Tongu no doubt subdued Wolf, or even killed him, by now. I shrank from the thought of Wolf dead, torn apart by the savage barbarians and their hounds. I knew Wolf's chances of survival were small. Yet, because of him, mine weren't. I ran again, this time without my panic as a spur. Glancing around, and at the newly risen sun to get my bearings, I set off the way he and I would have gone had the Tongu not overtaken us. Soon, they would set their beasts on my trail and follow after. *This time*, I thought grimly, *they would not catch me*.

I slowed now and again to squint into the sun and glance about me to get my bearings. I estimated I was about a league or so from the escarpment. While I had no bow to take out the Tongu if they found me on the escarpment, they wouldn't be able to take me if I was ahead of them. They couldn't circle around, nor would they shoot to kill. Most of all, they'd have to climb down as slowly as I did. If I got enough of a head start, I might yet elude them. Kel'Ratan and my boys lay two or three leagues beyond the escarpment. Once within their protection, no Tongu on earth could ever hope to harm me.

I set swift, steady pace, a lope I could sustain for hours, if necessary. The sun sent jagged spikes of pain lancing into my still teary eyes, and I wiped my face as I ran. Wolf was dead. No, he lived and I'd come back with Kel'Ratan and the others and rescue him. Wolf was dead. I'd die if he was dead. He had to live. Wolf was dead. No, I would return, and kill the Tongu. Wolf was dead.

I couldn't get the refrain out of my gibbering mind. Wolf was dead. No, he lived and I'd get him out of there. Wolf was dead. Tears flowed anew at the thought of Wolf's death. What was he to me? A slave, a nothing. A someone I found I cared deeply about. Only a few incredibly short hours ago I insulted him and threatened to kill him. He had absolutely no reason, *no reason*, to sacrifice himself to save me. I treated him badly. He could have freed himself and run, as intent as the Tongu were with raping me. He'd have been miles away before they even discovered him gone. His final smile when he saw me free haunted my vision. He cheerfully *died* for me. He cheerfully died for *me*.

A fierce savage pain ripped my heart. That smile. Oh, that smile. Only now, at his death, did I discover a man with whom I might be able to share everything with. Never before had I found in a man all that I wanted in a potential mate. My father's decree be damned. *I should be free to find the man I wanted, not whom my father wanted*, I thought, furious. The

bitterness that even should Wolf still be alive and we found love within each other, we could never be together. My father will make damn sure of that.

The hot surge of adrenaline gradually faded as I ran, pain slowly creeping past the horrid thoughts of Wolf's death. My ankle, badly injured, now had been bearing my weight at a full run for nearly four miles. Its hot agony forced itself into my awareness, but I set my jaw and grimly ran on. Dodging trees, ducking branches, I held on, moving steadily forward until my left ankle gave out entirely.

A scream snagged in my throat as I fell sideways, striking my head on a hidden rock. I thrashed in the underbrush, moaning, holding my left ankle in both hands as though that would halt the hot bolt of agony from surging upward to my knee. Even the pain in my head failed to overrule the torture of my foot. I rocked back and forth, crying, twigs and small stones digging into my butt, feeling nothing save the currents of fire that lanced up my leg.

After a long, slow time, the fire in my ankle cooled to a heavy pulsing throb with my weight finally off the injury. My sobs and shrieks slowly died into hiccups and I quit crying. I took a deep calming breath, slowly regaining control of myself. *It's a bloody good thing your only witnesses to that scene were a few squirrels*, I thought with wry humor. I hoped they would keep what they saw to themselves.

Wiping my face with my filthy hands, I threw my streaming oily hair back over my shoulder and looked about me. The sun shone down benignly, the air still cool enough to be comfortable before the day's summer heat took over. Birds flitted and chirped from nearby pine branches. A squirrel complained of my presence in his territory from the safety of an oak trunk. The slight breeze stirred the shadows of the undergrowth to dancing. I took heart from the normal forest sounds, remembering the black silence that fell over the woods when the Tongu drew near. I had no idea why their presence frightened the forest creatures to silence when my own did not, but the memory of it spurred me up.

My ankle had swelled to three times its normal size. My normally almond skin had darkened, to almost black halfway to my knee by the deep bruising. Stunned by its grotesque size and color, I felt a little sickened by what I saw. That foot couldn't bear my weight any longer. I looked around, hoping for something, anything, with which I could bind it. If it had the support of a splint, I might yet be able to hobble and keep going forward. Sticks I found in plenty, but no vines to bind them. Naked as I was, I'd no clothes with which to tear apart and wrap my ankle.

The squirrel, furiously scolding me, suddenly shut up and vanished. The soothing breeze died. I could no longer hear any birds chirping or fluttering

from branch to branch. I glanced up, my mouth suddenly dry. Why did the sun no longer shine so bright? It was still there, for I could see it through the tree branches. Still, a strange pall hung over it. Evil pervaded the very air, choking me. Lady above, no.

The Tongu.

The hairs on my neck suddenly rose to stiff attention. The squirrel, the birds, the insects and even the sun felt their resident evil. As did my instincts. They were coming. Their dreadful hounds had picked up my scent and even now hunted me. They had subdued, or killed, Wolf, and set off to recapture me. Now there was nothing at all, no Wolf, no vengeful daemon, to stand between rape and me. Panic, tasting like hot, sweet copper, flooded my mouth. I began to shake. I'd no weapons, an injured leg and no chance at all of defending myself. Bloody hell, I didn't even have clothes.

*Calm down*, I ordered myself.

I fought hard to regain control of my runaway wits. Using calming techniques taught by my sword master oh so many years ago, I stilled the panic. I thought hard, savagely. If I kept going, I may stay ahead of them. I'd no doubt Kel'Ratan and the others were searching for me. I also knew the escarpment wasn't far away. There was also Bar. If I could get to Bar first...

I could hardly walk. I needed a crutch.

My eyes fell on a stout oak branch, thick as my thigh at one end, tapering down to the thickness of my arm at the other. I grabbed it, fingering the sharp broken ends. A rock might help. Seizing a jagged stone, I set to smoothing the rough edges of the branch, shaving off the ends of twigs down the length, shaping it into a useful crutch. The ends still cut deep into my palm, and I once more shaved the harsher ends off. When I carefully staggered up to my strong right foot, the crutch, while still painful under my arm, held my weight without digging too deeply into my flesh.

Driven by the panic that still crept forward to nag at the edges of my mind, I lurched onward for another hour. I hopped and skipped forward, keeping the fear and panic at bay by concentrating on not tripping over rocks or deadwood. I quickened my pace to that of a crippled beggar. If the Tongu came for me now, they'd have no trouble whatsoever in overtaking me. I tried to increase my speed, hobbling and skipping along, but despite my care, stones and undergrowth constantly tripped me up. I set my jaw grimly and stubbornly stumbled on.

The deathly quiet around me informed me they hunted me still. How close were they? The pervading evil only told me they were close, but not how close. They might be a mile behind, or only a few rods. I'd never know until their hounds nipped my heels. They knew I was naked and injured and had

nowhere to go. With Wolf tamed and broken or dead (my mind shied away from that thought), they knew I was no match for them. I despised the fact that they were right.

Kel'Ratan and the rest of my war-band lay only a few leagues to the east. No doubt, they were already hunting for me, worried, seeking me with every resource they had at their disposal. They'd have no idea where Wolf might have taken me, but I knew they would have started a search of the forest. Wanting to estimate my position from the escarpment, I decided I was further from it than I previously thought. I struggled on.

Something passed between the sun and me. A bird? Whatever it was flit past the candle of my eye in less than a heartbeat. I glanced up, but saw nothing but sun and green. I stopped mid-hobble, scanning what I could see of the sky between the tops of the trees, looking, searching all around for another shadow. Could it be? Come back, come back, damn it.

Two grizzled hounds burst out from the undergrowth a few rods away. Their lips skinned back from savage white teeth. Once again, in a fleet instant, I saw their muzzles tied shut. Whipping my crutch out from under my arm, I cocked it. Balancing my weight on my good right leg, I swung the crutch, now a heavy club. I'd chosen well. Solid oak and still green, it was as hard as iron. The hound, a few strides ahead of its mate, leaped toward me.

My club caught the beast squarely on the side of its head. Canine skull crunched under the impact. I'd no time to consider its death when the other hound also leaped, snarling voiceless.

My warrior instincts and training took over. As in swordplay, rather than meet it head on, I melted to the side. My weight, solid on my right leg, shifted me to my right, where I held the club. The hound's leap took him past me, but he wheeled. Almost mid-jump, he turned, his hind legs thrusting him forward, digging furrows in the dirt. My club, on its returning swing, caught the hound under the jaw. I hit him hard enough to snap him backward. He flipped up and back, hitting the ground hard on his spine and tail.

I didn't look to see if I killed him. I knew the Tongu would run right behind their hellhounds. I readied myself, my stout club, undamaged by the two hard impacts, raised high.

They didn't disappoint me. Three of them burst out from under the trees, their tattooed faces and scarred throats as familiar as old friends. Undaunted by my readiness and my club, they rushed me. They held no weapons in their hands. So they still wanted me alive.

*Come on, big boy. Let's dance.*

The first one ducked my swing, but I still hit him on the shoulder rather than his head I aimed for. He staggered to the side, passing me by. My

returning blow caught the second in the ribs. His choked off wheeze told me I did some real damage. I set myself to receive the third when my left leg failed me utterly.

I needed two sound legs with which to fight. When I instinctively sought to balance on both legs to bring my club around to swing at the third Tongu, running a few feet behind his brothers, my left leg collapsed under me. My wild swing missed the Tongu completely. His arm around my waist finished what my treacherous left leg started. I went down, the Tongu's foul-smelling, hissing body on top of mine.

The impact knocked the wind from me. Gasping for much needed breath, I hit him, hard, on the ear with my fist. History surely repeats itself, for the Tongu hissed in fury and struck me a wicked blow across the face.

Half-stunned and sick with pain, I struggled, kicking upward with my knee, seeking his soft genitals. I hit only his rock hard thigh instead. He grunted, his dark evil eyes peering down at me, his triumphant grin white in his tanned face. He pinned me solidly, my wrists hard against the damp earth and dead leaves. I lost my grip on my club.

"We got you now, bitch," he hissed, his foul breath reeking in my nostrils.

I conjured saliva into my dry mouth and spit.

As in my archery, my aim was true. Squarely into his leering right eye, my spit hit. His face contorted into a mask of rage and hate. This time his fist almost made me lose consciousness.

Darkness filled my sight. No. Wait. My eyes, open wide, still contained vision. The darkness filled the forest. Beyond the Tongu's foul, grinning face, something impossibly huge blocked the sun, casting all into shadow. A deep, resonant sound, never before heard by a living human being, roared into the evil silence. Rage. Hate. Fury. None of those words could describe the daemonic sound that filled the forest. The earth shook under the sheer magnitude of that sound. I jerked my head, tossing my hair from my eyes.

The Tongu's evil eyes widened in sudden frantic panic. His leering mouth bowed down in horror. Blood drained from his darkly tanned skin, leaving his flesh paler than pale. He turned, slow, too slow, to face this new peril. His hands released mine as he made to boost himself off me, to throw himself off me. To escape.

A huge eagle's claw, with talons the length of a man's hand and sharp enough to gut a dragon reached down. It scooped him up, circled his torso, lifted him from me with all the effort a man might use to lift a mug of ale. So precise did those deadly talons seize him, I felt no touch of those claws on my bare belly at all.

Devil's eyes. Daemon's eyes. Yellow and black. With the dark shadows behind, the devil's eyes glowed yellow and black. For surely hell herself had vomited up this monster.

How can a man with no voice scream? Yet scream he did. His black eyes rolled back into his head, revealing the whites. The Tongu struggled, pushing against the immense hand that held him fast in its deadly grip. His struggles were those of a mouse caught within the jaws of the cat. A savage raptor beak the size of a horse's head bent down—

—Bar bit deep into the Tongu's neck.

As I might have torn off a chunk of meat with my teeth, he ripped the man's body in half. The Tongu's heart and brain lived for a moment longer than he did. His hissing, wailing scream as Bar tossed the two pieces of the man's corpse into the brush died away and was lost.

Catlike, he spun. His tail whipped the air above me, his lion hind legs digging deep furrows into the loamy forest soil to either side of me. I half sat up in time to see the other two Tongu bolt. One reached the safety of the trees. The other...

Bar pounced. Dirt and dead leaves flew about me in a shower as he lunged after the fleeing assassin. This one had no time to scream. Bar's eagle front foot caught the Tongu by the shoulder, ripping down, taking off not only the shoulder, but shearing deep into his torso. His raptor's beak tore the man's head off. Shaking his foot as a person might shake water off his hand, Bar discarded the corpse that caught on his wicked talons. As hardened as I was by war, battle and violence, my gut lurched at the sight of both men's ravaged corpses. While Bar accompanied me in battle, protected me from enemies, guarded my back, I'd never seen him kill before with such ruthlessness, such a savage viciousness.

He still wasn't satisfied. The hound I injured hobbled on three legs, eerily whining and chuffing, followed after his surviving master into the forest. Bar's single swipe cut the dog in half, red blood fountaining high to splash redly on a nearby tree trunk.

Never before had I ever been afraid of my griffin. Never in all our years together had I ever felt in any danger from him. Never before had I looked at my friend and all but pissed myself.

When he wheeled about to face me, streaked with thick dark blood over his eagle's beak, down his feathered mane, his raised right claw oozing gore, my empty bladder loosened. A raw, primitive terror ran through me. The terror a defenseless human felt when faced with a furious predator, a predator that killed easily and with little effort. It wasn't the red gore, his

lifted razor-sharp talons, his pitiless stare that frightened me. Those I recognized.

'Twas his eyes that caused my gut to lurch in sudden panic, caused my throat to close and shut off all breath. His raptor eyes, those daemon eyes, filled with such a lust for blood, for human blood, brought out the primordial fear in me.

He blinked. In that instant, Bar returned to sanity. I suddenly saw my friend in those awful black and yellow daemon eyes. Bar's concern, worry and panic over my safety returned with such a wash of love I began to cry. I flung my arms about his feathered neck, weeping with unashamed relief. My body shook uncontrollably, delayed reactions from the pain, the panic, the trauma of my ordeal bringing out a flurry of the shakes.

Sitting down on his lion haunches, Bar held me close to him, his taloned right foot circling my back, his feathered head bowed over my shoulder. The blood of his victims dripped down over my naked body, but I didn't care. Sharp chirps and hisses told me of his anxiety and worry. When neither Wolf nor I arrived at the monastery, he had flown in all directions since dawn, searching for me.

His immense presence, his soft fur-feather mane scenting of blood, musty earth and sweet air, his huge body wrapped about mine, brought with them some measure of quiet to my jangled nerves. My tears wetted his mane, dripping from a white feather to the ground below. I sniffled, my nostrils sucking in stray lion hairs. I sneezed. Choking on tears and snorted laughter, I finally grew some sense and straightened.

Leaning against his sturdy shoulder, I pulled my hair back from my face and looked into his predatory tawny eyes.

"What kept you?"

Bar's expressive eyes all too often showed his wicked sense of humor. His beak parted, his eyes lit up with high amusement, and although he made no sound, I swear he laughed. I laughed too. Laughed with humor, with hysteria, and with the pent-up release of the past hours of fear. We laughed together, two friends parted from one another now sharing a comfortable jest.

"Where are Kel'Ratan and the others?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

The jerk of Bar's head toward the east and a sharp squawk told me they were at or near the monastery.

"So you were to find me and tell them where I am?"

Yes.

"Bar, we cannot wait for them. That Tongu who escaped might come back with reinforcements."

His yellow eyes gleamed with a new anger as he took in my nakedness, the blood covering me from hundreds of scrapes and scratches, my injured foot I couldn't put to the ground. A long evil growl escaped his beak as he inspected me from head to toe.

A growl? I paused, drawing back to stare at him in astonishment. Though half lion, Bar's vocal cords were those of an eagle. However, the sound that emerged from his throat sounded so much like an angry lion, I doubted my own ears.

"Bar?"

He growled again, predatory yellow eyes flat. His tufted ears lay tight against his broad skull. He raised his left foot and flexed his talons, talons already bloodied by two Tongu and one hound. His low, deep resonant rumble promised revenge.

"Never mind that," I snapped. "You'll have to be my crutch. We have to keep going."

Rather than support me, Bar ducked his shoulder. A new hiss, this one of urgency, escaped his beak. Confused, I stopped, my injured left leg crooked at the knee. "What?"

He hissed again, dropping his shoulder lower. This time, he whipped his head around and butted me in the back.

"Bar," I began, as his message grew clearer. He wanted me to mount.

Another sharper hiss, this time both anger and urgency clear in his message. Another low growl rumbled, vibrating his chest and shoulders.

"Bar," I repeated. "You can't fly with me on your back. That's too much weight."

The next nudge into my back held a certain threat to it. While he might love me beyond life itself, Bar certainly knew who was the bigger and stronger of us. His predatory raptor's eyes glared at me with such a ferocity I dared not argue. Reluctantly, I used a large stone as a mounting block and half-jumped, half-wiggled onto his broad back. I found a comfortable seat just ahead of his furled wings, where feathers met fur.

"Bar—" I started to protest once more, but a menacing hiss forestalled what I might have said.

He didn't try to fly. Rather, when I sat securely on his heavy shoulders and grasped his mane for balance, he began to run. I bent low over his neck to avoid branches sweeping me off his broad back. The top of my head met the whipping branches and brambles, rather than my face. His wings half-furled for balance, he loped about as fast as a slowly cantering horse. Not fast by any imagination, but quickly enough that anyone following would have trouble keeping up on foot.

On he ran, carrying me as easily as a horse might. Thickets of pine, balsam, and scrub oak were no match for his charge. All bent, or broke, before him, leaving a trail a blind man could follow. Deer and wolf, rabbit and fox, all forest life fled from his approach. He made strong headway eastward, toward hope, safety and Kel'Ratan. Should any fool dare stop him, well, may their gods have mercy on their idiot souls.

The trees suddenly opened up, the forest first thinning, then ending altogether. The sun shone brightly in my eyes, nearly blinding me. Bar's lion feet and eagle talons now gripped rock and stone and moss, not dirt and undergrowth. Squawking birds flew upward, out of his path, and I saw a stag bolt from us in panic, antlers high. I sat up straighter, thinking the ride over. The escarpment lay just ahead, the stone falling away in a sheer drop of more than a thousand feet. I expected Bar to stop, let me climb down, and navigate the escarpment carefully downward.

He didn't stop.

Too late, I saw his intent.

I screamed. "Bar, *no!*"